



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 7 Iúil 2026

Tuesday, 7 July 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome all of our visitors to the Gallery. I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government keeps telling people that affordable home ownership is just around the corner, but that is not true. The latest report, published this morning, confirms this. That report from *myhome.ie* and Bank of Ireland makes for very grim reading for everybody, but especially for young people trying to get their first home. The report shows that house prices are continuing to rise and selling prices are well above even those, at 7.5% above asking. This is pricing more people, especially young people, out of buying their own home. The median asking price for a home State-wide is now €400,000, and here in Dublin, it is close to €500,000. These are startling headline figures, but they do not tell the full story of the runaway house prices. Some counties have experienced double-digit increases in the last year. Kilkenny, Roscommon and Mayo have seen €25,000 added to house prices.

At the heart of this crisis is broken Government policy - policy built on empty promises rather than delivery. For example, the Government promised to deliver 2,100 affordable homes to buy last year, but how many did it actually deliver? The answer is 935. By the way, most of these homes were not affordable to the vast majority of working people. Homes that the Government describes as affordable often have price tags of €400,000 or more. That is not affordable, not for a nurse, a retail worker, a van driver or a childcare worker, and not for the vast majority of young people trying to raise a family.

This cannot go on. We need to do so much better. We need so much more ambition. We need to make homes affordable. We need to make it easier for people to get their first home. We need to deliver the largest council housing building programme in the history of the State. We need to tackle the rip-off rents that make it so hard, impossible even, for young people to save for a deposit. I believe that we can restore hope, that we can get back to a place where ordinary people who work hard and save hard can have and buy a home of their own. That is the promise we have to make real for our young people - that they will have their opportunity

to build the life they deserve here at home in Ireland. That means we need vision, energy and a break from serving the interests of corporate landlords, speculators and property funds, to focus on workers, families and our young people.

Léiríonn an tuairisc is déanaí ó *myhome.ie* go bhfuil praghsanna na dtithe ag méadú de shíor. Tá teipthe glan ar pholasaithe tithíochta an Rialtais. Tá géarghá le hathrú mór treo chun na tithe atá de dhíth ag ár bpobal a chur ar fáil ar phraghsanna réasúnta.

Does the Minister accept that house prices are continuing to rise? Does he accept that prices of €400,000 are not affordable for ordinary people? Does he accept that the Government delivering only 935 affordable homes last year is absolutely pitiful? Does he now recognise that we need a major change of direction to end this crisis and deliver those homes that our people need?

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): This Government wants to give hope to young people and people who want to get an affordable home. It is the single biggest focus of the Government in everything we do. It is about building hope around delivering more home ownership, delivering an increased supply of social homes and ensuring that we bring affordability to all of our interventions. That is why all of the reforms that we have introduced are about trying to increase supply, something that Deputy McDonald does not acknowledge in all of her contributions.

She attacks, criticises and objects but does not support policy which works in enabling greater supply.

In 2025, we had record delivery and strong growth. Some 17,500 starter homes supports were delivered in 2025, the highest annual total recorded and a 21% increase compared to 2024. That demonstrates the sustained Government investment in accelerating progress in housing delivery. We have seen that increased supply will help moderate overall price growth and help to ease affordability challenges over the next number of years, as we ramp up supply across the board. That is why that level of investment in capital infrastructure and housing has been prioritised by Government in our national development plan.

The CSO data showed that prices fell month on month for the first time in almost three years, at minus 0.2% in February, following a period of moderation, and 1% for consecutive months. Prices have remained stable between March and April, respectively. The policy of Government is working. The reforms introduced by the Minister, Deputy Browne, are working.

Why does Deputy McDonald continue to oppose Government policy that supports affordability? There are tens of thousands of people who have benefited from the help to buy scheme that has bridged the gap for young people who are working hard and want a Government that supports them to bridge the gap in terms of affordability supports. Sinn Féin opposed that. Many Sinn Féin councillors across different local authorities, and even Deputy McDonald in her own constituency, Dublin Central, continuously oppose homes and supply opportunities-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Glass houses.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----again promoting local objectives and NIMBYism over the greater good. That is Sinn Féin's policy, namely, opposition on the ground and attacking Government at a national level. It is just not good enough. It is not serious politics.

We need supply-side interventions which drive tens of thousands more homes and completions across the board and matching the record level of support in terms of social housing delivery with affordability support which bridge the gap for young people. That is what is working. That is what will ensure we have increased supply in 2026, with the reforms we are introducing around increased zoning and the measures being taken by the Minister, Deputy Browne, on the housing infrastructure investment fund. It will provide enabling infrastructure locally to deliver more homes in the villages and towns across the country that have had constraints around water systems, being able to connect energy and other local infrastructure constraints, which have harmed housing supply.

This Government will continue to invest in infrastructure and provide affordability supports for young people, which Sinn Féin continues to oppose. It needs to front up young people about why it continues to oppose affordability supports for them. We want to match that with continued increase in supply in terms of social homes across the country. That is why we have put significant capital investment aside to support our approved housing bodies in terms of cost rental and drive an increased supply of social homes through local authorities while we improve the overall supply situation. We are seeing the moderation happen in CSO data. Increased supply will help overall with the affordability supports Sinn Féin continues to shamefully oppose.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sure I am not the only person struck by the profound irony of the Minister telling me that supply is the thing when, in fact, his Government only managed to deliver 935 affordable homes last year.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If supply is the thing, and it is the thing, the Government is failing abjectly on that measure.

On the measure of affordability, €400,000 is simply not affordable for ordinary working people, especially younger ones. House prices of half a million here in Dublin are absolutely out of the question. Does the Minister accept that today, as per this report, house prices and asking prices are continuing to rise? People are priced out of getting their first home. Does the Minister accept that we need to change tack to ensure that people can get a home and people who work and save hard can afford to own their own home? Does the Minister accept that there needs to be a change of direction or will he continue with the rinse-and-repeat policy of failure?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Sinn Féin policy is a complete and utter failure. It is a dishonest policy position when it comes to improving housing supply. It is populist waffle. In Dublin Central, Sinn Féin opposes housing project after housing project, day in, day out, which young people could be living in.

That is the issue.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Máire Devine: Give us the evidence.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We must have an honest conversation about how we improve supply across the housing system. For the Deputy to oppose housing every day and every week in her own constituency and then to lecture the Government on not doing enough shows a complete contradiction in Sinn Féin policy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister cannot stand up and tell the truth.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, you are out of order. Stop interrupting.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We see populism and NIMBYism on the ground and then waffle and rhetoric in here. You need to get real, Deputy McDonald, in terms of honesty around housing policy. We need to provide supply-side alternatives.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You have now answered my question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do not interrupt the Minister, Deputy.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Supply, by way of the affordability interventions the Government is making, will improve affordability, which is something you continually oppose.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister has now answered my question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald, please stop interrupting.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy's party has a complete contradiction in housing policy and it gives no hope for young people.

An Ceann Comhairle: Your time is up, Minister. I call Deputy Cairns.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We will have fewer homes being built if we follow its model.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is another week of chaos in the criminal courts as hundreds of solicitors have withdrawn their services for legal aid. Thanks to the actions of the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, thousands of cases have already been adjourned, not just in the District Court but in the Circuit Court and the Central Criminal Court, where the most serious crimes are prosecuted. Yesterday, at the Central Criminal Court, 12 rape cases were listed. Of that number, just two trials were able to start and that is only because the defendants in those two cases were minors and solicitors have not withdrawn their services in cases involving children. All the other cases were adjourned. This is an absolute disaster.

It was also reported today that a man has been charged with murder without having access to legal advice during Garda questioning. I do not want to comment on this or any other case before the courts but we should all be aware that being unable to access legal advice in Garda stations could pose very serious problems in subsequent criminal trials.

The question for the Government is how long it will allow this chaos to continue. This is a crisis of the justice Minister's own making. I have serious concerns about the way he has gone about this. At every stage, he has failed to meaningfully engage with solicitors, preferring instead to just portray them as abusing the system and being unethical. Clearly, the Minister and the Government seem to believe criminal legal aid solicitors are gaming the system and trying to line their pockets by prolonging criminal cases. The problem for the Minister is he does not have a shred of evidence to back this up. For a start, his own internal review is clear that it does not know the reason adjournments are requested. Also, it is just a matter of fact that, ordinarily, adjournments are requested by the State because there is some delay on the prosecution side. Finally, it is judges who grant adjournments. Does the Minister seriously think judges are conspiring with solicitors to delay cases in order that solicitors can make more money? That seems to be the implication.

This chaos simply cannot continue. These changes to the legal aid system must be reversed. Then there needs to be a real consultation about reforms that would genuinely improve the system. Does the Minister, Deputy Chambers, share our concerns about the chaos we are witnessing in the courts and will the Government admit that the justice Minister's attempt to ram through these changes has been a disaster?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Minister for justice has introduced an 8% increase in criminal legal aid fees payable to solicitors in the Circuit Court and higher courts from 1 July 2026. This represents total restoration of the criminal legal aid fees under the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI. As the Deputy described, the Minister has also introduced a fee of €520 for District Court criminal cases under the criminal legal aid scheme. This 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 that are legally aided is five. Many cases require fewer appearances to be concluded.

The objective of these reforms by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is to make the system more effective and efficient. He has set out very clearly why he was trying to do this. They will also ensure that those accused of crimes are provided with the legal representation to which they are constitutionally entitled.

In considering the need for reform, it is important to note that while the volume of criminal cases in the District Court has actually decreased, expenditure on criminal legal aid in the District Court has increased, from €19 million in 2015 to over €41 million in 2025. Every Minister across Government must examine reform and no area of expenditure should be immune from reform or from changing the system to make it work better for people.

In the context of reform, it is important that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has assessed this area. The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration reviewed more than 350,000 District Court cases which took place during 2022 and 2023 and, again, developed reform proposals in that regard. The system being reformed is designed to improve efficiency, reduce unnecessary adjournments, simplify the administration of criminal legal aid, speed up case

resolution and enable faster payments to practitioners. Under the new system for cases in the District Court, regardless of the number of appearances, a set fee will be payable to solicitors, replacing the previous appearance-based sliding scale.

The review that was undertaken showed that cases with criminal legal aid take an average of 313 calendar days to complete, compared with 133 days for cases without. The weighted average number of appearances for cases with criminal legal aid is five, while the weighted average without criminal legal aid is just over three. While cases with criminal legal aid take significantly longer than those without, the outcomes are similar. The reforms the Minister is progressing are to address the structural issues identified during this review. These include unnecessary adjournments resulting from the payment-per-appearance model, and to deliver a reformed criminal legal aid system that works for everybody, is efficient and effective and provides value for money for the taxpayer. It is in that context which he has advanced the reforms and also in which he increased the fee, set a few weeks ago to €520, which provides for the FEMPI restoration.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I think everybody agrees that reform is needed. The point is that the Minister for justice's approach has been an absolute disaster. His review looked into 350,000 cases. He is repeatedly citing three cases. Three in 350,000 does not really stand up to scrutiny. In addition to that, his main argument for pointing the finger at solicitors is the number of adjournments, but there is no mechanism for recording the reason for adjournments. We all know that the majority of them come from the State's side. Why is he not introducing a mechanism to record the reason for adjournments and taking it from there? It simply does not make sense.

The final point I would make is that it has resulted in cases not being heard in their thousands. There are people who cannot access free legal aid, crucially. There are cases not being heard and there are victims who ultimately will not get justice. Where is this going to end? Is there anything other than a climb-down for the Minister at this point? What is the Government going to do now that it is in this situation? Will it accept that its approach has not worked and tell us what the next step will be?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy set out the need for reform but did not say anything about how she would reform it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I did; I said we would check why the adjournments are happening.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Department of justice advanced a review. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has been informed by it and has taken the respective reforms and progressed them. There is a distinction between how the criminal legal aid system has been working with comparative cases and those who are not on criminal legal aid of five days to three. He is providing for a weighted payment of five and providing the FEMPI restoration accordingly. We all want to see a system that works and is victim focused - that is absolutely the case - but we also need a system that has sustainability of expenditure. When we see the growth of expenditure on the criminal legal aid scheme over the last number of years despite reduced case volume in the District Court, that has to raise legitimate questions from a Government that wants to drive reform. That is why the Minister has evaluated this and taken

an informed view on progressing it. He has also said that he will keep the operation of the new scheme under review.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Destroying the courts.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Last week, Ireland took on the Presidency of the Council of the European Union but we acquired another title, too. Ours is now the most expensive country in the EU for housing, healthcare and electricity. Housing costs are double those of the EU average and rising fast, as today's *MyHome.ie* report confirms.

The cost of healthcare is a staggering 85% higher than EU averages.

In that context, it is astonishing to see this Government's inaction on pay talks for hardworking public servants. The last public sector pay agreement expired at the end of June. SIPTU tells us that exploratory talks on a replacement have provided zero basis for meaningful negotiations and so the unions representing public sector workers are consulting their members. Their next step will be to ballot for strike action. This is a move that nobody wants to take but public servants need to be able to make ends meet. This is DEFCON 1.

The Minister needs to respond and to do so substantively. The Minister has already described the unions' course of action as a "surprise". Most people will be surprised by the Minister's surprise because thanks to the political choices made by the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the past decade, Ireland was already expensive before now and lacking in quality public services. However, now inflation is skyrocketing. The cost of living is crushing households and the Minister and his officials have known this was coming and knew the current agreement was expiring. As SIPTU general secretary John King has said: "Public sector workers have carried this country through crisis after crisis. They deserve fair pay, respect and meaningful engagement ..."

Did the Minister forget about public sector workers or is this in keeping with this Government's attitude to PAYE workers, in general? We know the Minister is dealing with finite public resources but by creating uncertainty around agreeing a new public sector pay deal, he is risking public finances. He is projecting prudence but finding the money to spend where it suits in a profligate fashion.

As the existing public sector agreement expired, the Minister's wrong-headed VAT cut for hospitality came into effect. At an annual cost of €681 million, the Government directly took money from the pockets of PAYE workers and put it in the hands of Supermac's and Burger King. Earlier in the year, the Minister announced measures to support sectors vulnerable to fuel hikes but nothing for the 500,000 households now in arrears on their electricity bills.

The Minister must now reckon with the political choices he has made and he has new political choices ahead. If he makes the wrong choices, the people with least to give will pay the highest price again and will pay the price for the Minister's unsustainable management of the public finances. Will the Minister stop scapegoating the unions and, as Minister for public expenditure and reform, will he engage in good faith and use the public sector pay talks to back and support PAYE workers and to spend in a sustainable manner, to invest in quality public services, to invest in the delivery of social and affordable homes, and to build an active State that communities need?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Bacik. I reject the Deputy's characterisation, which I think is unfair. If she thinks of the scale of public service growth in this country in the past five-to-six years, which this Government took positive action on, we have an additional 70,000 public servants working across health, education, disability services and many other areas of public service, which matter to all of us across our constituencies and we want to continue to build a public service that works and provides better inputs for the people we represent right across the country.

That is why the last two pay agreements have delivered fair, equitable and sustainable pay agreements for both the Exchequer and for public servants. That is why we rightly put an emphasis on lower paid workers. From 2019 pay has increased for the lowest paid in the public service by 30.7%. I can go through many different areas of the public service where we rightly protected and enhanced the pay of public servants.

The Government has been clear that we want to have a new pay agreement. We want to accommodate that in the context of budget 2027. It is important we have industrial peace and are able to plan for a new pay agreement with public service representatives. We have been concluding local bargaining, with which the Deputy is familiar, with many of the trade unions across different sectors over the past number of weeks and we want to have engagement without preconditions. That is what has happened over the last number of agreements. We have had engagement and exploratory discussions. That has built consensus around what is possible and that has formed the basis for an agreement.

I say to every public servant listening today: we want to ensure they are paid fairly, equitably and are given a fair deal in the context of a new pay agreement. That has absolutely been the case over the past number of years and nothing has changed in that regard. We want to see the public service unions engage. I think potentially balloting for strike action is unnecessary when we are a Government willing to engage with them. On the general question on the cost of living, we have been clear there will be an income tax package to reward work and support workers across the economy.

We want to ensure budget 2027 delivers on housing and infrastructure and that we protect the capital investment we have progressed in the last number of years, but also that we make a real impact in improved public service delivery and reduce the cost of living, with a priority around childcare, disability services and other areas as part of budget 2027. We must ensure that everything we decide to do is sustainable, affordable and within the fiscal parameters we have set out in the medium-term fiscal and structural plan. That creates trade-offs where we have to be realistic about what is possible in any budgetary cycle.

We want to see an agreement and engagement and I expect that will happen over the next number of weeks so that we can accommodate a new pay agreement in advance of budget 2027.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad to hear the Minister say that he wants a new national pay agreement but it certainly does not sound as if his rhetoric is matching the reality. It sounds as if he has something against nurses, teachers and gardaí because we are not seeing-----

Minister for Health Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is terrible.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----the sort of meaningful engagement that people need. The reality is that far too many of the lowest paid public servants in this country are now being priced out of living in this country. They simply cannot afford to make ends meet. They cannot afford to buy their own homes. I am sure the Minister, like me, is meeting people in his own constituency who are telling him they cannot afford to buy or rent a home. Indeed, many people, particularly in a younger generation, cannot even see a way in their immediate future to aspire to own or even rent their own home. Far too many public servants are still living at home with their parents, well into their 20s and 30s. That is not sustainable and they are seeing that wrong-headed VAT cut the Minister announced. That is the choice the Minister made. We are asking him to make a different choice. Will he guarantee that vacant posts in the public sector will be filled, that public sector jobs will be saved from outsourcing and that pay increases will at least-----

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----rise in line with inflation in the new deal?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am not going to negotiate a pay agreement with the Deputy in here. That is not going to work for anybody. What I would say is that our record stands clear. Since 2019, a teacher and a nurse starting their careers in the public service will have seen an increase of 26.9% and 31%, respectively. A clerical officer in the Civil Service will have seen an increase of 32.8%. That reflects a Government that cares about public servants and public services, and it stands through to today and to a new agreement, which we want to reach with public servants across our country. I am absolutely clear about that when I look at how we are prioritising public pay and recruitment in the overall budgetary context, and rightly so. I want to see services work better for people and that happens through improved recruitment in health, education and disability services and ensuring we deliver for people across our country.

It is similar in regard to affordability in housing. That is why we are continuing to protect capital investment in housing and infrastructure so we build more homes and ensure we reduce congestion through our improved transport systems. That will be a key part of budget 2027 as well, how we better deliver infrastructure across our economy and do it a lot quicker.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The public service pay agreement expired on 30 June with no successor in place. SIPTU has now announced that it may ballot over 80,000 members for strike action across the health, local authority and education sectors. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, public service committee has said that it has no basis for any formal talks to begin. Unions have pointed out, and rightly so, the inflation at 3.6% in May, which has already wiped out the 1% increase from February and the 1% increase since June.

As the Minister is aware, grocery bills are up by on average about 40%. Our energy bills are hitting the point where they are up by about 60%. We have approaching 500,000 people in arrears when it comes to ESB and gas bills. We have rent at record heights, unthinkable almost a decade ago, with 80% increases in some areas across the State. This directly affects the nurse, the garda, the hospital porter, the educator and those on low salaries in local authorities. They are the people who get up early in the morning, the people the Minister's Government claims to represent with great gusto.

The Minister and his Government say they want an agreement but not at any cost, as I understand from reading reports today. They have said that there can be no preconditions. However, it is seven days after the deal expired and there is still no date for substantive talks. We are looking at a country in the middle of an EU Presidency with a real possibility of industrial action across the health, education and local government sectors throughout the summer.

Will the Minister tell the House what the Government's action and timeline is for opening formal negotiations with the unions and looking after public sector pay? Does his Department intend to bring a concrete pay offer to the table? When will those table negotiations start? Will he continue his approach, which we have already worked out has no basis for talks whatsoever?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will repeat what I have said. We have been clear and consistent in our position. We are willing and ready to engage with staff representatives with a view to reaching a new public service agreement. We want to engage now. We want to see a fair, equitable and sustainable agreement to ensure we reward workers across the public service, many of whom have been recruited over the last five years. The Government considers that reaching an agreement as soon as possible is the best way to provide stability and certainty for public servants and ensure we can accommodate a new pay agreement within budget 2027.

In the first instance, like other pay agreements, we have sought to have exploratory discussions without preconditions. They are intended to provide a forum for both sides to raise concerns and explore respective solutions around the next phase of an agreement, rather than predetermining outcomes before meaningful engagement has taken place. The Deputy asked me what pay offer are we tabling. That is never how pay discussions are concluded or advanced. There has to be wider engagement around what is possible and what the respective asks are on all sides to try to put a structure around a process of engagement, which can take a period of time.

I am clear that we want to accommodate a new pay agreement within the budget. We have done that over the last series of budgets and correctly so, given the increased recruitment across the public service. The public pay bill of €31.2 billion in 2026 is a reflection of that. It reflects a Government that is advancing and expanding public services across the State and ensuring that we are remunerating our public services in accordance with the pay agreements. That is reflected in €12 billion of expenditure around public pay in the health sector, as well as nearly €8.5 billion in education and more than €2.5 billion for the justice Vote group. Those figures reflect the strength of Exchequer support for public services and the public servants who work to deliver across the front line.

We are seeking to have those exploratory discussions. Local bargaining has been concluding over the last number of weeks. Again, we want to use the period over the next number of weeks to provide that stability going into 2027 and conclude a new pay agreement.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Minister for his reply. I have had relative success in business throughout my years. I can confidently say that if I ran my business the way the Government is approaching these negotiations, I would probably be out of business today. That is the reality. As I said, we are now seven days after the expired deal. We should have been at negotiation tables about six months ago to ensure a smooth transition, particularly when this

country - with great gusto as the Government has said - is supporting the Presidency of the EU, and to ensure there would not be strikes or anything.

We are now putting the horse before the cart yet again. The Minister is playing catch-up continuously. This is affecting nurses, doctors and staff in hospitals. It is affecting gardaí, front-line workers and those lower paid people on whom we depend in local authorities. As one of the Members already said, these are the people who are not coming back. They are leaving in their droves because there is no future or stability. Without a plan in place for them, where they know what the plan is and the funds available to them, they cannot plan for the future. They are not going to come back.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are seeing strong levels of recruitment right across the public service this year, which is a very different story from what the Deputy has described.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jack Chambers: We had the conclusion of the pay agreement with a 1% increase over the last number of weeks. Usually, when there is a conclusion, we engage in exploratory discussions. Typically, in the past, that happened in the December-January period. Obviously, the pay agreement that concluded finished at the end of June. We want to engage in good faith and in a constructive way to ensure we have an agreement we can afford in budget 2027 that supports workers right across the public service.

The Government has a strong track record in the expansion and improvement of public services, be it in health, education or disability services. That will continue as part of budget 2027. It is just a matter of getting this engagement going over the next number of weeks and ensuring we get an agreement that is fair and supports many of the workers the Deputy referenced, such as nurses, teachers and gardaí. We need to ensure they have a fair deal in the context of a new pay agreement.

That is something this Government is committed to delivering.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of EirGrid, Electricity and Turf (Amendment) Act 2022 Section 10 Order 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Motion *re* Referral to Select Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the (Taxes on Income and on Capital) (the Principality of Liechtenstein) Order 2026 and the Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and Capital Gains) (Sweden) Order 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Motion *re* Referral to Joint Committee of Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Draft Regulations for Planning and Development Act (Exempted Development) (Act

of 2000)) Regulations 2026, and Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

- Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 1 hour and 30 minutes*)
- Postal and Telecommunications Services (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (*to conclude after the first round, not to exceed 1 hour and 52 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday*)
- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Council Decision (EU) 2023/1076 with regard to matters related to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement (*to conclude within 1 hour*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Planning for Constitutional Change Bill 2026 (Second Stage), selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements and Q&A post European Council meeting of 18th-19th June 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133 (*not to exceed 1 hour 33.5 mins, followed by 20 mins Q&A and Ministerial response for 5 mins*)
- Postal and Telecommunications Services (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (*to commence no earlier than 4 p.m. and to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Amendments from the Seanad) (*to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Finance Bill 2026 (Recommendations from the Seanad) (*to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 2 hours*)
- Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (*to conclude within 2 hours*)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* A Place Called Home for Adults with an Intellectual Disability, selected by Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Dementia (*not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes*)
- Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (*to conclude after the first round, not to*

exceed 1 hour and 52 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday, 15th July, 2026)

Thursday evening business shall be the Social Housing Passport Bill 2026 (Second Stage), sponsored by Deputy Mark Ward.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

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

(c) private members' business shall be taken on conclusion of the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Council Decision (EU) 2023/1076 with regard to matters related to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of EirGrid, Electricity and Turf (Amendment) Act 2022 Section 10 Order 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Referral to Select Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and on Capital) (the Principality of Liechtenstein) Order 2026 and the Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and Capital Gains) (Sweden) Order 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

4. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Referral to Joint Committee of Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Draft Regulations for Planning and Development Act (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2026, and Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

5. the proceedings on the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

6. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

7. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Postal and Telecommunications Services (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) on conclusion of the first speaking round, or where speeches conclude before the 1 hours and 42 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; Provided that any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday; and

(c) members may share time;

Mins	10	10	10	6	2
Mins	10	6	2	10	6
				SF	
Mins	2	10	6	2	10

8. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of Council Decision (EU) 2023/1076 with regard to matters related to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, Social Democrats, the Labour Party, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;
- speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and
- a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time; and

9. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Planning for Constitutional Change Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) the Statements and Q&A post European Council meeting of 18th - 19th June 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133, shall be taken at the time when the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) would normally be taken, and on the conclusion of the Minister's response to the statements, the sitting shall stand suspended either for one hour or until 4 p.m., whichever is the later

2. the Statements and Q&A post European Council meeting of 18th-19th June 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133, shall not exceed 1 hour and 58.5 minutes, and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

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

(b) following the statements, questions and answers shall be taken for 20 minutes;

(c) on the conclusion of the questions and answers, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed five minutes; and

(d) members may share time

Mins	15	10	5	9	3.5
Mins	5	8	3.5	5	8
Mins	3.5	5	8	5	

3. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Postal and Telecommunications Services (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall be taken no earlier than 4 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport;

4. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a

conclusion after 1 hour, and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration;

5. the proceedings on the recommendations from the Seanad to the Finance Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour, and any recommendations from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad recommendations, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance;

6. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and

7. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Social Housing Passport Bill 2026, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil

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

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

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

(c) members may share time; and

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

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) on conclusion of the first speaking round, or where speeches conclude before the 1 hours and 42 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; Provided that any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday, 14th July 2026; and

(c) members may share time.

Mins	10	10	10	6	2
Mins	10	6	2	10	6
				SF	
Mins	2	10	6	2	10

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

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: They are not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mac Lochlainn.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The approach of the Minister for justice to the changes to the criminal legal aid scheme has brought absolute chaos to the system, as was dealt with earlier. There are a number of motions to annul his scheme but he needs to come to the House and engage. We cannot go into recess and allow this to continue. There is chaos in our system. The Minister is making a mess and he needs to engage with stakeholders and sort this out urgently.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is deeply disappointing that the Government has not announced plans to issue a State apology to thalidomide survivors. The Tánaiste said 2026 has to be the year we bring some degree of closure to these people who have been treated so badly. Time is running out. There are just 40 survivors left; this issue must be resolved. There are only two

weeks until we go into summer recess. We need to have statements on the issue and to hear from Government why it has treated the survivors so badly and when it intends to make the apology that has been promised.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The summer programme, previously known as July provision, remains in absolute chaos. We have parents and children still wondering whether they are going to get a service this summer. We have an email address and a phone number but we do not have answers. We would like a debate in this House at the earliest possible opportunity.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I object to giving only 90 minutes to the occupied territories Bill. This is a Bill both Government parties said during the general election that they would support, and yet they are now trying to absolutely gut it. The Government parties do not want time to discuss it because they do not want that to be exposed.

Deputy Michael Collins: With Electric Ireland raising electricity bills by 8% last week and Pinergy raising them by more than 80%, and more than 300,000 people in this country unable to pay their electricity bills, surely it is time for the Government to take action and have a proper debate in the Dáil as to how we can control these energy companies. They are out of control.

Deputy Mary Butler: There have been five different requests from the Opposition Whips. If we were to take them, we would not be able to bring forward the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory Bill 2026, the Postal and Telecommunications Services (Amendment) Bill 2026 to support postmasters, the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026 or the Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses) Bill 2026. Notwithstanding the fact that everything they have raised is important, we have prioritised legislation this week so the Order of Business stands.

Question, "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to", put and declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to Questions on Policy or Legislation. I welcome members of St. Finbarr's hurling and football club who are in the Public Gallery. The club is celebrating its 150th year. It is older than the GAA itself and slightly older than most of us. I welcome them to Leinster House at the behest of Deputy Ó Laoghaire. To be 150 years old is to be commended.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On behalf of the barr's of Cabra, I extend a welcome to the barr's of Contae Chorcaí. We all argue the bit over which club outstrips the other.

In recent days the country has been really shocked by reports of children fighting for their lives because of e-scooter crashes.

I have heard doctors warn of an epidemic of traumatic brain injury, gardaí raising concerns about risk posed by reckless and unlawful use and, across the place, pedestrians are literally being forced off footpaths. Many older people are afraid to walk through town centres. Parents

worry every time a child leaves the house because these e-scooters are being driven at speed through public spaces with absolutely no regard for anybody's safety, much less the law. This is now a scourge, yet the Government's response has been slow, fragmented and wholly inadequate. When will Government act on the issue? The Garda needs enforcement powers and penalties to tackle dangerous, illegal e-scooter use and it needs those powers now.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I share her significant concerns around e-scooters. We have seen the shocking evidence coming from Temple Street and the traumatic brain injuries that have resulted from their use. I have been informed by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, that a review of regulations is under way, particularly around helmets and high-visibility clothing, with a view to addressing the concerns that have been documented around head injuries and other serious injuries. The Minister is considering a range of proposals in the context of the next road traffic Bill. I agree we cannot leave the regulatory system as it is. We have to take the evidence as it comes. It is shocking across many of our communities. I know the Deputy sees it in Dublin Central as I do in my own constituency. We need to change some of the regulations as they exist today because it is having a significant impact on young people.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The CSO reported today that electricity consumption by data centres is at a record high of 23%. That is 10% higher than it was in the previous year. It is forecast to grow to 30% by 2030 and if the Government's large energy user policy is implemented in full, it could reach 55% of our electricity demand. That means higher electricity prices for domestic users and small businesses, it means completely undermining our energy security and it means that we could face up to €28 billion in fines because we will have absolutely shot through our emissions reductions targets. How many data centres is enough? At what point will the Government realise we cannot continue to allow this unchecked growth of data centres? There is a cost to them. It costs people in their bills and it is costing the environment.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have to be a bit more balanced than what the Deputy has reflected in the debate on data centres.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It was quite balanced.

Deputy Jack Chambers: They are a central part of Ireland's economic and digital future and a key part of our value proposition for foreign direct investment and associated employment. In 2024, an estimated €104 billion in gross value added was enabled by data centre-dependent sectors. Approximately 170,000 people work in Ireland's ICT sector and 19,000 jobs are directly in data centre operations. The Government is committed to working with key stakeholders to identify and support new approaches to integrating large-scale demand sustainably into Ireland's energy systems, in alignment with decarbonisation and digitalisation objectives of growing our knowledge-based economy. This is being reinforced by unprecedented grid investment. Attacking data centres ignores the huge economic drivers they provide.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am asking how many.

Deputy Jack Chambers: What would the Deputy say to the 19,000 jobs that are reliant on them? Where would she find them?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: They need to-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not allowed, Deputy. I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: My thoughts today are with the many victims of George Gibney following his conviction after many decades of evading justice for far too long. We are reminded of how many survivors of abuse are still awaiting justice. A timely vote takes place in the Dáil tomorrow evening on the Labour Party's Bill to enable survivors to pursue religious orders for redress in respect of abuse perpetrated upon them in childhood.

The justice Minister has said the Bill aligns with Government policy but that he wants another six months to consider the Bill. The Minister has had almost two years. He referred this Bill to the Attorney General, I understand, two years ago. Survivors have been left carrying terrible trauma for decades, where they have experienced abuse in institutions as children. They should not have to wait another six months before we can even see work resuming on this Bill. The work the Minister says remains to be done can continue while the Bill progresses through the Oireachtas on Committee Stage and Report Stage. Will the Government withdraw the delaying amendment and let the Bill progress through the Oireachtas to deliver justice for survivors?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As with Deputy Bacik, my thoughts today are with all the victims of George Gibney, the four incredibly brave and courageous women who gave evidence in the case and indeed everyone who has suffered abuse. I think of the horrendous suffering they endured when they were so vulnerable, but more so I am thinking of the incredible strength the survivors have demonstrated in ensuring justice has finally been delivered.

On the Bill the Deputy is seeking to progress tomorrow, the Minister will set out the Government's position on that tomorrow. I think the Deputy will share my view that the Minister is keen to progress changes in this area. He will set out the wider Government position on that tomorrow.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will Fianna Fáil Party TDs be given a free vote on Wednesday night when they get a chance to ban hare coursing? Multiple Fianna Fáil TDs have responded to constituents saying that they are utterly opposed to hare coursing. Is Fianna Fáil going to force them to vote to continue this cruel practice, where thousands of hares are captured from the wild every single year, held in little cages initially and then kept in enclosures with many other hares when these are solitary animals, all to prepare them for the point of them running for their lives?

I also ask the Minister to correct the record of the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, in the debate on Thursday, where he referred to a 2022 independent economic analysis which

apparently suggested a benefit of coursing of €70.7 million annually to the Irish economy. That independent analysis simply does not exist.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, outlined the Government's position very clearly in the debate last Thursday evening. The Government will be opposing Deputy Murphy's Bill.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am speaking today on behalf of families living with Friedrich's ataxia who are running out of time while waiting for access to Skyclarys, the only approved treatment for this cruel disease. For these patients, every week that passes means more mobility loss, more independence gone and more heartbreak for families watching their loved ones deteriorate. This disease does not wait for meetings, reports or lengthy negotiations. These families need action, not more promises. Will the Minister, Deputy Chambers, now engage directly with the Minister for Health and the HSE to ensure the reimbursement process is prioritised, negotiations with the manufacturers are brought to a conclusion without further delay and every flexibility available to the Government is utilised to expedite the decision? Emma O'Shea is one of these patients, who do not have the luxury of time and who deserve to know that the full weight of Government is behind getting this treatment over the line.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): The HSE is assessing this medicine in line with the criteria detailed in legislation. It is important to say that the company which markets this medication submitted the document ten months after the health technology assessment, HTA, was commissioned by the HSE. There has been substantial delay in relation to this. We received a commercial proposal on 27 May and the drugs group is meeting in July, as it does, bringing together the scientists involved to assess the effectiveness of the medication and the cost together. It is a scientific process led by our scientists and we need to let that process continue.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: There has been a significant increase in the population in Naas and the Department of education has requested St. Corban's national school in Naas to increase its enrolment for September by an additional 25 students. The school is more than happy to do so. It applied for a grant for furniture and it has a classroom ready. However, the Department will not allocate a teacher. It is only allocating 19 teachers when the school needs 20. The Department needs to allocate an additional teacher to ensure the 25 children have a school place in September. I would appreciate the Minister, Deputy Chambers, liaising with the line Minister and the Department on this.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue for St. Corban's national school. As he knows, the primary staffing schedule is designed to operate in a very clear and transparent way, ensuring that all schools are treated equally regardless of their location. With over 3,000 primary schools in the country, it is essential that every school is treated fairly, and that is what the Department is seeking to do. As the Deputy knows, the enrolment of St. Corban's decreased from 498 in September 2024 to 460 in September 2025. The enrolment of 460 is the basis on which the school was allocated teachers. Attrition can happen in the year thereafter and I know it is often in that year that demand can arise. I will

ask that representatives from the Department of Education and Youth continue to engage with the school on the issue the Deputy raised.

Deputy Emer Currie: The Liffey Valley is an unrivalled green corridor in Dublin, an ecological and biodiversity treasure for our capital.

That is why I asked the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to reconvene the stakeholders of the Liffey Valley Park strategy. I welcome his agreement to do so. However, that vision set out 20 years ago this year to connect a necklace of amenities along the Liffey Valley remains unfulfilled. We have seen positive steps through the acquisition of Castletown House and Lucan House but we have also seen an attempt to rezone high amenity lands at St. Edmundsbury. The Government must do more to protect and secure the future of the Liffey Valley. Will the Minister ask the Office of Public Works, OPW, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, to prioritise protection of the Liffey Valley and the acquisition of more lands by the State in the public interest?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I acknowledge a lot of the work she has done in the Liffey Valley, particularly when she was on the council. She had a number of initiatives that brought a lot of success for the Liffey Valley. I am not going to comment on zoning proposals. On a general point, we need to zone more land. I am not speaking about the specific area the Deputy referenced but we need to ensure that local authorities zone sufficient land to deliver more homes.

Relating to the Deputy's question about the OPW and NPWS, we can ask the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to engage with his officials relating to the Liffey Valley. With Fingal County Council and South Dublin County Council, there is a need for greater co-operation across some of the shared infrastructures in both local authorities. We all want to enhance that amenity and what it means for people across Dublin. However, I am not going to comment on the specifics of zoning except to say that we need to have more zoned land.

Deputy David Cullinane: The proposed pharmaceutical, veterinary and one health buildings at the South East Technological University, SETU, are really important opportunities for enhancing third level education in the south east and Waterford. All those buildings are to be housed in the Glassworks site, which is also a real opportunity for the south east. Lots of plans have been progressed by SETU. It has set out its ambition. It has forwarded those plans to relevant Departments. I was on a number of calls with the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, when he was the Minister and with local TDs and now Ministers. Clear commitments were given that State money would be available to develop that site and those buildings. Regarding those particular projects - the pharmaceutical, veterinary and one health buildings - I ask that they be prioritised and seen as the game changer that they can be.

The University Hospital Waterford is hoping that on the same site that we can have a new medical school. It is something that I have raised with the Minister for Health in the past. I ask if those plans can be progressed.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. We want to see the continued expansion of SETU across different disciplines. I have not got an updated brief on the specifics of what the

Deputy raised. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to come back to the Deputy on the specifics of it and what he has raised.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The universal social charge, USC, remains one of the most resented charges on a worker's payslip. It cannot be reduced by tax credit. It hits the middle income and lower earners at the first euro. As the Minister is aware, it was introduced in 2011 as a temporary crisis measure. Fifteen years on, it is still here. It is still squeezing the workers it was meant to support during that downturn. Previous Ministers have claimed that USC must be in place because we need the revenue. Is the Minister aware that of the €145 billion in tax revenue generated in 2025, only €5.6 billion was the USC? That is less than 4% of the State revenue. That is a charge that successive Governments promised that it was never meant to be permanent. Will the Government commit today to bringing forward, as part of budget 2027, a costed roadmap that plans to abolish the USC at the lowest level at least to start with?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The tax strategy group examines the different options that are available to the Government during the summer. That informs the respective tax package that will advance. We have to be honest about the measures we take in terms of taxation. They have to be sustainable and affordable in the long term. USC brings in about €5.5 billion per year. To make permanent reductions in it, that would potentially have to be found elsewhere. The calibration of the wider tax package is a matter for the Minister for Finance with the tax package that will be available. We will set that out in the summer economic statement. We have been clear that we want to have an income tax package for workers. The mix of that is a matter for the Government to decide in advance of budget 2027. The Deputy and I have read the Commission on Taxation report, as has everybody.

We need to ensure we have a sustainable tax base to pay for public services and for the long-term demographic risks we have in our economy. We have to balance all of those risks in how we decide budget 2027.

Deputy George Lawlor: Last Friday, Rosslare Europort was reaffirmed as a port of national importance. This is an issue I have discussed with the Minister relatively recently and I am looking for some sort of update. The Port of Rosslare has grown exponentially in years since Brexit, yet the former customs post, which can hold and park 93 trucks, lies idle after the Minister's Department spent €14.8 million on it. Can we please have some common sense in this regard? To be fair to the Minister, I spoke to him about this relatively recently. Can we have an update because common sense must prevail? Rosslare Harbour village is overrun trucks. The former customs post has parking for 93 trucks in an ideal location. I ask the Minister to act on this.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I appreciate he raised this matter with me during the past week or so. I followed up on it directly with officials this morning to try to get a response and I will come back to him with a comprehensive response.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Too many people are dying from cancer all over the country. Many young people are dying just three to six weeks after being diagnosed, at very short notice. Young mothers and fathers are leaving behind young children at such short notice. Blood tests

going back even for 12 months do not seem to have shown up anything in many people. Then it is too late when the cancer is detected. People are asking if a high-level investigation could be carried out by senior medics to see if there is any connection between Covid vaccines and the fact that blood tests are not showing up cancer until it is too late. I ask that this be done.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We have improved our cancer treatment enormously. We have more people living with and beyond cancer. The vaccination, like all vaccinations, is a life-saving medical intervention that protects people all over the world. We will not be doing that. I will discuss the Deputy's suggestion and comments with the Irish Cancer Society.

Deputy John Clendennen: We have seen huge improvements in rail services that are benefiting commuters and regional development on a balanced basis. I recently received a commitment from Irish Rail in relation to the reintroduction of catering services later this year. I ask that it be considered on the Dublin to Galway and Westport route to benefit the Tullamore area. More importantly, after 7.30 p.m. five trains leave Dublin for Portarlinton and Portlaoise, with the latest one running at 10.10 p.m. On the Dublin to Galway and Westport line, two trains leave Tullamore after 7.30 p.m., with the last one at 8.30 p.m. That is simply too early. We have managed to work on the timetables early in the morning to benefit commuters but we need to ensure now that they work later into the night. I ask the Government to consider a later train to serve people leaving Dublin at a later time in the evening.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I absolutely agree that we need to expand catering across all the rail services. The Deputy made a fair point that we should have later trains covering different regions, as happens in other areas. I will ask that the Minister for Transport engage with the National Transport Authority and Irish Rail. With the increased capital investment, new trains and improved train lines, we need to ensure the bandwidth improves throughout the day, and particularly at night so people can leave their cars at home and plan for a train journey later in the evening. That is a sensible suggestion and I will convey it to the Minister for Transport.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: In Limerick, women who need maternity services have long enjoyed an excellent system. It is called a midwife-led series of community clinics. Effectively, what it means is that a woman will deal with the same midwife during the entire course of her pregnancy. In the past 48 hours, without any notice to anybody, the HSE has pre-emptively decided to terminate that service, allegedly because of a shortage of staff. I cannot overstate the anxiety, angst and distress this has caused. I have been inundated with phone calls to my house, my office, etc., from women, some of whom have been pregnant for quite a while.

3 o'clock

Is it possible to get this reversed? That is what people want to know and it is what people have asked me to raise here today. Will the Minister check out the situation and get back to me as quickly as possible?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I will come back to him on the specifics of the maternity services in Limerick, which I do not have to hand - forgive me - but there has been a very considerable increase in staff. The recent questions around staffing, posts unfunded or changes are something of a surprise to me in that context. I

will clarify the issue both for the Deputy and for his constituents but there should be no basis for that given the very considerable increase in staff both in the mid-west in UHL, and in the maternity services. I will clarify that for the Deputy, of course.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I renew my appeal in relation to the urgent need to increase the income eligibility limits for social housing in counties Cavan and Monaghan. The social housing income baseline is €30,000 in both counties. This is totally inadequate in view of the costs today for people buying or building a home. Daily I am dealing with constituents who are working hard in relatively low-paid jobs and they are above the present income limits. At the same time, those people have no hope whatsoever of getting a mortgage as their income is too low to service a home loan. The Minister, Deputy Browne, confirmed to me recently in replies to parliamentary questions that his Department is carrying out an analysis of present household income conditions. These conditions need to be amended without further delay. The present system is denying good, hard-working people and their families the opportunity to own their own homes. Those people must not be condemned to a lifetime of renting housing accommodation.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate the issue here and the significant issue of people being excluded on the margins, or indeed being taken out of social housing lists, by virtue of income growth. I understand from the Minister, Deputy Browne, that a revised household means policy issued to all local authorities recently around income disregards, once-off income and other changes, but I understand the wider issue. We are all dealing with people's applications for social housing every day. I will reflect the serious concerns of the Deputy's constituents in Cavan and Monaghan, and the need to provide certainty and hope for people around the social housing lists. I know that the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is examining that area as well.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Notwithstanding the obvious requirement for the Garda to have the resources to adequately provide security during Ireland's tenure holding the Presidency of the EU, the loss of ten gardaí from Ballymun deals a substantial blow to an area that has seen a rise in violent criminal activities in recent times, particularly in relation to a widely reported feud between local gangs in Ballymun. The loss of these gardaí has also resulted in the stopping of certain vital Garda operations targeting such criminal activity. The loss of these gardaí goes against assurances I received and it will have an immediate and long-term consequence for communities plagued by such criminal activity. I urge the Minister to get a review of why this decision was made and to look at whether it is necessary to take gardaí from an area that is badly in need of help.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate the concerns around the potential. I do not know the specifics of the organisation of gardaí in respect of the different regions. I know this is something Deputy McAuliffe has also engaged on with the Minister for justice around the concerns in Ballymun and elsewhere. The Deputy will be aware that the deployment of gardaí is a specific matter for the Garda Commissioner, but we will reflect the Deputy's concerns, and indeed those of other Deputies, to the Minister for justice, who can engage further with the Commissioner on this matter to ensure that the community Deputy Ellis represents is properly policed and that public safety is upheld as an absolute priority.

EirGrid, Electricity and Turf (Amendment) Act 2022 (Section 10) Order 2026: Motion

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

EirGrid, Electricity and Turf (Amendment) Act 2022 (Section 10) Order 2026,
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.

Question put and declared carried.

Double Taxation Relief: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Orders in draft:

(i) Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and on Capital) (the Principality of Liechtenstein) Order 2026, and

(ii) Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income and Capital Gains) (Sweden) Order 2026,
copies of which have been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 25th June, 2026, be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach, in accordance with Standing Order 103(1)(a), which, not later than 15th July, 2026, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 110, and Standing Order 109(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

**Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2026
and Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations 2026:
Referral to Joint Committee**

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2026,
Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 2) Regulations 2026,

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 3) Regulations 2026,

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 4) Regulations 2026,

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 5) Regulations 2026,

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 6) Regulations 2026, and

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) (No. 7) Regulations 2026,

Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations 2026,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 2nd July, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Instruction to Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I move:

That it be an instruction to the Committee on the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, that pursuant to Standing Order 194, the Committee has power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill to provide that Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 be amended for the purposes of:

(i) introducing legal and habitual residency eligibility criteria for access to homeless accommodation provided by housing authorities under said Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988;

(ii) obliging housing authorities to have regard to the best interests of children when making decisions on the allocation of available homeless accommodation to a family with one or more children; and (iii) expanding the powers of housing authorities to withdraw the provision of homeless accommodation in certain circumstances;

and to change the title of the Bill and make other technical and consequential amendments required to take account of the changes above.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	

Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Devine, Máire.	
Carrigy, Mícheál.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Healy, Seamus.	
Daly, Martin.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kenny, Martin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Fleming, Sean.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Foley, Norma.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Geoghegan, James.	Murphy, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Harkin, Marian.	Nash, Ged.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Kyne, Seán.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lahart, John.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Lawless, James.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Quaide, Liam.	
McGuinness, John.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Sheehan, Conor.	

Moynihan, Aindrias.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Smith, Duncan.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Stanley, Brian.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Murphy, Michael.	Wall, Mark.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ward, Mark.	
Neville, Joe.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

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

Question declared carried.

Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026: Report and Final Stages

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 1 is in the names of Deputies Ó Laoghaire, Bennett, Duncan Smith, Gibney, Boyd Barrett and O'Gorman. It arises out of committee proceedings.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 3, between lines 24 and 25, to insert the following:

“ “Illegal settlement” means any residential area, outpost, or economic zone established, supported, protected or otherwise administered by the State of Israel, in violation of international law, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (including East Jerusalem) that was brought under Israeli administration since June 1967;”.

We have had a bit of discussion on this and our intentions are all the same, namely to ensure that no technical difficulty arises from goods or services being exported by Palestinians in relevant area codes or postcodes that are not settlements but rather involve Palestinians seeking to export. I appreciate that the response of the Minister of State a fortnight ago was to the effect that they would be travelling through a different door because settlement goods would attempt to go through the EU-Israel Association Agreement and that there is a separate agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Europe.

However, the concern that was raised on Committee Stage was that, ultimately, this is a form of legislation that has a criminal sanction for breach of the Customs Act. In the event that somebody brought a complaint, our concern is that there could be unintended consequences. Does the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, have strong enough grounds to state that even though a good is from a relevant postcode, it does not count? The Bill seems to hinge very much on postcodes.

There is concern that things will be unintentionally captured because they originate from within a certain postcode even though they might not be a settlement good. Related to that is the fact that the Bill relies almost entirely on postcodes rather than trying to define illegal Israeli settlements, which is the approach taken in legislation in other jurisdictions. They have a definition of what constitutes an illegal settlement and, therefore, there are two criteria by which to define them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 7 is related and may be discussed with this amendment.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We had a good discussion about this on Committee Stage. It is important to note on the floor of the Dáil that we would be an outlier in terms of this legislation compared with other countries that have progressed similar or related legislation. When Senator Frances Black started this process eight years ago, Ireland was a pioneer in introducing legislation in this area. We have since been caught up and overtaken by other European countries, such as Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway. They have combined the definition of Israeli settlements and postcodes. Why would we be an outlier in the growing group of states that are bringing forward similar legislation in terms of this definition?

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Minister of State wish to respond?

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): Yes. As Deputies Ó Laoghaire and Smith alluded to, we went through this in quite a bit of detail on Committee Stage and I recognise that as such. It is very much the firm opinion of the Government that such amendments are not required. For the benefit of the House, I will go through the reasons for this.

First, I want to address the issue of intention, as raised by Deputy Ó Laoghaire. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Bill is specifically aimed at Israeli settlements. This is stated in both the Long Title and Short Title and there simply cannot be doubt. Second, on definitions, I do not believe that Ireland should or needs to create our own definition of an Israeli settlement. This poses its own challenges and risks. Third, the legislation makes use of an existing process,

namely the EU-Israel technical agreement of 2013, based on the list of postal codes referenced in footnote 4 in the Bill. I have the list of postal codes here. It is extremely extensive.

Postal codes for this area are not similar to Dublin 4 or N5, for the Arsenal fans in the House. They relate specifically to buildings. It is far more detailed than anything we would think about in terms of how comprehensive they are. To elaborate on that, 90% of the postal codes listed are part 1 postal codes. They directly correspond to Israeli settlements rather than an area. Fewer than 10% of the codes are part 2 postal codes. Part 2 postal codes are locations that fall on both sides of the Green Line, which is, of course, the pre-1967 Israel-Palestine border. In the case of a part 2 postal code, operators are advised to contact the customs authorities of a member state to carry out a further check in order to verify the exact position and, thus, eligibility.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire referred to the discussion on this on Committee Stage. He mentioned a hypothetical about a Palestinian who might be caught up in this based on their location. Again, that person would not be trading under the EU-Israel Association Agreement. It would be the EU-Palestinian Authority trade and co-operation agreement that would be the relevant agreement. That agreement does not require or even provide for the use of Israeli postal codes by importers but rather rests on arrangements involving the relevant customs authorities.

On the comparison with other EU member states, Norway is not an EU member state and therefore is not covered by EU legislation and is not part of the Common Market. The Netherlands has not progressed its legislation further. It is currently at draft stage and has been put out to a sort of public consultation. Belgium has not drafted legislation and is further behind. The situation with Spain is that there is no difference. It relies on a postal code list. I will go into Spain a little bit in the next set of amendments.

For all of those reasons, I am satisfied that the amendments are unnecessary, although we accept their intention and the intention is shared with the Government.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will be brief because I want to get onto the meat of the debate, services. I will re-emphasise the point I made on Committee Stage. Section 5(1) of the Bill is very clear - there is no exemption that deals with this in terms of subsection (2) - and states that the importation of goods originating in a postal code to which this Act applies is prohibited. It is written very clearly.

In the case of a Palestinian farmer in one of the postal codes in the Bill, according to any reasonable reading of the law, the importation of the goods from the postal code to which the Act applies is prohibited. The legislation does not specify whether it is being done through the EU-Israel Association Agreement rather than via another method. It refers to the importation of goods from the postal codes being prohibited. I accept it is not the intention of the Government to do this but I do find it strange. We were told on Committee Stage that the provision would be interpreted in the context of the full Long Title and that, therefore, it is about the illegal occupied territories and so on. It seems strange to me to argue that when we have a much neater way of doing things, as outlined in the amendment and as has been done by a series of other countries in Europe.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: At the outset I would like to comment on how much I object to having a severely guillotined debate on such a key Bill. Many Bills are being guillotined and rammed through, but this one in particular, having been a promise to the people, is one that deserved more time at every stage.

Speaking specifically to the amendment, like Deputy Murphy, I have no doubt about the intentions. However, members of the Government talk a lot about unintended consequences.

That is all we are trying to catch with this. Multiple amendments were put in that would address the issue. The Minister of State has talked about the percentages, including that 90% is clear. That is the whole point. We know the postcode system will largely work; we are looking for a definition that will catch that small additional percentage that is not clear. The definition in the amendment will do exactly that.

The Minister of State mentioned Spain, where the legislation covers Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory and a link to the EU postcode list. I appreciate that the Netherlands and Belgium are not as far advanced with their legislation but, as it stands, their approach is to do it that way. We all want to make sure we do not in any way penalise Palestinian people through the passage of this legislation. That is all we are trying to do. This really was an issue on which I thought we, Government and Opposition, could easily work together. However, once again, unfortunately, the Government has not shown willing to take it up.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The debate on this issue went into quite a bit of technical and hypothetical detail on Committee Stage. It must be stated clearly that the postcodes are very specific. They do not apply to a broad area. It is not the case that the Netherlands and Belgium have decided to go in a different direction. They are in a public consultation phase, which means it is not a fair comparison. There is the 90% covered by the postcode list and then there is the less than 10% that would, quite clearly, be trading under a different Act. It is clear in the legislation that this is covered and provision is made for it. We have absolutely no doubts that the Bill is completely fit for purpose in what it is trying to achieve in this section.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 2, 9, 11, 13, 16 to 18, inclusive, and 24 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 4, between lines 4 and 5, to insert the following:

""settlement service" means a service provided in whole or in part within a postal code or relevant occupied territory to which this Act applies;"

This is part of a series of amendments of which amendments Nos. 16 and 17 are the most substantial. This legislation matters because the settlements are part of a deliberate policy and strategy by the Israeli Government to undermine the viability of the Palestinian state. Senator Black's occupied territories Bill mattered in particular because it sought to tackle that and also because it was a demonstration that international law has to apply in full and with force and

vigour. Too often, the atrocities we have seen, including tens of thousands of people killed, the deliberate refusal of access to humanitarian aid, the starving of funding of the Palestinian Authority, the deliberate targeting of journalists and the abduction of nationals from across the world, including Irish nationals, on the high seas, all point to Israel being able to act with impunity.

This is a small but meaningful measure to state that international law does apply. We have an International Court of Justice decision that states very clearly that trade with the illegal settlements is illegal. That includes goods and services. Plainly, trade in services is just as morally wrong as trade in goods. It is against all the advice of the Minister's Department, as things stand, and the Department of enterprise. It sustains the settlements that are such a problem, such an undermining of international law and such a violation of the rights of the Palestinian people.

It is also very clear that not including services is a political decision. We heard a lot of words from the Minister, Deputy McEntee, at the committee but no clear reason has ever been given as to why, if the public policy exemption exists in one particular place, which it does in relation to trade, it cannot be applied in this case. It has not been demonstrated that it cannot rely on the relevant sections of the treaties. The Minister has acknowledged that it would allow for restriction of trade in services to another EU country, which should actually have a higher bar. If that is the case, and she acknowledges it is, why would it not be allowed to ensure the restriction of trade in services with a non-EU jurisdiction? The legal basis that is being argued scarcely exists at all.

We can talk about advertising of services and so on but, ultimately, the Spanish have got this over the line. That is the long and the short of it. They may not have gone as far as I would like or people in Spain and in the Spanish Parliament and even Palestinians themselves would like but, at the end of the day, in terms of infringement proceedings and coherence with EU law, they are over the line. They have interfered with trade in services. The same risks applied to Spain acting as would apply to Ireland. No infringement proceedings have started, the sky has not fallen in and there have been no issues in terms of the many multinational companies, including American companies, that operate in Spain. None of those things has happened. The Spanish have legislated on advertising of services, thereby bringing themselves into the same realm the Government and the State would be in if we ensured this legislation amounted to a ban on services.

We should ban trade in services. I think the day will come that we do so. I hope it happens at EU level but if not, this jurisdiction can still move forward in this regard. Excluding services is a watering down and taking the teeth out of this legislation in terms of what could and should have been done and what was promised during the course of the last general election, when every political party said it would implement the occupied territories Bill. At that stage, in any engagement Senator Black had with the Department, nobody was saying there was any legal difficulty. It was stated that there were technical issues that needed to be worked on but nobody was saying it was impossible to do this. Nobody ever said that, including during the election. Now we are being told it is impossible to do but we are kind of not being told that as well. Any time the Taoiseach talks about it, he touches on that and then he moves on to international trade. It has been demonstrated in Spain that international trade has not been an issue. It would still be the right thing to do in any event but it has not been an issue in that jurisdiction.

I know the Minister of State will talk about advertising of services being in the Spanish language and all that kind of thing. That really does not cut it. The bottom line is that the Spanish have brought this over the line. We could legislate for this. The basis for it exists in the treaties. We should do it because it is the right thing to do but a political decision has been taken not to do it. That is the long and the short of it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will build on the discussions we had on this on Committee Stage. The Minister seemed to rely quite heavily on the argument around the Spanish language as a rebuttal to the Opposition stance that Spain has done it and, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire said, the sky has not fallen in and there have been no infringement proceedings. If the Minister of State has any other information in that regard, I look forward to hearing it. The Minister did not quite concede this as the reality of the situation but she went some way to agreeing that the passage of this legislation will not make us compliant with the ICJ ruling. I understand the Government's position is that it will bring us towards compliance and that we still have a way to go. We have heard about the Government's objective and proposal that the remaining compliance vacuum left by the legislation will be met at European level, which is a stronger way to do it. We all agree it is stronger. We also all recognise the complexity and delay that come with trying to agree anything at European level. The reality is that the passage of this Bill means we will not be compliant with the ICJ ruling. That is the simple reality. Until there is a European solution, if there is one, to fill the services gap, we will not be compliant. The Minister, if not fully conceding that, did at least acknowledge it.

I draw the Minister of State's attention to Article 29.3 of Bunreacht na hÉireann. His Department has stated that a commitment to the rule of international law is enshrined in the Constitution of Ireland and is one of the core principles of Irish foreign policy. Indeed, under that article, Ireland commits to accepting the principles of international law "as its rule of conduct in its relations with other States". Here is a clear opportunity for us to comply with international law as per the ruling of the ICJ in July 2024. Two years on from that ruling, this is our first legislative attempt to comply. The legislation was on the books already and could have been dealt with much more quickly. We have all expressed our frustration with all of that.

Nonetheless, we are here at this point where we have a measure to do that. Rather than looking at, for example, the Spanish language as a barrier or the European-level services gambit as a proposal or a way forward, why are we not starting from this point? How will we develop legislation that is compliant with international law and then work backwards from that? That is what I do not get. It seems to me that the Government is just throwing more and more barriers up to us accepting the reality that we are obliged constitutionally, morally and legally to comply with international law and we are about to pass legislation that will not do that. It is not compliant with international law.

How has Article 29.3 factored in the Government's discussions, if it has? How can the Government stand over the passage of this legislation without making it compliant with international law?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I remember well the debate on RTÉ during the general election where it was kind of a quick-fire question, "Will you implement the occupied territories Bill?" With no hesitation, Micheál Martin and Simon Harris said yes. There was also then someone with a camera phone who went and talked to Simon Harris in a café and asked him if he would

implement the occupied territories Bill and he said, "Oh yes, no question, no ifs or buts. This is an absolute priority for me." We had one promise made to the public during a general election and now that promise is effectively being abandoned. The occupied territories Bill, which everyone understood to mean goods and services, is now being gutted to remove the majority of trade. We know that on average, 70% of trade is in services rather than goods and that 70% is now being removed.

Why is that happening? We might get an answer and we might not. We never know which arguments we will get, but we might get some legal arguments today which are utterly spurious and empty. If I get time I will go through it. The reason they are so spurious and empty is because this is not about the law. There is an interesting tension between how Micheál Martin describes it and how Simon Harris describes it. Simon Harris says that he is on the side of the people and would love to do it but cannot legally, but then cannot explain why legally he cannot, whereas Micheál Martin comes out and says the truth, which is that we do not want to damage our relations with US corporations. That is the truth. We have suspended independent foreign policy for the benefit of US multinational corporations and for fear of offending Donald Trump. That is what is happening here.

There is no clearer example of this than what was revealed by *The Ditch*. The then US ambassador, Claire Cronin, contacted the Taoiseach saying there would be consequences for US companies in Ireland if the Bill proceeded. Hours after that, the then Tánaiste, Micheál Martin, announced the Bill would be shelved for review. This directly contradicted the Attorney General's advice that amendments were sufficient. That is what this has always been about; an Irish Government that has been triangulating between public opinion and the movement for Palestinian solidarity, which has put it under tremendous pressure, and then the wishes of the US Administration and US corporations. The Government's way of dealing with it is to say it is doing it, and try to send a signal to the movement and to popular opinion that it is taking action, while simultaneously saying to US companies, "Don't worry, none of you are actually going to be affected by this. It is not actually going to be in any way significant." It is really shameful to put the interests of Donald Trump and big US multinationals before public opinion, before promises made before the general election and before, most importantly, standing up against apartheid, genocide and the reality of what this Israeli State is and what these occupied territories are about.

What does this mean in real terms? It means even after this Bill is passed and implemented, assuming that the Government is going to reject all of our amendments, people in Ireland will still be able to go onto Airbnb and see advertised a "warm and lovely community settlement" in an Israeli settler village, Tekoa, with no mention of course of the violence against the Palestinian village of Tuqu', and no mention of the dispossession that has taken place and the violence that continues to maintain this "warm and lovely community settlement." It means *Booking.com* will be able to continue to list settlement properties in the West Bank. From 2018 to 2020, they tripled from 26 to 70. It tripled its East Jerusalem listings to 39 in the year before October 2023.

There is the continuation of potentially buying good in terms of Amazon. We know that in 2020 Amazon was found to be offering free shipping to illegal settlements but not to their Palestinian neighbours in the West Bank. Multinational corporations here, or with operations here that trade with the settlements include Airbnb, Etsy, BNP Paribas, HSBC, Barclays,

Motorola, RE/MAX Holdings and *Booking.com*. All these companies and all this trade is going to be able to continue. It fundamentally contradicts the Government's own position, which is that it could not do anything until the ICJ ruling. The ICJ ruling changes everything because it says that all states are under an obligation to abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings and prevent trade or investment relations with the settlements. For the Government's legal argument, that is the turning point. The problem with the Government's argument is that the ICJ ruling makes no distinction between goods and services. Later on, the Government suggested that there is some sort of distinction here in terms of the public policy exemption and that somehow this only applies to goods and not to services even though all the legal experts, even those who disagree with this Bill, all agree that such a distinction is absolute nonsense. The public policy exemption either applies to both or applies to neither.

The result is the Government has got itself into this position whereby it is going to implement law, supposedly to bring us in line with the ICJ ruling, but which it acknowledges is not actually going to bring us into compliance with international law. I thought a particular engagement at the committee between Deputy Ó Laoghaire and the Minister was really interesting. Deputy Ó Laoghaire asked her, "Is she ultimately accepting that [with this Bill] Ireland would not be in full compliance with the ICJ judgment?" The Minister replied, "I have said very clearly that this would go towards compliance, but the two-pronged approach is absolutely what would make us fully compliant". The Minister went on to say, "We are working and taking actions to be fully compliant. The intention is to be fully compliant, not partially compliant." Being partially compliant with international law is a little like being a little bit pregnant. We are either in breach of international law or we are in compliance with it. The Government is proposing a Bill supposedly predicated on the ICJ ruling, which is going to continue to have us in breach of international law because we are going to continue to allow trade in services with these illegally occupied territories.

It goes back to the fundamental point that none of the legal arguments here make any sense whatsoever. This is all about politics and US interests. It is shameful that those interests are being put first, and for me it underlines the fact that we need to continue to mobilise and to continue to pressure for services to be included even after this Bill. More fundamentally, it is not just the illegally occupied territories that we should be stopping trade with. We should be stopping trade with the entire apartheid, genocidal State of Israel. The idea that we continue to trade with such a state after almost three years of genocide is obviously horrendous.

Deputy Duncan Smith: To continue on from where we were left off at committee, by taking services out of the original Bill, we are essentially gutting it and watering it down. It is not just politicians on this side of the House saying that. Oxfam Ireland and a slew of very respected worldwide international organisations will say that this Bill has been watered down. Services make up 70% of the overall trade with the occupied territories. That trade, including financial services, tourism, tech and booking platforms, is a huge boon to the illegal Israeli settlements there and must be tackled. The Government has put forward a couple of arguments against doing that. One was that it would be technically very difficult, but that is a fallacy. We brought in goods and services bans for Russia after the invasion of Crimea. I know that politically that came from an EU decision, however, technically it showed that such a ban could be delivered and implemented relatively quickly and easily.

Second, I will come back to what Spain has done by banning the advertising of services in the Spanish market. When we brought this up at committee, the response that came back was very flimsy. We spent 30 or 40 minutes with the Minister talking about the Spanish language. We thought that this was not relevant. What language an ad is in is irrelevant. She also said that it came in through consumer legislation. That was the mechanism that Spain had; this is our mechanism. Hundreds of legal experts have backed our methodology to include services, to ensure we are fully compliant with international law.

The argument against has been, as I said, so flimsy in terms of including services and, as Deputy Murphy outlined, we all know the reason. It is because we are bowing to pressure from the Americans. Of that, there is no doubt. It was correspondence from ambassadors, letters from senators and congresspeople. Ultimately, that is the reason. Quite frankly, it is not good enough and does not recognise the will of the Irish people in relation to this Bill. They recognise what it can do and also recognise what it cannot do. The Irish people have been far ahead of this Chamber in terms of this issue, the illegal Israeli settlements, the apartheid regime and the genocide in Gaza and they want to see us bring forward as strong a piece of legislation as is possible. That must include services. Including goods is good but it is not good enough. We need to include services and, unfortunately, the arguments that have been put forward against that have not been strong enough in our view.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I join colleagues in proposing amendments that would include services in the occupied territories Bill or, as an alternative, at least restrict the advertising of services available within the occupied territories. Today the Government is going to use its majority to force the adoption of a piece of legislation - its version of the occupied territories Bill - which is knowingly and intentionally inconsistent with our international law obligations.

Throughout the entire process of debating the occupied territories Bill the Government has conceded that for full compliance with the July 2024 legal opinion of the International Court of Justice, a Bill that bans all trade with the occupied territories - trade in goods but also trade in services - is required. When we were looking at this Bill during pre-legislative scrutiny at the foreign affairs committee a number of months ago, officials from the Department of foreign affairs confirmed this to me and others when we put the questions to them. Indeed, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, accepted this point during the Committee Stage two weeks ago when she conceded that the Bill being advanced is only in partial compliance with our obligations.

Let me reiterate what those obligations are as set out in Article 29(3) of the Constitution: "Ireland accepts the generally recognised principles of international law as its rule of conduct in its relations with other States." Yet today the Government will push forward with this Bill which is knowingly and intentionally inconsistent with international law because it does not go far enough and does not meet the criteria set out in the ICJ opinion.

This did not have to happen. The issue of services was introduced by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael after the 2024 general election. The concern about services did not originate in the legal advice given by the Attorney General to the last Government. This is a political decision taken by this Government which, in my view and that of many colleagues here, is dictated by fear of the Trump administration.

Last week during oral questions I raised the issue of the exclusion of services with the Minister, Deputy McEntee. She argued that there was a distinction in terms of how the public

policy exemption contained in Article 36 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, TFEU, applied to goods and services by saying it does apply to goods and somehow does not apply to services. What I say now and what I said then is that distinction is entirely unconvincing. First, it is not backed up by any case law. There is no case law that says the public policy justification does not apply to services. Indeed, if we look at the vast bulk of case law discussing goods and services from the Court of Justice of the European Union, over decades it has always sought to treat the protection of the free movement of goods and services and limitations on those freedoms identically rather than trying to separate them and treat the two differently.

Not only is there no case law, the strong advice heard and the strong academic understanding of EU law that was at the Oireachtas committee also speaks very much to there being no distinction on the grounds of a difference in treatment between goods and services when it comes to public policy. Professor Takis Tridimas and Professor Panos Koutrakos said very clearly that public policy provides a derogation not only from the free movement of goods but also the freedom to provide services. Professor Graham Butler, who actually does not agree with the overall approach of the Bill, said on that point:

I am in total agreement with what Professor Koutrakos said about the [public policy] existence of the exception even if it is not explicit for services in the same way as it is for goods.

So, there is no case law to justify the distinction. The strong academic advice is that there is no distinction, and the practical application of what is happening in Spain demonstrates there is no distinction either. That is because Spain has brought in national legislation restricting goods from the occupied territories and restricting the advertisement of services. I know that is a narrower ground than the initial one put forward in Senator Black's Bill. Nevertheless, Spain has justified that restriction on advertising of services on the grounds of the public policy justification in Article 36 of the TFEU and no effort has been made by the European Union to take enforcement action because it accepts what everybody accepts: that the distinction the Government is trying to rely on does not really exist in terms of the day-to-day application of European Union law.

While everyone here accepts that action at an EU level on restricting trade for goods and services with the occupied territories is the better approach, and I welcome the statements the Minister of State, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Taoiseach have made, we have no certainty of success following and relying solely on that EU route. If Ireland acts on this Bill, we will deliver restrictions on services immediately but, more importantly, we will continue that leadership role and we will show a direction for other member states to follow, in the same way they followed us when we took the brave step of recognition of Palestinian statehood, in the same way we have shown leadership on calling out genocide in Gaza, and in the same way we stood up for United Nations Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, when there was major pressure against it from other members states. We have shown leadership in the past but by passing a Bill that excludes services and excludes the most meaningful restrictions we can implement, we are sacrificing that leadership role and we are sacrificing it on the basis of fear of the Trump administration. On that point, I believe we are fighting yesterday's war because even in the United States that steadfast support for everything the Netanyahu government does is fading. For a Democrat who gets donations from the American Israeli Public Affairs

Committee, AIPAC, it is a kiss of death in the primary elections. This cause, the cause of Netanyahu, is lost in the Democratic Party and even in significant and growing parts of the Republican Party the overreach Netanyahu has demonstrated in terms of the Iran war is undermining support for him. The Government is fighting yesterday's war in terms of adhering to the Trump administration's view.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: A few things have come up in the news today to put this in context. Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, a renowned surgeon who heroically stayed with the people while they were being genocided by Israel is, unfortunately, probably near death. The man is unrecognisable and there has been an international campaign to have him released, which has unfortunately failed. He said, "They brought me here to kill me" and that he was not going to get out of there. The other news was a Palestinian goalkeeper who was also killed. Then we see the farce taking place over the past few days in the US with the World Cup where the President of the host nation can intervene and get a red card suspended. He did not know what a red card was beforehand, apparently. He knows a lot about sport but not what a red card is and had to find out. That's absolutely disgraceful. My point is that we have a completely bankrupt and corrupt FIFA that bowed to that pressure and went along with it. Thankfully, the Belgians triumphed, so that was something. All of this is happening. I heard today that the US President may come over for the Irish Open, which coincidentally was awarded to his golf course.

4 o'clock

I am sure there is nothing untoward there. He is going to come over and may be invited to address the Dáil, as other past Presidents have. Sure we might as well let him. Let us reconvene the Dáil early, in fact, for this man who is bringing in fascistic policies. There is no other way to describe what he stands for. He is fomenting hate, targeting minorities, stoking up racism, transphobia and misogyny, and even intervening in a competition that people are meant to enjoy while they watch.

This Government made a promise to the people that it would bring in an occupied territories Bill. It was a key point and debate in the election. I remember canvassing in local elections and the general election, and it was brought up regularly on doorsteps. Here we are now with an absolute farce of a Bill, which will do very little to help the people of Palestine. It is being done to save face. We know it is because of the fear this Government has of the American regime in regard to in any way, shape or form saying anything. It even said the Ireland-Israel game must go ahead. This was something the Government could have taken a stand on. Even now, it could say to the Football Association of Ireland, FAI, that it would back it up fully in this, on a moral principle. I watched a documentary last night in which Bertie Ahern was waxing lyrical about Saipan. There is an idea that Governments do not intervene on sporting occasions.

To get back to the Bill, the academics, Dr. Patrick Bresnihan and Dr. Patrick Brodie, have pointed out that this Bill is being reduced in order to save face for companies like Airbnb, insurance brokers and so on. I had a look around on what is available on the Airbnb and *Booking.com* websites in relation to Israel. *The Guardian* did a very good exposé of how those two companies are helping Israelis make money off stolen Palestinian land. For example, there is an advertisement for a stunning villa with a private swimming pool and views from the master bedroom of the Judaeen Mountains. This is in a settlement on land that was seized from

Palestinians and it will continue to be advertised in this country and others. Only a handful of Palestinians are allowed in that area - the ones who work there.

There are 760 rooms available in hotels, apartments and Airbnb properties on illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Some 2,000 people can stay there during August. It shows inhumanity and barbarity to profiteer from and advertise that sort of luxury on the backs and the blood and bones of Palestinians in that area. I am sure the Minister of State agrees that is reprehensible, yet it will continue to be allowed.

We have all spoken umpteen times on this issue, and the Government has never explained how Spain and Slovenia could do it and Ireland cannot. It has never been explained how Spain and Slovenia can ban goods and services. These are two countries the Minister of State was working with in Europe to get pan-European unified action. Yet, those two countries, two of the Government's chums, were able to pass this and this Government is not. There is one simple reason. Spain, as a major economy, is not beholden to the US, in the same way that this Government is. Successive Governments, not just the Minister of State's, have created an economic policy that is so heavily reliant on foreign direct investment, FDI, that absolutely nothing can be done in any way, shape or form.

Let us have Trump in here and bring the Dáil back because he seems to be running the show in this country. We may as well have him in here and listen to his insane ramblings because this whole Bill has been reduced. It is a breach with the Irish people, which is being done because of Trump and US capitalism. Take a bow there.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I acknowledge the presence in the Gallery of Senator Frances Black. I look forward to engaging with her on the legislation in the Seanad next week, all going well. I recall debating with her in the Seanad when she initially introduced her Bill. We sat beside each other.

I will try to address as many points as possible in the time allowed to me, bearing in mind the extensive debate, over a number of hours last week, on Committee Stage when Deputies had the opportunity to contribute.

It goes without saying that the clear commitment made in the programme for Government was to progress legislation to prohibit the import of goods from or originating in Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. Whatever discussions or debates there are about interpretations, that is what the commitment in the programme for Government is and that is what this Bill fully delivers on.

The Government has a very clear responsibility to ensure that any legislation is legally robust and able to withstand challenge. Deputy Ó Laoghaire rightly stated that at the heart of this are very real concerns about flagrant breaches of international law taking place in the Middle East. To be a Government that can talk about those flagrant breaches, we have to make sure, soundly and completely, that legislation produced in this House is in line with international law.

Without wishing to reiterate what was said in the debate last week or, indeed, many times in this Chamber, in the case of goods, a public policy exception exists in the EU regulation that controls the importation of goods. Bear in mind, before this opinion was enacted, there was no pathway to any Bill of this kind until *iar-Taoiseach*, the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, took

the ICJ opinion, said there was an opportunity here and put it through the ringer. I know Deputy O'Gorman was part of the Government at that time. That opportunity is there to allow member states to prohibit the importation of goods from outside the EU for public policy reasons.

It is our considered view that there would be huge challenges regarding the effective implementation and enforcement of restrictions on the many types of trade and services. By their nature, trade and services are broad and wide-ranging. I could go into the WTO's general agreement on trade and services. I could talk about the Single European Market, the services directive, the commerce directive and the posting of workers directive.

I will make one point clear. I do not really disagree with much of what Deputy Coppinger said in the first minute or two of her contribution. I have no doubt that if President Trump does come, there will be large-scale protests. I remember attending protests when President George W. Bush was here. Deputy Paul Murphy led them, with Professor Aidan Regan and many others who were a bit younger then, but that was the time we were in.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was on them.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I have no doubt the Deputy was. I was merely a second-year arts student following Deputy Murphy's lead.

In this area, when we talk about what other member states are doing, Slovenia does not have legislation. That is crucial here. I remember sitting with the then Slovenian foreign minister at the Foreign Affairs Council last year. She came up to me and asked, "What are you doing in Ireland? How can we follow your lead?" Unfortunately, that Slovenian Government lost the most recent election, and I say "unfortunately" because its members were good working partners. The Deputy can call them our buddies or "chums" but they were really good working partners who wanted to work in this area.

At the same time, the consistent Spanish minister said Spain was looking through options and opportunities where it could do this on a domestic basis. As has been said, the Spanish Government provided a very clear amendment to Spain's consumer protection legislation by royal decree. We do not have royal decrees in this jurisdiction. That amendment has only been in place for a number of months so it has not faced the full rigours of a challenge yet, but I am of the understanding that 60 or 70 advertisements have been taken down since it came in. It is important to provide that context. I understand the points the Deputies made and I do not necessarily disagree with them, but that is the context of what is happening in other jurisdictions.

A point is repeatedly and understandably made about our compliance with the ICJ opinion. Of course, the Government has a key responsibility to make sure any legislation we produce is fully in order for our Statute Book. The 2024 advisory opinion we are all familiar with finds that Israel's occupation of occupied Palestinian territory is, of course, unlawful. That is why they are called occupied territories. However, the court does not, therefore, distinguish between goods and services. It leaves it to the states to determine what steps they should take.

As Deputies stated, and as was discussed at length in committee, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has made clear that we are taking a very clear twin-track approach. First, we are doing what we can do on goods, which is what we promised to do in the programme for

Government. We put that through pre-legislative and Committee Stage and we are debating it here and will debate it in the Seanad. We are clearly bringing in legislation that impacts on goods.

On what we are doing on EU level, Deputy Smith rightly cited the issues in relation to Russia and Crimea and, of course, that was agreed at EU level.

That was how we were able to do it so quickly and strongly and with widespread support from the House. No doubt, when the 21st sanction package of the EU is brought forward, we should get the vast majority of the House's support as well.

Deputies Gibney and O'Gorman referred to our constitutional obligations. I simply reject Deputy Gibney's assertion that we are not in compliance with the full ICJ judgment. I will outline the reasons, if the Deputy bares with me. The EU is, of course, bound by international law. This is clearly stated in the treaty. EU member states are similarly bound by international law. In areas where EU member states have pooled their competence, such as external trade, obligations that would normally fall to states are on the EU, including international obligations. However, EU member states are also bound by EU law. When trying to ensure compliance with both EU law and international law, states must first identify the correct legal level at which to act. Certain measures can be taken at the national level while others may only be possible at the EU level. The objective should be to reconcile EU and international law obligations, and that is exactly what we are doing by bringing forward this Bill at a domestic level to ban trade on goods and bring us towards compliance with the ICJ advisory opinion. In parallel, clear advocacy has been going on for quite some time at an EU level to bring about an EU ban on all trade with settlements. For the first time, we saw that issue being discussed during the trade segment of the Foreign Affairs Council. It will be raised again at the Foreign Affairs Council next week.

I am very aware my time is running out and there is much more I would say but I might have another chance later. I will state again that we fundamentally believe that these amendments would leave us with a Bill that is unworkable and wide open to legal challenge. Such a move would also act as a disincentive to other EU partners. For those reasons and many others, stated by both me and the Minister on Committee Stage, we are not in a position to accept this grouping of amendments.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister of State said he did not want to rehearse all the points of the last point. The key bit, however, is that we are looking for something new. We are looking for an explanation. Ultimately, we have not gotten that explanation as to the clear legal basis we cannot proceed. I believe a satisfactory basis exists within the treaties for a public policy exemption. It is the same type of public policy exemption that we are looking for here. I do not see any reason we cannot do that. The Minister of State, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, or any of the other Ministers, including the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste in their public commentary, have not made it clear as to why we cannot do that. That is why it seems obvious to me that this is a political decision.

Picking up on the point Deputy Gibney made, Article 23.9 of the Constitution commits Ireland to accepting the principle of international law, "... as its rule of conduct in its relations with other States.". We have a situation where the Department of foreign affairs - the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy McEntee - is bringing in this legislation in full knowledge of

what the Department itself accepted that the only reasonable reading of the 2024 ICJ advisory opinion is that a complete prohibition on trade with Israeli settlements is required. The Government, by implication, has said that it is moving towards compliance or partial compliance. Therefore, it is not ultimately compliant with the decision. If we are to be consistent with Article 23.9 of the Constitution, we should be implementing this in full.

There are so many contradictions with the position of the Government. On the one hand, the Government is saying that it was able to act only because of the ICJ decision, although I am not sure that is the case. We could have acted anyway. Yet, that very ICJ decision calls for a ban on goods and services. The Government is saying "No" to imposing a ban on services even though the whole basis of us moving forward was the ICJ decision. There is this contradiction of saying that we can interfere in trade with EU countries, with a public policy exemption, but we cannot do so with non-EU jurisdictions. Another contradiction is saying that the Spanish have done it by using a broad degree of language and so forth but we cannot do likewise. Ultimately, Spain is over the line. It can be done.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will take the baton and continue. I, too, identify those contradictions in what the Minister of State has said, and continues to say, which is similar to what various Ministers who have commented on this have said in the various Stages of discussion on this Bill. The Minister of State said the ruling does not distinguish in this regard and leaves it up to the states. It leaves it up to us. It is up to us to do it. We are the member state. We are the nation state that has to be compliant with this ruling. How we choose to do that is up to us. What I have seen, most particularly with this issue but with others as well, is the Government ping-ponging between having to be in twin step with European Union member states and colleagues versus going it alone where it thinks it appropriate. Honestly, that is genuinely sinister. The Government is essentially weaponising our membership of the European Union.

Deputy Neale Richmond: That is mad.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Government is essentially saying that when it suits, the way we do it must be through Europe. However, it is also willing to go it alone when it suits. That undermines our whole membership. I have said it again and again that as a member state of the European Union, we have to assert our values as a nation, which are solidarity, human rights, social justice and peace. Spain has done that. It is leading the way and showing how this can be done within the legal and regulatory frameworks and all the other frameworks at play here. However, we, as a member state of the European Union, are saying, "No".

I have been talking about the two-pronged approach for months before the Minister, Deputy McEntee, started calling it that herself but I never intended that to mean that we do one thing here and then push for the other part at a European level. We should push for it all here. We should go to the absolute edge of what we can test and then use that influence to get the same results at a European level. The Government is choosing to ping pong when it suits it between going through Europe and going it alone. There is no reason we should not be including services in this Bill.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister of State made a point of saying that the ICJ does not require member states to do anything. Therefore, it is up to member states how they chose to act and whether they make a distinction between goods and services. In the regulatory impact analysis from the Minister of State's Department, it stated that, "The only reasonable reading of the 2024 ICJ advisory opinion is that a complete prohibition on trade with Israeli settlements is required". The Minister accepted that on Committee Stage and, like the Minister of State, used phrases like "This Bill is moving us towards compliance" and "With this Bill, we will be partially compliant". All of that is an acceptance that we will not be in compliance with this Bill. We are either in compliance with international law or we are not.

To emphasise the point made by other Members, this raises the question over the constitutionality of what the Government is doing here. Article 29.3 of the Constitution commits Ireland to accepting the principles of international law "... as its rule of conduct in its relations with other States." Yet, the Government is introducing a Bill that it acknowledges will not bring Ireland into compliance with international law. Far from being one of the core principles of Irish foreign policy, as the Department of foreign affairs puts it, we are actually going against it. We are saying that we have to do this to be in compliance with international law but it does not suit us politically to do that at this stage. Therefore, the Government's official line is that we will become partially compliant and that people do not need to worry because the EU will do the meaningful thing later down the line. However, as everyone knows, that will not happen in a short period of time. That is just kicking the can down the road where it is not going to move forward because the political establishments in many other European countries are far closer and sympathetic to Israel than our Government.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to come back in. This goes to the very clear place that in the case of goods, a public policy exception exists in EU regulation controlling the importation of goods. This gives the Government the opportunity, on foot of the ICJ opinion, to act in this manner on a domestic footing.

I am taken by some of the language. Deputy Gibney used the terms "sinister" and "weaponising". We have had quite a cordial debate. I think such terms are out of place. What is sinister about seeking to bring in legislation that will ban the importation of goods from the occupied territories? It is a good thing. We are not looking to weaponise the EU. We are merely reflecting the very real-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is sinister to not include services.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Respectfully, I did not interrupt the Deputy. I waited for my opportunity to intervene. This legislation is absolutely cast iron in line with international and EU law. It moves us towards our full obligations under the ICJ opinion. That is something we have to reflect on. However, there are issues with services, which have been well elucidated.

When it comes to the example of Spain, Deputies cannot come into this Chamber and say that a royal degree amendment to a consumer Act, which has only resulted in some 60 or 70 advertisements being pulled down, equates to a blanket ban on services.

In the time remaining to me, I must refer to what I can only call a conspiracy theory argument put forward consistently that somehow this legislation is at the behest of the US

administration or has been put in in such a manner because of the US administration. As Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, I think I have travelled to the United States six times in the past calendar year. Not once has this legislation been brought up with me by lawmakers, members of the business community, multinationals or anyone else. Ultimately, the Government made a decision on foot of the ICJ opinion that there was an opportunity to take the good work done by Senator Black and introduce legislation that would get us to some degree there. Parallel to that twin track approach - whoever came up with it first - is a very clear policy choice to proceed with legislation on a domestic basis in relation to goods and to continue to raise this on an EU basis and build an alliance and coalition to get real EU action like we achieved when we managed to get 18 other member states to come along with us and open up the EU-Israel Association Agreement in the first place.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 3 and 4 and 30 to 32, inclusive, are related. Amendment No. 4 is a physical alternative to amendment No. 3. Amendments Nos. 3 and 4 and 30 to 32, inclusive, will be discussed together.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 4, line 14, to delete “may” and substitute “shall, within 3 months of the commencement of this section”.

We had a considerable discussion on this. Ultimately, the Minister on Committee Stage said an order designating postal codes was being drafted and would be moved immediately. We appreciate that it is the position of the Government that it wants to do this as quickly as possible but the world is a changeable place and governments can be changeable in terms of their attitudes and approaches. Who knows what circumstances might arise to cause a Government to decide that now is not the opportune time to ensure this legislation is enacted, that the section should not be commenced and that the ban not be commenced on foot of that. This amendment has the intention of ensuring there is a set timeframe, which is quite a reasonable one, to ensure the Government brings forward the appropriate list and, subsequently, within three months of that, the section is commenced. It is quite a reasonable and not an unusual provision. In many forms of legislation, there is a timed date in terms of commencement.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I support this amendment and our similar amendment No. 4, which substitutes "may" with "shall". In theory, and I accept this is not the intention of the Government, and for the benefit of the public, it is true that we could pass this Bill and it could become law. However, if there was an election, resulting in an even worse Government if it is possible to conceive of that, a Minister could decide not to do this. If we are passing a law, let us make it obligatory on the Government to carry it out.

As I think this is part of the argument for sanctions on Israel, I want to take a moment to mention, as Deputy Copping did, the condition of Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya. People will remember him. His only crime was not to abandon his patients during the genocide. The reports from a couple of days ago on his condition are absolutely horrifying. He has suffered months of torture, solitary confinement, starvation and the withholding of essential medicines. His lawyer visited him on Thursday last and said he did not recognise him. His face was

battered and he could barely speak or breathe. Psychologically, he is being irrevocably damaged. If he survives physically, he will have gone past the point of regaining normal functioning. He told his lawyer he is beaten daily with rods and hammers and that he was brought to this new torture dungeon so they can kill him. In his own words, he said, "This is the last time you will see me." This man is a paediatrician; a children's doctor. He is being tortured mercilessly for publicly not abandoning his patients to genocide. What encapsulated, concentrated horror. It is important the Irish Government, the State and all of us do everything in our power to call for the immediate release of Dr. Abu Safiya. The healthcare workers and Doctors Against Genocide are talking about taking action next week, which will be really welcome and important in terms of trying to raise international pressure on this issue.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an obair ar fad atá déanta aige agus as an obair a rinne sé le cabhrú liom nuair a bhí mé sa phríosún. This is a very important amendment as it gives that guaranteed timeframe for the implementation of the postcodes and allows people to know it will be done. I have no doubt from speaking to Minister of State that it will be done but it would be great if it could be brought in in order to guarantee that when we bring in this law, it will be implemented and has the desired effect to oppose the genocidal state and current regime in Israel.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: In the previous amendment, the Minister of State was sort of reprimanding people for using particular words. I am sorry but he is not going to get a polite debate because we should be absolutely enraged about what is happening to Palestine and the lack of Government action. I urge everybody not to have a polite debate. This has been one of the biggest issues in this country and, indeed, the world for two and a half years. This Government has a chance to do something and it is choosing not to. It is not that the Government saw a chance to build on what Senator Black has done, and I commend the Senator on her amazing work and patience on this issue. I was in the Dáil when the Minister of State's side of the House, and Fianna Fáil, jumped up and down about this Bill. Years ago, it said they would bring in an occupied territories Bill and now what it has is not even a mutation of that.

The Minister of State said there is no concern among American big business about this Bill, following the meetings he had. If the Minister of State does a quick Google search, he will see a multitude of articles about it. I have one where the Department of foreign affairs warned about the impact on business and how it might be perceived by American multinationals and big business if the original Bill had been passed. There are numerous articles and officials from the Department of foreign affairs warned about that. I do not know how the Minister of State is meeting people who are not saying anything like that while Department officials are meeting people from a completely different background. There is absolutely no question that this Bill has been neutered because of pressure from big business. The Minister of State should not insult our intelligence by saying anything else. That is what has happened.

Dr. Abu Safiya has been mentioned and I hope this Government has made representations about his treatment and detention. What has the Government done about Palestine because I am wracking my brains. Every time we say something, we are told by other Ministers that the Palestinian Authority thinks Ireland is amazing. I talk to Palestinians a lot because there are Palestinians in my constituency and involved in the D15 With Palestine group. I am sure we are all involved in local groups because these groups have sprung up across the country. It is

not all young people - in fact, there are people of every single age and every gender. Many of them would have been disposed to voting for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the years. This has had a transformative impact on people and their political understanding for the past two and a half years.

This Bill is the most publicised action the Government could take. We need to mark that we are less than an hour away from it being rammed through with very little impact for Palestinians.

I will tell the Minister of State what Palestinians think about the Irish Government. Obviously, Palestinians are desperate. They will take any decent measure done by any government and will welcome it. They welcome the fact the Irish Government is not as bad as other governments but it is not as bad as other governments because the other governments are horrendously bad. What is the Government comparing itself to? If you look at the actual practicalities of what Ireland has done to help the Palestinian people, the answer is nothing. It has not done anything about overhead flights or Shannon. It has not done anything about being the second biggest trader with Israel, mainly because of Intel. Obviously, it does not want to upset Intel. It has now not done anything about the occupied territories Bill. Even for a football match, it will not lift a finger to say to the FAI, which gets €6 million in public funding, not to go ahead and not to sportswash a genocidal Israeli team. It does not even have the gumption to do that. That needs to be marked here today.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I back this group of amendments on the basis the Government promised the enactment of the occupied territories Bill during the election. That was nearly two years ago. It has dragged its heels on every element of this debate. I agree with Deputy Coppinger that despite the Government's self-appraisal of its response to Palestine, it has not been anywhere near up to scratch. I appreciate aid is an important part of the response. I acknowledge how strong we are in the provision of aid. We get the same message at EU level. It is all very important but certainly at EU level, it does not hold water when we are also, as a European Union, arming the people committing the genocide. At domestic level, it is the case that this has been on the Statute Book since 2018. Senator Black worked with the Government to do everything she could. She always said she did not care who brought it forward. It is about the actual enactment and the blocking of trade with an occupier. That is what we are trying to do. Governments have dragged their heels all the way along. All this amendment tries to do is hold the Government to it and make sure we do not enter another limbo and, while the Government gets its head around postcodes and whatever else, we end up without any action again.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank all the Deputies for their contributions. I will speak to the amendments, first and foremost, and then touch on some of the other interventions.

On amendment No. 3, the designation of postal codes is not a one-off event. I have them in my hand. The Minister will be required to do this whenever the EU list of postcodes is periodically reviewed and updated. This is just something that is done. Placing a time limit on designation is neither operable nor necessary because we have them designated already.

To Deputy Murphy's point, when will the Government collapse? Will it collapse tomorrow? Will the Deputy move a confidence motion next week? The Government will not collapse

between the conclusion of this debate and the Seanad Stages next week after which the Bill will be enacted and commenced immediately by the Government. I cannot give a more firm commitment and the Minister gave the exact same commitment when she was in committee last week. I appreciate the Deputy does not like this Government; I would not like a government he thought was better. That is the politics we belong to and it is okay to disagree.

On amendment No. 4 and its use of language indicating that the Minister "shall" designate, it is simply not a drafting that is regularly used by drafters in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel in circumstances such as these. It would not be normal to make such a provision mandatory on the Minister because the use of "may" is more suitable where the Minister is being conferred with a recurring power to designate an unspecified number of times. The Minister made it clear the designation of postcodes is not a one-off event. The use of "shall" could imply it is a one-off power to be used on one designation order; however, we intend to regularly update the prohibited postal codes as the EU list is updated. When the EU list is updated, our list is automatically updated. We have already prepared the advance drafts of the ministerial order that is required to enact everything that has been stated.

On amendments Nos. 30 and 32, the Minister has said she fully intends to commence the Bill as soon as possible.

I am minded not to go into the charges that do not relate to the amendments. I do not want to give a false depiction of what other people say but I have met the foreign minister of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Authority's ambassador to the United Nations. We have all met the Palestinian Authority's ambassador to Ireland, I presume. Deputy Gibney said aid was important and I know she has a strong record in development. One of the areas she and I agree on is the importance of humanitarian aid and development co-operation in a global context and, crucially, in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories. It is not just about the amounts Ireland has contributed. Bear in mind that the EU suspended funding for UNRWA - the EU blacklisted UNRWA. The Irish Government fought tooth and nail to get that overturned rapidly and get EU funding increased. We stood up and made it quite clear. We were the first EU member state to officially recognise Palestine as a state, with our friends in Spain and, outside the EU, in Norway. That may be nothing to those opposite but it is false to say the Irish Government has done nothing.

The first time the Government brought forward the proposal to open up the EU-Israel trade association agreement, only three member states agreed with it. Last May in Brussels while I was in attendance, we moved that coalition from three to 19. We saw an impactful proposal from the Commission last September. Unfortunately, other EU member states did not go along with the position clearly laid out by the Irish Government, the Spanish Government, the previous Slovenian Government and, at times, the Governments of Belgium and Luxembourg. Thankfully, since an election, the Dutch Government is very much part of that. We will continue to push forward. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, will continue at the Foreign Affairs Council on 13 July. We will make sure Ireland's voice is heard clearly on that.

I completely accept the bona fides of Deputies Ó Laoghaire and Heneghan. They want to make sure of the immediate commencement of this legislation. They can take this absolute guarantee. I have no doubt it will be in place long before the Oireachtas goes into recess.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Amendments Nos. 4 to 7, inclusive, not moved.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendment No. 8 is out of order.

Amendments Nos. 8 and 9 not moved.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendment No.10 is out of order.

Amendments Nos. 10 to 13, inclusive, not moved.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos.14 and 15 are out of order.

Amendments Nos. 14 and 15 not moved.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move amendment No. 16:

In page 5, between lines 36 and 37, to insert the following:

“Prohibition on sale or offer for sale in State of certain services

7.(1) It shall be an offence to sell or offer for sale to a person in the State a service provided, or to be provided, in an illegal settlement in a postal code to which this Act applies.

(2) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable—

(a) on summary conviction, to a fine of €5,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or both,

(b) on conviction on indictment, to a fine not exceeding—

(i) €125,000, or

(ii) where the value of the service concerned, including the duty and tax payable on them, is greater than €250,000, three times that value, or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years or both.”.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 67; Níl, 79; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Brady, John.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Cairns, Holly.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Burke, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Butler, Mary.	
Collins, Michael.	Butterly, Paula.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Buttimer, Jerry.	

Coppinger, Ruth.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Cahill, Michael.	
Cullinane, David.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Cummins, Jen.	Calleary, Dara.	
Daly, Pa.	Canney, Seán.	
Devine, Máire.	Carrigy, Mícheál.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Chambers, Jack.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Clendennen, John.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Collins, Niall.	
Gannon, Gary.	Connolly, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gould, Thomas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Graves, Ann.	Cummins, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Currie, Emer.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Daly, Martin.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hearne, Rory.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Lawless, Paul.	Fleming, Sean.	
Lawlor, George.	Foley, Norma.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Grealish, Noel.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Harkin, Marian.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Heydon, Martin.	
Murphy, Paul.	Higgins, Emer.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Keogh, Keira.	
Nash, Ged.	Kyne, Seán.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Lahart, John.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Lawless, James.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Murphy, Michael.	

Sheehan, Conor.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Neville, Joe.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Connor, James.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Sinéad Gibney; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Members to remain in the Chamber. The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with the Order of the Dáil of this day: "That Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put and agreed to.

Postal and Telecommunications Services (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to bring the Bill before the House. It is a short amendment to the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act 1983. Its purpose is to enable the payment of the agreed funding from the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport's Vote to An Post so that An Post may, in turn, be able to disperse this funding to postmasters across the network. The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure of our country. Members will be aware that under the programme for Government, the Government committed to continuing to provide a nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities.

I am very happy to have been able to not only secure continued future funding in line with this commitment but provide funding of an enhanced level of €15 million per annum, or a 50% increase on last year, which was approved by the Government in January. While this may appear to be short legislation, it has quite a significant impact and meaning for post offices. The approval provides a clear mandate for this enhanced funding. My Department is working to ensure that the required structures are in place as soon as possible to commence providing the funding. In line with the programme for Government, the funding will support the stability and sustainability of the nationwide network of post offices, protecting and nurturing a commercially focused post office network. It will also support access for citizens to the key social benefits of the post office network and help citizens access services effectively and equitably. The principles under which the funding model will operate include maintaining access to the network across urban and rural Ireland, ensuring that no community is left behind; aligning individual funding with criteria, including the degree of isolation and the sustainability of each post office; ensuring a minimum revenue threshold for post offices; and recognising offices of cultural or geographic significance, such as those on inhabited islands or in Gaeltacht areas.

At present, there are 870 active post offices. Many of these offices are operated in the vast majority of instances by independent postmasters, who will directly benefit from this increase in funding. In fact, only *circa* 40 of the 870 offices nationally are directly operated by An Post, with postmasters operating over 90% of the network. This is a nationwide network of significant scale, providing economic and social benefits to citizens, urban and rural, across the country. The Government recognises that there are challenges for both the network and postal services. This includes uncertainty regarding global trade, a decline in traditional mail volumes and the growth of digitalisation. It is not only nationally but internationally that mail and post office businesses are experiencing long-term structural challenges. Additionally, issues relating to the cost of living, in particular the effects of inflation and higher energy costs, have been felt by many SMEs, including the postmasters, and indeed, current global events continue to cause challenges in this regard. In the face of these challenges, however, we are seeing the post office network adapt and innovate, including seeing new generations of users rediscover the network through services such as Vinted.

It is important to remember that this support aims to protect and nurture a sustainable and commercially viable post office network. It also aims to ensure access to important services across the post office network for citizens.

5 o'clock

Any support must therefore be utilised to allow time and space to enable new commercial initiatives and services to be developed. An Post fully understands the Government's position and that a sustainable, viable and customer-focused post office network is a key strategic priority for the company.

An Post has a statutory responsibility for the post office network. Accordingly, it must actively explore opportunities to develop new or enhanced product lines for the network. We want to have a sustainable post office network that is available to all of our citizens, both urban and rural, in the medium and long term. The network is a core strength of An Post and the continued development of the network and its services is a vital component of its sustainability. Part of the strength of the post office brand and one of its selling points is that it reaches all

parts of the country. However, we must recognise that post offices are commercial entities and as with any business, they need to continue to develop relevant commercial strategies to attract customers, drive footfall and generate growth. Supported by Government, An Post must ensure its commercial viability and the continued fulfilment of its mandate to provide a mail delivery service and ensure a viable post office network. Decisions relating to the network, including those relating to specific post offices, are operational matters for the board and management of the company and not ones in which I have a function. Further, the terms under which postmasters contract with An Post is a matter between the postmasters and An Post, and any negotiations are a matter for both parties directly.

To satisfy state aid requirements, a letter of entrustment for the service of general economic interest will be issued and funding will be paid under a grant agreement with An Post. Previously, funding which ran from 2023 to 2025 for the first time, was also provided to An Post on the basis of services entrusted to An Post, namely, the provision of counter services for the company's own business and Government business, pursuant to the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act.

As I have mentioned, the Bill's sole purpose is to provide a statutory basis for funding to be paid from the Department's Vote to An Post, and onwards, subsequent to that, to each post office. The Bill provides for a small technical amendment. The previous Government funding scheme, which provided €10 million per annum between 2023 and 2025, has its statutory basis at section 29A(1) of the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act 1983, which provides that the Minister may provide €30 million to An Post for the purposes of supporting the post office network. That €30 million cap has been reached and, therefore, an amendment is required to raise the level of funding that can be given.

Section 1 provides for an uplift in the funding currently allowed under section 29A of the 1983 Act, as amended, by increasing the amount prescribed by a total of €75 million, up to €105 million, in line with the agreed funding commitment by Government. The Bill will be commenced upon enactment.

The ongoing global challenges, structural changes in the postal sector and changes in consumer habits provide a dynamic and challenging environment for the post office network and An Post. It is important that we recognise and thank postmasters across the country who are working hard to deliver in this environment, as well as An Post, which is actively seeking out new opportunities to support the network.

The Government is demonstrating its commitment to the network and the value it provides to citizens with the allocation of €15 million per annum, which is a 50% increase on last year, and for the term of this Government. However, I encourage all stakeholders to work together and do everything possible to ensure a long-term, sustainable post office network for all of our citizens in order that the post office remains at the heart of our community in future, as it has been throughout the history of the State.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Minister's speech available for circulation?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Apologies, it is not at present.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I welcome the advancement of this Bill. It aligns with Sinn Féin's policy of supporting the post office network and matches the critical investment of €15 million in funding we pledged in our alternative budget last year. For this reason, Sinn Féin will not be proposing any amendments. It is heartening to see collective agreement that the post office network needs to be supported everywhere, and in particular in rural areas.

I will highlight, however, that the Government funding pledge ends in 2030, after which there is no plan. That creates a concern. Sinn Féin has long supported a new public service mandate for our post offices, backed by strategic investment in an expanded range of services and better conditions for postmasters. Our party's 2023 and 2024 alternative budgets set out detailed proposals to safeguard the future of the network and we have continued that in our most recent alternative budget. We did not put a time limit on our support, as the Government has, and I urge it to take a similar long-term approach.

Post offices are often the last remaining public service in rural towns and villages across the State. Last year, the Irish Postmasters' Union, in its pre-budget submission, said the funding is not just good value for money but is "essential to sustaining vital public access points in communities across Ireland". Post offices play a proven and irreplaceable role in supporting social cohesion. They serve both rural and urban economies, offering critical services and access for older people, vulnerable citizens and marginalised communities. Despite this, the Government is yet to commit to a structured, multi-annual investment that would safeguard these services for the future. Sinn Féin has made that commitment.

As the Minister of State will know, in June last year, the future of the post office network was discussed at the Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Culture, Communications and Sport. What we heard from the postmasters was a stark warning to all on how precarious the position of many postmasters, especially in rural post offices, are in. Without this support, postmasters warned us, 40% of post offices would close. With the increase of funding to €15 million, 70% of the postmasters' union members could envisage a viable future. Core products such as mail, Department of Social Protection payments, Billpay and National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, services are all declining and despite the huge reduction in transactions at post offices over the past decade, postmasters are still paid per transaction and are not paid a salary.

In 2022, Grant Thornton did a bottom-up analysis of the post office network, which found that the network needed €20 million in funding. The Government would, I believe, need to get EU approval for that. To ensure a viable post office network for generations to come, the Minister of State should look at the possibility of making that a reality. For today, however, we welcome the advancement of the Bill.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: While we welcome the Bill, many people in my community and the Minister of State's constituency in Donegal will hear his words and say they ring hollow. He talked about how this investment will sustain the post office network across the State and, in particular, support rural and Gaeltacht post offices. At the same time, however, as he knows, in the community of Anagaire locals have come together to fight to try to save their local post office. As the Minister of State speaks in this House about securing the future, that post office is about to close down within days as the postmistress will retire on 31 July with nobody to take her position.

At the core of this, as Deputy Byrne made clear, is that postmasters and postmistresses are being paid per transaction and are not being paid a salary. The challenge is that when somebody looks at the books in a rural, Gaeltacht community to see if it is a viable opportunity, in many cases, unfortunately, the answer they come up with is "No". We have seen this script rolled out time and again. We have seen the post offices in Bun na Leaca, Mín Lárach, Gortahork, Dún Lúiche and An Bun Beg close in recent years. We cannot allow the same thing to happen in Anagaire. Over 200 transactions go through that post office every single day and 60 businesses depend on its services. If the Minister of State is to put substance behind the words he has delivered in the Dáil today, he needs to intervene and make sure there is appropriate support to allow for rural and Gaeltacht post offices to continue and thrive in the future and to adapt to the changes that are happening all around us.

As the Minister of State with responsibility for this area, I ask the Minister of State to look beyond the sheets of paper that were written for him and do not allow the post office in Anagaire in his constituency to close down. There is a solution. It means making sure a small proportion of this additional funding can be provided in core support to make sure rural and Gaeltacht post offices are viable into the future.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: For communities across this State, in particular in our rural and Gaeltacht areas, An Post is a vital public service. It connects people and supports local businesses. As my colleague Deputy Joanna Byrne has said, post offices are often the last remaining public service in towns and villages. However, successive Governments have allowed rural communities to be hollowed out. Every time a post office closes, people are told that technology or the market will fill the gap but that is not the reality on the ground.

In Waterford, eight post offices have closed in the space of less than a decade.

In An Rinn, in a carbon copy of what Deputy Doherty spoke about in Anagaire i dTír Chonaill, a Gaeltacht service, which was the last front-facing public service trí mheán na Gaelainne ar fáil i gceantar Gaeltachta, was allowed to close with zero intervention from the Government. Last year, I met Sean Martin, then president of the Irish Postmasters' Union and postmaster of Tramore post office in County Waterford. He said that €15 million per annum is required to stave off further post office closures and to make it viable for those that still remain to keep their doors open. This legislation will do what Sinn Féin has been asking for, and we are supportive of it, but it applies only until 2030. That is the key difference. We need to offer communities, postmasters and their staff a level of certainty.

Equality of access should not depend on a post code. We need to ensure fair pay and funding for postmasters who have adapted to the enormous challenges and changes of recent years and taken on new responsibilities. They do not need to be lectured or told that An Post is a commercial entity. They have made the changes, found the innovation, made savings and brought in new business, but they need somebody to bat for them. I stress the importance of protecting post offices in our Irish speaking, Gaeltacht communities and our small towns and villages. It is not just about business and services; it is also about social connection and combating the isolation that is gripping too many rural communities across the State.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Sinn Féin welcomes what is being done. We need to see this funding provided to post offices as quickly as possible. For many communities, this is too little, too

late because in my part of the world and in much of rural Ireland, large numbers of post offices have closed down. It seems the only model An Post will work with is one where the post office moves into a supermarket in a large town. That is happening all over the country. It means there has to be a business that will provide footfall so people can make money in the post office.

In Carrick-on-Shannon, the largest town in County Leitrim, the post office was to close down because the postmistress could not make enough money to ensure a sustainable future. She had to stop working and nobody else would take over the post office, which then had to move into a local supermarket. It seems that this model is being applied everywhere. It is particularly acute in cases where small post offices in rural areas cannot survive on their own. The payment per transaction model simply does not provide enough to make post offices sustainable and viable businesses. That needs to be recognised. The only way to reverse that is to put a base salary in place that postmistresses and postmasters can survive on, and then give them a payment per transaction. That is exactly what needs to happen.

For many communities, the current position simply does not work. I know of areas where people, mainly pensioners collecting a pension, are travelling ten, 15 or 20 miles to find a post office whereas the post office used to be just down the road from them a few years previously. This is part of the neglect of rural areas, which have been left behind for far too long.

What the Minister is doing here today is welcome but short-lived. What will happen after 2030? Where will we see progress after that? A lot of people are telling me this is too little, too late. Many communities feel left behind, and it is not only because of post offices. In many aspects of rural life people find that investment has not been made to sustain their communities and ensure there is a future for them. Most people who live in rural Ireland want to live there. People who may have had to travel to get education or work want to come back to raise their children and have them go to the school they went to and play for the football club they played for when they were growing up. They have that sense of place but it is being eroded as the services in rural areas are eroded. I am sure the same applies in the Minister of State's community. All of us have to work together to try to provide solutions to this. Unfortunately, the Government does not want to look at solutions. Basically, the Minister of State is delivering something that is too little, too late and does not go far enough. That has always been the problem. While the Bill is welcome, for many communities, it is failure that will continue to dominate in the future. People do not see any future in much of rural Ireland. Unless there is a place for them to live and there are services for them, they will not come back.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I welcome this legislation as a measure that will alleviate some of the issues we discussed in committee and heard about from the postmaster community. Postal services are a vital lifeline for so many of us, particularly, as others have pointed out, in rural parts of Ireland. Despite this, many communities have lost their post office. The current model undermines the public interest when it comes to ensuring that everyone has access to postal services. Until we are employing postmasters directly, we will constantly have post offices under threat.

Our post offices in many communities are where people come to connect, interact and receive help from a service they trust and where people go to access public services and banking. It is how they connect outside their own homes. I am reminded of Kenmare, a town I have visited my whole life and my parents visit. My parents have two friends down there

who are known locally as Eileen and John PO because they are the postmaster and postmistress. It is a part of their identity and how they are known in the town.

For the older among us, the post office is where people link to their community and each other, particularly when not everyone can make it to the active retirement group or the community centre. Postal services fill a vital gap for those who cannot use, or choose not to use, online services. We act like paying our bills or doing banking online is everywhere but there are still houses that do not have broadband and many people do not have digital skills or are fearful, and increasingly so, of online scams. Sa lá atá inniu ann, cé go bhfuil an oiread rudaí ar líne, caithfidh muid tuiscint go bhfuil tábhacht le seirbhísí fisiciúla. Tá neamhspleáchas agus sábháilteacht ag baint leo do dhaoine, go háirithe dóibh siúd atá níos sine.

Many communities have faced the loss of their post office in recent years. In my constituency of Dublin-Rathdown, we have seen post office closures, including one near my home in Kilmacud. Those that remain continue to come under increasing pressure. It may not seem like a big deal to some people that instead of walking to the post office, they have to drive or get a bus. For many of my constituents, however, that is a huge barrier to accessing these vital services. The post office is a community service, one that is often accessed by the most vulnerable in our communities. For older people in particular, that journey may be the difference between being able to go and collect their pension independently or being reliant on other people who may then have to assist them with their finances.

I mentioned that the current model undermines the public interest because our postal network is under increasing pressure. I welcome that the Bill seeks to address this issue because postal services are a public service and ensuring that they are available to all, cheap and easy to use, and are protected into the future, is in the public interest. The model of insisting that postmasters are self-employed and run post offices like a business franchise is actively contributing to the collapse of our postal network. It means that once these postmasters cannot make it work financially any more in the face of loss of business and limited means of increasing business, they must simply give up. It means that communities can be faced with the sudden loss of this public service simply because we do not recognise that it is a public service.

If we are not employing postmasters directly, we will constantly have post offices that are under threat. We deserve to have a resourced postal network, from the person who puts the letters in your door, all the way to the person who sold you the stamps in the first place. According to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, in March only 41 of 873 post offices were directly operated by An Post. This means that, apart from those 41, every other post office is vulnerable to business conditions, making the provision of the public service impossible for the postmasters who provide them.

I welcome that this Bill seeks to support our post office network. However, without recognising that our system is broken, we will never be able to fully ensure that every community has a post office it can rely on, today, tomorrow and in ten years' time. We will continue to have people who are unable to make the community post office work or are leaving the sector because they need to do so if they are to ensure that they and their families have financial stability and security. The provision of public services should not be left up to the market. When we do that we stop looking at them like public services and we stop looking at those who use them as people who should be guaranteed access.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Postal and Telecommunications Services (Amendment) Bill 2026. I am glad to support its passage. This is a short Bill with a single purpose. Section 1 raises the amount the Minister can make available to An Post for the post office network from €30 million to €105 million. That one change gives legal effect to the Government's decision, announced earlier this year, to provide €15 million each year until 2030. That amounts to €75 million in total and it builds on the €10 million per year provided from 2023 to 2025. That funding reached every contractor post office in the country.

Behind the statutory ceiling stands something far more important, namely, the post office network itself. There are 951 post offices in Ireland, of which postmasters run 906 directly. According to An Post's sustainability report, up to 1 million customers walk through their doors every week. In 2024, the network carried out 82 million transactions. That is phenomenal. Almost 26 million of those were social welfare payments made on behalf of the State.

Let us consider what those figures mean in practice. They mean a pensioner collecting their payment from someone who knows their name. They mean a carer paying bills through the household budget service. They mean a family buying a Leap card or lodging savings at one trusted counter. That is why I say the post office network is not simply a commercial channel. It is social infrastructure. For older people, people with disabilities and people who are not online and never will be, the post office is often the front door to the State. I see this in my constituency of Dún Laoghaire. Our post offices in Dún Laoghaire town, Blackrock, Sallynoggin and Ballybrack, to name but a few, serve some of the oldest populations in the country. When I meet older residents at my clinics, they do not talk about mail volumes or e-substitution. They talk about the counter they trust and the services and individuals they rely on.

The value of this network runs far beyond the money the State invests in it. When a post office anchors a main street or a village, footfall follows, local shops benefit, older residents, in particular, keep a reason to come into town, isolation is reduced and community is sustained. No line in any set of accounts captures that return, but every community in Ireland benefits from and knows that real return.

It is important, though, that we acknowledge the pressures on the system. Having met with the Irish Postmasters' Union and read its report, transaction volumes and contractual earnings for postmasters have continued to decline since 2020, through a period of 15% inflation and a 30% increase in the minimum wage. The previous funding slowed the contraction of the network, but it did not stop the underlying trend. That is exactly why this Bill matters, and the funding model behind it matters even more. I welcome the principles the Government has agreed for that model. Access will be maintained across urban and rural Ireland. Funding will reflect the isolation and sustainability of each post office, and a minimum revenue threshold will apply. Offices on our islands and in our Gaeltacht areas will also be recognised for what they are, and that is essential.

Members should look at what is happening elsewhere. On 30 December last, PostNord delivered its final letter in Denmark, ending four centuries of state letter delivery after letter volumes fell by more than 90%. Other countries are cutting delivery days and closing counters. The UK is also selling off its postal network. In comparison, we are in a totally different space

in this House and country, and that has to be recognised. While things have to change in order to maintain the network and keep it viable, we are in a different situation from many of our European counterparts and neighbouring jurisdictions. A service that reaches every community of 500 people or more is worth defending, precisely when others are walking away.

I will finish with one specific ask. Funding sustains the network and new business strengthens it. An Post has shown what it can do with the likes of An Post Money, parcels and financial services. I ask the Minister of State to bring forward, before the end of this year, a plan to channel additional Government services through the post office network, so that the network earns as well as receives. That is how we make this €75 million an investment in growth, not a subsidy for decline.

I know of the Minister of State's personal commitment to the post office network, having met the postmasters' union and others numerous times. It is essential that we keep the focus on sustainability and the retention of our post office network as much as possible. I know the Minister of State wants to see that in every rural town, the Gaeltacht areas and urban areas.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. In the Labour Party, we support this legislation because it recognises something that many of us recognise from our constituencies. Our post offices are not simply businesses; they are part of the social fabric that knits our communities together. They are places we can trust. In many towns and villages, they are one of the few remaining public services, providing far more than somewhere to post a letter or collect a parcel.

The additional funding provided for in the Bill is therefore very welcome. It will help secure the future of our post office network to some degree and provide certainty for postmasters and postmistresses who have served their communities with dedication for decades. I mention the post offices in Dublin Fingal West that continue to do a great service for their communities and our postman, Leo Bissett, who has been a pillar of the community for many years.

While this Bill protects the network with funding, we also need to ask a bigger question - what is the future role of the post office? This is not the first time I have addressed this issue in this Chamber. As I have stated before, we need to future-proof our postal services to breathe new life and new initiatives back into our local services. The Labour Party is pushing for a transformation of the post office network into genuine community hubs that are not relics of the past but pillars of the future.

Government services are becoming increasingly digital. In many respects, that is a good thing. Online services can be quicker, more efficient and more convenient, but we must also recognise that digital access does not always mean accessible services. Every week, as public representatives, we meet people who struggle with systems that many of us take for granted. They may be people who need additional support, people whose first language is not English or people who are without reliable Internet access. Others simply find Government websites confusing or overwhelming. I saw this recently in my constituency. A gentleman with very limited English came into my clinic because he could not complete an additional needs payment application online. He also needed help with the Residential Tenancies Board and Threshold. He was not looking for special treatment. He simply needed somebody to sit down with him, explain the process and help him submit the application. On another occasion, an elderly lady came into us because she could not upload the photograph needed for her new bus

pass. Again, this was a somewhat straightforward online task that had become a source of real anxiety and frustration for her. These are not unusual cases. They are repeated every day in every constituency office across the country.

This is why we cannot assume that because a service is available online, it is genuinely accessible to everyone. Instead of asking people to travel long distances or rely entirely on digital systems, we should be asking how we can bring those services closer to the communities they serve. This is where our post offices can play an even greater role. They already have trusted staff, secure premises and a presence in communities across Ireland. They have something that no website or app can ever provide, namely, trust, human interaction and a friendly face. People will often tell their local postmaster or postmistress something they would never type into a computer or a chatbot. That trust has been built over generations, and we should be using it to make public services more accessible, not allowing it to disappear.

I encourage the Minister of State to explore expanding the range of Government services available through post offices. They could become places where people receive assistance with MyGovID verification, uploading documents for social protection applications, renewing transport passes, accessing online Government services or simply getting help to complete applications. This would not mean post office staff making decisions on applications. It would mean providing practical assistance so people can access services that they are entitled to. The principle should be simple - digital, where possible, but not losing access to personal, where necessary. Every Deputy knows that constituency offices all over the country spend time helping people upload documents, verify identities, complete forms and navigate online portals. Much of that support could be delivered closer to home if our post offices were properly equipped and empowered to do so.

There is also another reason this matters. The local post office remains one of the few places where people regularly meet face to face. For many older people, it is an important source of social interaction as well as practical support. The postmaster or postmistress knows the community, notices when someone has not called in and provides reassurance that cannot be replicated online. That community value cannot be measured in financial terms.

This Bill provides welcome financial support but funding alone will not guarantee the long-term future of the network. The future of post offices depends on their continued relevance. If we want to protect them for another generation, we must give them an expanded role at the heart of service delivery. Doing so would improve accessibility, strengthen local communities, reduce pressure on other services and provide the additional footfall that will help sustain post offices into the future.

This is not about resisting technology. It is about ensuring that technology serves people rather than excluding them. The success of public services should not be measured simply by how many transactions are completed online. It should be measured by whether every citizen, regardless of age, disability, language skills or digital skills, can access the services they need with dignity and reliability.

The Labour Party warmly welcomes this Bill and the investment it represents. I also hope it marks the beginning of a wider conversation about the future of the network. Let us see our post offices not only as places to post letters or collect parcels but as trusted community hubs where people can access Government services, receive practical assistance and remain

connected to the supports they rely on. If we take that approach, we will not simply preserve our post offices; we will strengthen them, ensuring they remain at the very heart of communities across Ireland for generations to come. The best way to protect the post office is not simply to subsidise it but to give people more reasons to walk through its doors.

I will finish with an example of how the Government is missing the mark regarding post offices. I want to credit Deputy Ivana Bacik's work on this as well as the work of Councillor Dermot Lacey and Councillor Fiona Connelly. Rathmines Post Office is a historic public building with significant potential, yet the Government cannot even give a commitment that it should remain in public ownership or be protected from being sold off for purely commercial use. One of the most concerning aspects of this issue is the apparent lack of interest from Government Ministers. They seem to have no clear position on the potential sale of a valuable State asset at a time when the State is spending enormous amounts leasing buildings and office space. If Ministers have no vision for safeguarding strategic State assets like this, then they are failing both the local community and the taxpayer. At the very least, they should be setting out a clear plan to ensure that buildings of such historic and public value continue to serve the public interest rather than being disposed of without any meaningful scrutiny.

Deputy John McGuinness: For many years, I have listened carefully to the submissions made by Sean Martin. I have read each submission with great care because I believe in the post office network. I am a supporter of that network and of the postmasters and postmistresses and the work they do throughout the country. However, in those years, I have also witnessed the closure of many post offices throughout the country, particularly those in villages and towns that are suffering from a decline in population or a decline in local services. We cannot turn a blind eye to this. When people lose a post office, they lose a critical part of their social infrastructure, a service and a building where they can go and meet neighbours and friends as they transact what are small transactions, generally, in the post office. They can also share the news of the day, or share their views on what could or could not be done with the post office network itself. People have opinions on it, and they want their post office to stay in place.

This investment will ensure a continuation for a further number of years. However, the time has come when the Government must sit down with the union and discuss just how it wants to see the post offices develop, particularly in rural Ireland. If we are making the investment, if we are giving the support, while we might look at it as a subsidy, we should also be looking at it as an investment in rural Ireland. I know urban centres, like Deputy Devlin's area, will have the same type of benefits. If we look at it in that way, we might agree on a structure and a worthwhile strategy or plan, so the investment will give a yield not just for the post office network but also give a yield for the Government of the day.

I think of places like, for example, the post office on the High Street in Kilkenny city, which is a building that attracts quite a lot of business in its role in the post office network. However, it is also a building that should be invested in by a combination of the Government and the union contributing to a strategy that would see buildings like this enhanced and making a greater contribution to Kilkenny city, in this case, and then to look beyond that and see what investment can take place in all of the other villages and towns that either had a post office or still have one but could do with investment. If we do not do that, then what we are doing today by giving more money to the post office network will just see that network slowly grind to a halt. It will be a slow death. This affects not just the customers. It affects the staff, the families

and all those involved in post offices. It means there is no future that will be seen by them as keeping them employed. We have to give that future to them. We have to understand the trust that they have created over generations, in some cases, with local communities and local families. It is a trust that allows the public to go and make their payments through the post office, deal with their part-payments to cover bills for services every week, and feel comfortable in doing it.

I would make the point that not everyone is IT-literate. People like to have a safe, private place that they can trust, where they do not need to be IT-literate, and where they can come in and do their business in an open fashion. We need to recognise that. We also need to recognise that not everybody can use technology to speak to someone. Only this morning, I was talking to people in a company providing services. They did not have a clue where I was, and I did not have a clue where they were. There was no personal connection, no face-to-face meeting - there was nothing. I immediately thought of those people who are marginalised for one reason or another, who cannot engage with technology. The post office allows all of those people, in their own way, to interact with a person, get their problem solved and do it, as I said, with trust and in a place they are familiar with.

I welcome the money that is going to be provided on top of what is already there. It is a substantial amount of money. However, if we put our minds to it, as a Government, then a lot more can be achieved, not just for the network but for society generally and for communities that need the type of interaction that a post office offers. We cannot ignore the drop in the number of post offices. We need to look at that, and we need to look at how society is developing. Footfall is all-important. If you lose your post office, you perhaps might lose your pub or your local shop. That is a detrimental step. I encourage the Minister to have a look at the overall workings of the post office and to fund it appropriately.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome this legislation, which gives effect to the €15 million that was announced earlier in January. I commend all the post offices and thank the post office owners who communicated with me at the time, including those I met in trying to get this vital extra funding. We all know that post offices are far more than just places to send letters and collect parcels. They provide essential public services at the very heart of our communities, where people go to pay their bills and access pensions, social welfare payments, banking services and a whole lot more. For many people, particularly the elderly, those living alone with disabilities and those without reliable transport, the local post office is a lifeline for them.

As the Minister of State said in his opening statement, the strength of the post office brand is that it reaches every part of the country. Unfortunately, it no longer does because we continue to see the network diminish, with more than 250 post office closures over the past decade. Last month's closure of Geesala post office in Erris is the most recent example. The people of Geesala must now travel 10 km to Bangor Erris or almost 20 km to Béal an Mhuirthead to access services that were once available in the heart of their community. Those distances represent a real barrier to essential services. We clearly need a renewed commitment from the Government to invest in our post office network. Post offices should be recognised as essential public infrastructure and funded accordingly. By expanding the range of Government and financial services available through post offices, ensuring fair remuneration for postmasters

and postmistresses and investing in the long-term sustainability of the network, we can secure the future.

It is reported that the CEO of An Post will earn a base salary of €285,000 in his first year. That can be compared with what is paid to postmasters and postmistresses around the country. I want to take this opportunity to thank them for the service they have given to their communities and this country over the years.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I welcome the Bill and the additional investment in An Post. There is a fundamental problem with An Post and it is why week after week we hear Deputies rightly complain in here about post offices closing, sorting offices moving and the terrible treatment of pensioners in An Post. The fundamental issue at the heart of it all is the so-called commercial mandate for An Post. An Post has to legally behave like a company that is solely focused on profit despite the reality that it is a public and community service and should be seen as such, and that should be its priority. Because it is not, many decisions are taken to the detriment of workers, communities and pensioners.

I want to talk about two aspects of An Post. One is the relocation of sorting offices and the other is the treatment of An Post pensioners. The Minister of State took a Topical Issue from the TDs in our constituency. I had to miss it for some good reason. The Topical Issue was about the move of the sorting office in Edmondstown, which serves Dublin 16, to a superhub in Lucan, coincidentally beside the Amazon warehouse, supposedly to prioritise parcels. Added to that, also in our constituency, is the move of the Tallaght sorting office from the centre of Tallaght to the superhub in Lucan.

The communities are up in arms about it, and rightly so. This will be a disaster. It will be a disaster for workers. Workers have told us they live in the area and do not drive a car. They cycle to the sorting office and then do their route, and will not be able to travel from Dublin 16 to Lucan on a daily basis. The new hub is 17 km from the Edmondstown sorting offices and 11 km from the one in Tallaght. For workers who do not drive, that is out. Even if they do drive, their quality of life and life at work will get worse. A large proportion of the working day will be spent sitting on the M50 on the way to and from Lucan, rather than primarily delivering post, talking to people, etc. People will spend hours of their working day in traffic as opposed to delivering post. The impact on residents will be a dramatically worsened service.

More staff will have to be involved in delivery, and in theory that is something that can be done. The issue that we cannot take account of, however, is that the traffic on the M50 is different on any given day. On some days there will be a big pile-up on the M50 and, therefore, routes will not be completed. Post and packages will go back to Lucan at the end of the day. The service for residents in Tallaght and Dublin 16 will be worse.

The biggest issue, however, is one the Minister of State can imagine himself. People miss deliveries; we all do. We know our local sorting office because it is the place we go to get a package when it has been missed and we get a delivery slip. People living in Tallaght or Dublin 16 who miss a package will have to travel to Lucan. It is crazy. People who do not have a car will have to take a bus from Rathfarnham or Tallaght into town and out to Lucan, and back again, a journey of two to three hours. Even those in a better situation who have a car will find it hard. It is difficult enough for people to go to sorting offices to collect parcels, never mind driving all the way to Lucan. The inconvenience will be immense.

An Post has said behind the scenes that it will make arrangements with local post offices to make sure packages can be collected. We have spoken to local post offices that have told us they do not have the space or opening hours to do that and that there has been no contact with them to make this happen. We are being lulled to sleep by An Post saying not to worry and that this will be fine, but ultimately it will not be fine.

A mother living in Dublin South-West spoke about the impact of this on her. She is the parent of a child with additional needs. She does not drive and said having a local An Post delivery office is not simply a convenience but essential. She said she relies on being able to access postal services close to home and that travelling further to collect missed deliveries or resolve delivery issues would be extremely difficult. She said caring for a child with additional needs already involves attending appointments, managing therapies and balancing many daily responsibilities. Without access to a car, she said, any additional journey by public transport or on foot creates extra stress and practical challenges, in particular when travelling with her child.

This is a huge issue and it is why in Dublin 16 we had a well-attended public meeting and, a few weeks ago, a very well-attended protest. Over 4,000 people have signed a petition against the move of the Dublin 16 post office, and we are just getting started with the campaign in Tallaght. We will hold a public meeting next Monday night in Tallaght, which I believe will also be well attended.

The result is that the campaign is having an impact. An Post has now said that, due to time constraints, it is staggering the consolidation of Fonthill in Tallaght. It also said that because it would take a number of weeks for the offices to settle in the new surroundings so close to the very busy Christmas peak period, it has taken the decision to defer the move of the Edmondstown and Tallaght sorting offices to quarter 1 of 2027. We have forced back the decision, but this is not the answer. Going back to quarter 1 of 2027 provides a six-month reprieve. The move was to happen in quarter 3 of 2026. That is not what we are looking for. The plan has to go off the table. There are other issues with sorting offices across the country, but this is a major issue. There will be a large meeting in Tallaght on Monday night. We will then propose to bring the campaigns together and protest outside the Dáil in September to show that this is not acceptable.

Fundamentally, this is a political issue. The Minister of State needs to tell An Post it is not a runner and does not make sense. To be clear, the buildings where the sorting offices are currently located are fully operational. Ironically, after moving the Edmondstown office to Lucan the plan is to move a Dublin 14 sorting office, currently located in Churchtown, to the old building. From the point of view of workers and residents, this proposal, which I believe is about prioritising Amazon over people, needs to be dropped.

Regarding An Post pensioners, we have a scandalous situation where workers who transferred over to An Post and gave huge service to the company and to the communities they served were given guarantees about the value of their pension not being diminished and so on. All those guarantees, which supposedly exist in law, have been broken and now they are going into pension poverty. There is an incredible situation whereby a cap on these pensions means they can rise by only 2% a year. The cost-of-living crisis we have seen over recent years has led to people's real income being massively eroded, and workers are expected to just accept it.

If we continue on the trajectory we are on, the State pension, inadequate as it is, will actually surpass the An Post pension for many workers. That is no way to treat people who were working directly for the State before being transferred to An Post. They have been left in a situation of deepening and worsening pension poverty. We all know what the rates of inflation have been over the past few years. Two of the workers, Mr. Paul Moreland and Mr. John Hearn, appeared before the Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport in May. They put the case extremely well in terms of how poorly An Post pensioners are being treated. That situation must be rectified.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mór agam an deis labhairt ar an mBille seo a bhaineann le seirbhís atá thar a bheith tábhachtach do dhaoine i mo Dháilcheantar agus timpeall na tíre, is é sin an tseirbhís poist. Cuirim fáilte ar leith roimh an infheistíocht sa bhreis atá anois á cur ar fáil ag an Rialtas tríd an mBille seo le tacú le gréasán na n-oifigí poist timpeall na tíre agus a chinntiú go gcuireann siad seirbhís ar fáil do na daoine atá ag brath orthu. Ag an am céanna, áfach, táthar ag moladh do An Post dul i ngleic leis an nuálaíocht, cur chuige nua a spreagadh maidir leis na seirbhísí a chuireann sé ar fáil do phobal na tíre agus é ag claochlú i gcónaí.

I thank the Minister of State for bringing the Bill to the House. I thank him also for his engagement with my colleagues from Dublin and me and with postmasters and representatives of postal service providers across the country. That engagement has been important. It underlines the importance we in our party place on the post office network and the central role it plays in Irish life, both in cities and in rural areas. In all the post offices in my constituency, including Clondalkin post office and all the offices in Lucan, there is a buzz around the place on days like pension day. That encapsulates the importance of the post office network as a social outlet for many communities, and especially for older people, for whom loneliness is a real issue. Where postmasters, postmistresses and counter staff know individual customers by name, the service they provide is a vital lifeline for communities, not just in rural areas but also in cities and in large suburbs such as in my constituency of Dublin Mid-West.

That comes even more into focus when we think of the challenges facing our communities in terms of digital exclusion. There are people who may not have well-developed digital skills or be able to access online platforms to do their everyday business and life administration, as many of us of another generation might be able to do. In providing a breadth of services, post offices offer a real outlet and lifeline to those people, not only to do their business without compromising their pride by having to ask for help but also from the knowledge that the service is available to them.

When there was widespread disruption to postal deliveries in my constituency in recent months, it caused real disruption for older people, not just in terms of birthday cards and gifts but also missed hospital appointments. While a hospital might call people to appointments by email, many older people wait for a letter to provide them with the information they need. This calls into question the often-held assumption that loneliness is not prevalent and connection is not at a premium in built-up areas. That is not always the case. Older people and people from all backgrounds who have come to my clinic or spoken to me at the doors have recounted how important an active and vibrant post office is to them.

Denmark recently announced the phasing-out of traditional postal services. The reaction here in Ireland to that announcement underlined the importance of investing in our postal

network. People do not just think of our postal service in terms of the delivery of letters. They think of the post office as a stable and familiar linchpin or anchor in their communities. It is a social pillar in the community. For many people who experience loneliness in their lives, going to the post office is one of the few occasions in the week when they will meet someone and enjoy a meaningful conversation and human connection. The importance of the stability and familiarity of dealing with the same teller, postmaster or postmistress cannot be overstated.

The additional investment enabled by this Bill sends an important signal to the post office network that the State believes there is a massively socially desirable aspect to the provision of postal services. I bring to the attention of the House the ability of the State to combat the ongoing pandemic of loneliness in our communities in cities, towns and rural areas throughout the country. The post office is a key front in battling that pandemic and in providing cohorts of people who feel excluded from society and who may not have a human connection with stability at a time when we hear of services being made digital first or digital only. The post office can be an outlet to provide that connection for people.

Public services should strengthen community life. This Bill is a key enabler of strengthening community life by increasing investment in our post office network. We need to encourage An Post, as a result of it, to continue to innovate and bring forward new approaches to how it delivers its services. Some instances of disruption to postal delivery continue in my constituency. I will raise that directly with An Post. The impact of such disruption shows the importance people place on a functioning postal service, not just for the delivery of parcels and letters but also for connection, engagement and the human interface that so many in this country value. As a country, and certainly as a member of Fianna Fáil, we pride ourselves on being people who value community. The post office is a manifestation of that. It is one of the reasons I support the Bill. I compliment the Minister of State on bringing it forward.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: We welcome additional funding for the post office service. Sinn Féin has committed to major investment in the post office network as part of our alternative budget. Communities across counties Wexford and Wicklow have had to endure many post office closures over recent years, with 11 closing in Wexford in 2018 and five local communities in Wicklow losing their services or seeing them consolidated. Each of those closures represents a major loss of an essential community service. It is a huge blow to rural Ireland.

The Government is now providing funding over five years to support the network. That investment is very welcome. However, nowhere in the Bill is there a guarantee that post offices will remain open. I am thinking of towns and villages near me, including Aughrim, Arklow, Avoca, Rathdrum, Carnew, Tinahely and Shillelagh. Post offices provide essential services in those communities, as they do in other places where they exist, such as Ballyfad, Ballycanew, Bunclody, Kilanerin, Kilmuckridge, Courtown, Camolin, Ferns and Gorey. Communities deserve to know whether this funding will simply slow the decline in the network or protect it.

Post offices are doing more than ever before. In 2022, they processed 6.5 million everyday banking transactions, with a value of €2.7 billion, for AIB and Bank of Ireland customers. Those transactions generate approximately €3.2 million in commission payments to postmasters. At the same time, bank branches continue to disappear from towns and villages, including many in my local area, thereby making post offices even more important, yet many

postmasters tell us their businesses remain financially vulnerable. Despite that, the Government is yet to commit to a structured multi-annual investment that would safeguard the services into the future. We really need assurances that there is a clear plan for sustainable income for postmasters and expanded services. Most important, we need a commitment that the post office services, which are absolutely essential to every local community, will continue.

Deputy Michael Collins: We in Independent Ireland will always welcome any extra funding to post offices. It is hugely important. Since I came into the Dail, I have spoken on numerous occasions about the safeguarding of local post offices. As welcome as the funding is, however, the serious question is whether it will stop the closure of post offices and make them a viable option.

6 o'clock

The only way to make something viable is to make sure extra services are provided. When I came into this House first, we talked about maybe being able to tax your car in the post office. There were so many other things. The post office could become something like the credit union in a town, by providing banking services and all that sort of business. They are doing that in other countries. Maybe passports could be done through the post office. Sadly, they have been starved in terms of moving from what they were doing to moving to new services they could deliver. They provide an incredible service in most towns and villages. Sadly, in the nearest parish to where I live, we lost the Goleen post office a couple of years ago and the Durris post office closed last year. The Crosshaven post office closed last May. It is on the edge of my constituency, at the eastern end. It is very unfair and those communities have been hit very hard by the loss of the post office. I spoke to a former postmaster in a community that lost its post office. He said An Post failed to fund or put any kind of decent money into the business. The computers being used were 15 or 20 years old. If you squeeze the life out of something, it will die. If you do not put a drop of water on a plant, it will not live. If we do not feed post offices in the way they need to be fed, then the rural post office is going to go.

Yes, it is very welcome the Government is giving this funding. It is appreciated. I know that when I talk to my local postmistresses, Wendy Briscoe, in Schull, or Bridie Reichert, in Ballydehob, they will appreciate it. However, they tell me they are fighting for survival. It is not easy. When the Goleen post office was closing, I heard politicians saying to people that they would love living in Goleen, down by the coast in the most beautiful part of the world. They were coddling people because people have to work six days a week. They cannot really afford to take somebody on because if they do, their profits are cut in half, or close to it. That hits a person. I knew quite a lot of people who applied for the Goleen post office but who pulled out when they realised what was involved in the running of it and that the money they were going to make was little or nothing.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Like my colleague, I have always been supportive of the local post office. We recognise the importance of the local post office. I have told the story in this House of how I always believed that a visit to the post office took about two and a half hours because I remember my grandmother going to collect the pension and coming back two and a half hours later. I remember one of my first visits to the post office and being astonished that I was in and out within three or four minutes unlike my grandmother who was collecting neighbourhood information and gossip while collecting the pension. That is the importance of the post office.

All of us in the House recognise how important that community link is and how people meet their neighbours and friends and find out how people are doing. There is also the community notice board. The workers in the post office, whether the postmistress, postmaster or those employed by them, help to fill out forms, let people know their entitlements and download and print stuff for them. I think that type of community service is unique to this country.

We have to recognise that we have to move forward and keep the post office moving forward and keep it relevant. We have hindered that quite a lot. There are additional services that could be provided by the post office, keeping it up to date, part of and embedded in the community. I have said before in this House that we need to look at our Garda stations and how we could amalgamate them with the post office. I can guarantee that very few people would rob a Garda station. We have to look at that. We see it with the postal systems in France, northern Spain and Switzerland, where post offices are delivering prescription medicine, working with their equivalents of the HSE. They are able to get prescriptions out to people who are not able to get them and who do not have carers looking after them. There is a wide range of services that could be provided with that.

As I said, we welcome this but I notice that we are going from recognising €30 million to €105 million in this case. The last thing I want is to be back here in two years' time saying that we do not have enough money in our post offices and that not enough was invested. It is all very well to throw money at a situation. Government is very good at throwing money at situations but we have to get a full plan for the post office to bring it up to date and keep it relevant.

We need to recognise that because of European law, people will now be taxed, or whatever you want call it, €3 on every item from these large Chinese companies like Temu and Shein. There will be serious changes when it comes to delivering small items, whether they are from Temu, *abudhabi.com*, Shein or whoever these providers are. There will be some challenges there in the next 12 months.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The post office service is really important and I welcome support for post offices across the country. It is particularly important for senior citizens in rural areas. In many rural areas the banks are closing and withdrawing services and face-to-face services. That is why it is particularly worrying that so many post offices are closing.

In the past ten years, 19 post offices have closed in County Mayo. Let us look at the region of Kilkelly, where nine banks have closed. This is in an area between Ballyhaunis, Charlestown and Kiltimagh. As a result, post offices across the country - in this case in Kilkelly - have stepped up and have welcomed the customers who have been abandoned by these banks. The post office is really important. It provides in-person oversight to payments that no online system can replicate. I know of postmasters who regularly and routinely alert An Garda when there are instances of fraud. They alert neighbours when a local does not come in for their pension. That is the value of the local post office that the Government has to recognise.

I also want to speak about the economic model behind post offices. We have to question why the subsidy is necessary. If we look at the postmaster economic model, they receive 55 cent for processing a bank transaction and 65 cent for a social welfare payment. The cost of a stamp is fixed centrally. While the revenue is static, costs for wages, insurance and regulatory compliance are rising. I spoke to a postmaster recently who outlined that the cost of his alarm

system had doubled in the space of a year. Yet, his revenue will not double. In fact, the revenue he receives is static and fixed centrally.

At the same time as this is happening, there has been a reduction of footfall, as many social welfare payments have now migrated to bank accounts and so on. The Minister of State needs to look at this issue. Postmasters can play an important role in counteracting fraud. It is a very important one that is not being recognised by the Government.

I believe in supporting the postmasters of Ireland but I want to raise a number of important points. The previous scheme was allowed to expire without any successor and this was wrong. It has meant that they were left with a gaping hole. They were struggling and did not know how they would survive.

Regarding the additional €15 million every year, it is fundamentally important that is ring-fenced for the front line and that it does not get caught up in a central office in An Post. It is important the Minister of State guarantees this funding will go to the front line and will prevent more closures of the network across the country.

We have to plan and reform. The postmasters of Ireland want to provide additional services, such as car tax renewal, renewal of licences and of passports and public services card replacements. All of these things can be delivered in the local community but it is important they are allowed and that the services are expanded.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The programme for Government recognises the vital role played by post offices in communities across Ireland. It commits to supporting them on a long-term basis. This Bill is clearly part of that commitment, providing €15 million per year over the next five years to support the network.

It is welcome investment. Post offices are an essential part of community life, particularly for older people, vulnerable people and those living in areas where access to other services may be limited, as Deputies mentioned.

While the services provided by post offices have evolved over time, their importance to the communities they serve has not diminished. However, if we are serious about supporting the future of the postal network, we must also acknowledge the challenges facing consumers. This year the price of a national stamp increased to €1.85. I went back through the records. It has gone up at a fair pace in the last ten years. In 2016, a national stamp was 72 cent. In 2017, it went up to €1.00 and now we are at €1.85 for a regular national stamp. There is a risk of blasting through €2.00 for a national stamp and it does not seem to get any attention. The cost of sending a letter to destinations across Europe, including Britain, went to €3.50.

I know An Post is facing rising costs and has fixed overheads but these increases are big for our citizens and those that use An Post services, and are particularly felt by older people who continue to rely on traditional postal services. They will be compounded by the new customs charges being applied on low-value items entering Ireland from outside the European Union. Where online retailers do not collect these charges at the point of purchase, customers may face an administrative charge of €6.95 from An Post. At a time when households across the State are feeling cost-of-living pressures, these additional costs will be keenly felt by consumers because they will be passed on to them.

Like others, I want to raise a local issue around Harmonstown sorting office. The post office and postal service have been part of the fabric of Artane, Harmonstown and the wider areas on the northside for generations. Now there is a proposal to move that sorting office to Finglas. It is understandable that residents and businesses are very concerned about the impact that will have on them. Finglas is a minimum 10 km journey from Harmonstown for many people. While I understand and have been told any relocation is not expected to occur until 2027 and that planning is ongoing, meaningful engagement with local communities must take place before these decisions are nailed down and finalised.

I want to support An Post. It has done great service for years. However, it is vital it does not compromise local services and senior citizens in particular accessing services provided in Harmonstown. Those services need to be made available to them elsewhere, nearby, so they can access them. Like others, I am pushing An Post to ensure there is not any reduction in services as a result of these charges because there is a serious lack of clarity at the moment as to what is happening with these services. An Post must answer those questions. The funding enhancement of post offices will be of little value if we cannot have those services and bring communities along with us into this new era.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: We can tell a great deal about the strength of a rural community by the services that remain at its heart. If the school is open, the local shop is trading, the GAA club is thriving and the post office is still there, that community has a bright future. That is why this Bill matters. As Fianna Fáil spokesperson on rural affairs, I am delighted to support this legislation because it is about much more than funding a postal network. It is about protecting an essential piece of Ireland's social and economic infrastructure. For generations the local post office has been part of the fabric of community life. It is where people collect their pensions, access Government services, carry out their banking, send parcels, pay bills and, just as importantly, meet their neighbours and friends and keep connected to their community. For many older people, those living alone and those who are less comfortable with digital services, the post office remains their most trusted connection with the State and that role should never be underestimated.

Rural Ireland has faced enormous changes over recent decades. We have seen the loss of banks, Garda stations and many other local services. Every time a service disappears, communities lose a little more of what makes them vibrant and sustainable. That is why we must continue to support our post office network. The funding that will be provided through this Bill will give certainty to postmasters and to the communities they serve. It recognises the pressures created by declining mail volumes, rising costs and changing consumer habits, while giving An Post the opportunity to continue modernising and developing the network for the future.

However, this should not simply be about maintaining what we have. It should also be about recognising what our post offices can become into the future because our post offices are trusted, accessible and located in the heart of communities across the country. As Government continues to modernise public services, we should continue exploring every opportunity to deliver more services through this network, making life easier for our citizens while strengthening the long-term future of our post offices.

Fianna Fáil has always believed that people should not have to leave rural Ireland to enjoy the same quality of public services as those living elsewhere. Balanced regional development means investing in the infrastructure that allows people to live, work, raise families and grow older in the communities that they love. The post office is part of that infrastructure because it supports local businesses, strengthens community life and provides an invaluable service to people every single day. This Bill is a clear statement that the Government recognises that value and is prepared to invest in it. It is an investment in our communities in rural Ireland and in ensuring that no part of our country is left behind. I am delighted to support this Bill and I congratulate the Minister of State for bringing it to the House.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Post offices provide proven, irreplaceable benefit to the communities they serve. They contribute to local economies and offer critical services and access for older people, vulnerable citizens and marginalised communities. When we see in the decade up to this time last year that 257 post offices had closed across the State, it should have set alarm bells ringing. As a TD for a rural constituency, it is particularly stark that 201 of those post offices were rural. Eleven of them were across Cavan and Monaghan.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss increased funding for our post office network and I welcome that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have finally woken up to the challenge. I understand that this legislation will facilitate an additional €15 million allocation to An Post this year in line with what was advocated by Sinn Féin in our alternative budget proposals last year. This is positive and I do welcome it. This funding will contribute towards preventing upwards of 40% of the remaining post offices from having to close, which the Irish Postmasters Union had warned last year would occur without it. While this funding and this measure are welcome, there is an urgent need now for the Government to finally accept the need for a new public service mandate for post offices. I must commend the Irish Postmasters Union on this. It has brought forward proposals of enhanced benefits it can deliver. Now is the time for Government to urgently reflect upon and progress this.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk on this. On 18 June 2026, I raised a Topical Issue about the proposed closure and relocation of Harmonstown delivery sorting unit. I welcome the work in the Bill but I would appreciate if the Minister of State could look into this for my constituents. I have started a petition that has over 1,200 signatures online and there are over 800 in relation to post offices and the uncertainty that this has brought to my constituents. I welcome the engagement on this and that the Minister of State recognises the local post office is more than just a post office and is giving that guarantee to elderly people with disabilities so they know they do not have to transport the whole way to Finglas to collect a missed package.

From speaking to residents and local businesses, the level of concern has not gone away. People are now telling me, regarding the public statement I received from the Minister at the time, that they do not believe they have been properly consulted, that deliveries are already under pressure and that local post offices simply do not have the space or capacity to accommodate the significant volumes of missed parcels. If those concerns are accurate then they deserve to be addressed openly and transparently.

I want to be clear that I welcome the engagement with An Post but I would appreciate if they would give more clarity to my constituents. It provides an outstanding public service

every day and has hardworking men and women but my concern is with the planning of this proposal and the lack of confidence it has created locally. I ask the Minister of State for an update and whether the Department has sought further clarification that this is not just happening in my constituency. Is the Minister of State satisfied there has been meaningful consultation across constituencies that are losing their sorting offices? The uncertainty that remains is not acceptable to my constituents and this needs to be addressed. I would appreciate if the Department could reach out and give certainty to my constituents.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about post offices. First of all, I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Charlie McConalogue, and the Government for giving them financial assistance this year because they do need it. Like every other Member, I appreciate our post office network. I am sad to think that so many post offices have closed around us over the years.

I remember the previous postmasters in Kilgarvan, Denis P. O'Sullivan and his brother John O'Sullivan. Before them were Bridie and James Cronin. She used to send her brother out with the telegrams. My uncles told me a story - all of them are long passed - that they met him one day going up the road with a telegram. He asked them if he had much further to go. They asked him where he was going and he told them to mind their own business and tell him how far he had to go. That is how trusted, secretive and dependable the people who work for the post office are. They retain the confidence of the people and that is why. At the present time in Kilgarvan, we have a great operator. He has been there for many years now and he is a most reliable person, Padraig Sweeney, and we are proud to have him running and operating the post office in Kilgarvan.

We have lost post offices, like I said, in Clonkeen, Gneevgullia, Headfort, Blackwater Bridge and different places. Invariably, they were at the centre of each locality. If the post office is not there, a place loses its identity. We are in trouble now with so many shops closing in rural areas. In many rural villages, there is nothing left but the post office. We hope that we will retain the post offices because as has been said here, the post office, the school and the GAA club are so vital for retaining the identity of parishes throughout the length and breadth of rural Ireland. We hope we will retain the post offices in Kilgarvan, Kenmare and Glenflesk. They are the nearest ones to me at the present time and we appreciate the great work they do.

The Government, however, should advise people on social welfare payments more to draw their payments through the post office rather than going to the bank. Over the years, we have had enough done for the banks. Payments should always be directed to the post office because it is on each transaction the post office gets paid and to ensure business is kept in them, we should do as much transactions as we can in the post offices. People should not be sent elsewhere to bigger towns because there are no longer banks in villages and it is very important for people to meet. Social interaction is so important with people. People are becoming very lonely in rural places because they do not meet as much as they used to at the creamery, the shop or the pub.

In tougher times, we had post offices everywhere and a Garda station. We do not have a Garda station in Kilgarvan now. Many parishes do not. We had a doctor's surgery in every parish and a social welfare office. There were several small schools in a parish but in the late fifties, they directed the smaller schools to close and sent them to a central school. That was a

very sad thing and it hurts me at times when I see people in areas passing their own small, local school and going into a bigger school in town. We must try to retain what we have and what we had. The school in the locality is very important to retain the identity of that locality.

Then there are the pubs and shops, as we all know. In Kilgarvan at one time, we had 26 shops. Now we have just two. That is replicated throughout many parishes in Kerry. Even Gneevgullia does not have a shop. The last place to close was the post office and the shop that went along with the post office. It is so important to subsidise post offices or give them an opportunity to remain open. To remain open, they must be profitable for the owners because there are a lot of costs and overheads. There are so many different things.

The one thing that is hitting every kind of an outlet at the present time is rates and commercial rates. It is sad to think that there are shops closing all over County Kerry, including in Killarney at the present time. It has been told to me that the cost of commercial rates has gone up since the rates review. The cost of paying the rates has gone way up. It is hurting and causing businesses to close. The Government must recognise this and we, the Members, must highlight it and bring it forward to the Government here because maybe it is not known as much as we elected Members know about it as we are on the road every day and know what the problems are. We must look at the rates and how they are applied and charged for many businesses. Many businesses are now afraid to open their doors because they will be liable for a rates bill from that minute onwards.

I again thank the Minister of State for recognising the post offices and ensuring they keep going for the present time. Like I said to him, we must ensure more business is directed through the post office to ensure its viability. We appreciate the parcel service it has at the present time. It is second to none. There is stuff coming out of vans every day coming to our door and it is the same right through the parish, including on Saturday. It is a great service and each and every one of us must do our utmost, and it is incumbent on us, to ensure we deal with the post offices, especially for that great service as well. It means so much in a rural community where people are out on a limb and where it is so far away to go to the bigger towns. When you talk about going to the city of Cork, it is a day's work to go to and come from there, if you were to do business that far away. I thank the Minister of State for this great effort.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): At the outset, I thank everyone across the House for their various contributions to this amendment legislation today, and for the broad support there is through the Houses of the Oireachtas for it to be passed. I thank the Dáil and the Seanad, where it will be later on this week, for their engagement in planning this. It is important that we pass this legislation before the Dáil and the Seanad go into recess so that we are in a position, from a Government point of view, to make the payments to An Post for it to be in a position to make the payments to post offices. An Post has been applying the increased payments to post offices since January this year. For us, it is important now to make sure that we are making the Government payment to it for what it has already paid out in increased payments as well as what is going to be due to post offices before the end of the year.

This is a significant increase. It is a 50% increase on what was in place in respect of payments to post offices and postmasters last year. The past three years has been the first time we have seen payment from the Government that is going to post offices to support them in the

services they are providing to local communities. Once again, I thank and acknowledge all the postmasters across the country and their staff for the really valuable work they carry out within communities, and for the face-to-face community service they provide, as well as the postal, business and banking services they also provide to that community. The strength of contributions here today and the strength of feeling within communities is very much a reflection of the work our post offices do. Of course, by our post offices, we mean the staff that drive them, the people who open them in the morning, close them in the evening and open them on Saturdays to make sure their communities are well served.

As I said, 2025 was the first time the Government introduced a payment to support the work of post offices. For the years 2023, 2024 and 2025, the payment was at a rate of €10 million per year. The legislation in place provided for that €10 million to be paid up to a maximum of €30 million. As the figure of €30 million has been reached and a new and significantly increased payment structure has been agreed with postmasters, we need to amend the legislation to provide for that payment to be made over the next five years at a rate of €15 million per year. This small piece of legislation we are discussing today provides for the Act to be updated to accommodate a payment of €105 million between now and 2030 at a rate of €15 million per year to postmasters.

As I said at the outset, we have approximately 870 post offices, 40 of which are run directly by An Post. Therefore, we have approximately 830 post offices run on contract by postmasters. This €15 million is a 50% increase compared with the previous year and it will be paid across the 830 post offices. Those 40 post offices run directly by An Post do not avail of this particular funding. It is only for post offices run on contract by postmasters. Different criteria are used to allocate this funding, which give a stronger weighting to smaller post offices and those in more peripheral areas. However, if we were to take the average of this €15 million funding divided by the 830 post offices, it would be worth €18,000 per year to an individual post office.

The different criteria as to how the funding will be distributed and how much each post office will receive were agreed between An Post and the postmasters. A total of 47% of the fund - some €7 million - is allocated on the basis of a community access impact payment. That is based on where the next nearest post office is to the post office receiving the payment. Another 44% of the individual payment to a post office goes towards payment for higher operational costs. There is also a transitional support payment of 8% to make sure that every postmaster is receiving at least a minimum increase from the previous scheme. While the average per post office is €18,000, these criteria will decide how much each post office will actually receive. They were negotiated, discussed in great detail and agreed between the postmasters' union and An Post.

What we are doing now in the Dáil is following through on the Government's commitment to support the post office network through this payment. This significant increase is a reflection of the Government's commitment to the work that post offices do. There is no doubt that it is needed and necessary to ensure we can maintain our post office network across the country. There is also no doubt that if it were not for the Government introducing this payment over the past three years, we would have seen more post office closures. Making that significant increase now is important to maintain the post office footprint across the country. Our objective is to maintain as strong and widespread a network as possible. We seek to keep the post offices that we have in communities open. That is why we are increasing that fund by 50% this year.

A few issues have been raised through the various contributions this evening. In the city of Dublin, there is the issue of the adjustments to the sorting offices, which is an issue of concern in some communities. Indeed, that is something we are seeing happening across the country at the moment. It is important that there is appropriate engagement with local communities by An Post when it is making, proposing and putting forward those steps.

There is a significant change to the work An Post is carrying out. We have seen a reduction in postal volumes and the number of letters posted. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in parcel volumes. That brings a significant change to the services and infrastructure An Post needs to be able to deal with that demand. For example, in 2025, parcel volumes increased by 27% compared with 2024. So far this year, An Post has indicated that parcel volumes are almost running 50% higher in the months of January and February compared with the same period in 2025. It is rapidly evolving. It is important that An Post ensures it is at the forefront of that transition in order to be able to provide a good service. It must make sure it has the infrastructure, services and facilities in place to be able to deal with that additional volume. From a Government point of view, we are working with An Post to support it in that transition and make sure it remains as relevant in people's lives and provides as strong a service as it has done in the past.

Deputy Doherty mentioned the issue of the post office in Anagaire. It is our objective to keep as many post offices as we possibly can open. That is why we have introduced in the Dáil this week a 50% increase in the Government's contribution to support post offices. An Post has also indicated that over the course of the past year, it has seen an increase of approximately 10% in transactions across post offices, which is welcome. We want to see that continue so that more revenue is coming into our post offices. I will engage with the local community in Anagaire and with An Post to ensure that everything can be done to maintain that post office in the local community, as we are doing with the post office network generally. Post offices are so important to the local community. That is the reason we are introducing this 50% increase in the Government's contribution to post offices and postmasters in the Dáil. It will support them in their work and keep the network as strong as it possibly can be.

I thank Deputies across the House for their various contributions and support for this Government action to increase post office funding. I look forward to Committee Stage tomorrow and to taking this Bill through the Seanad so that it will be implemented and in place.

Question put and agreed to.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026 without amendment.

EU Regulation: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to accept the following measure:

Council Decision (EU) 2023/1076 of 1 June 2023 on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence with regard to matters related to judicial cooperation in criminal matters, asylum and non-refoulement,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 9th June, 2026.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating this motion. This evening I am seeking the approval of the House to conclude an opt-in under Article 4 of Protocol 21 to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union in relation to EU Council Decision 2023/1076. The decision concerns the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which is the Council of Europe's treaty on combating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The decision was adopted by the EU institutions as a step in the process of the EU becoming a party to the convention in its own right. Detailed legal consideration was given to the implications of this initiative at the time, including a comprehensive analysis by the Court of Justice of the European Union, which informed the appropriate technical approach to be taken by the EU.

Some of the treaty provisions relate to the justice sphere and, therefore, Title V of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. In light of Ireland's position under Protocol 21, the court determined that two decisions were necessary, one to cover areas coming within scope of Protocol 21 where an opt-in is required and another to cover all other matters.

Ireland did not opt into this decision when it was initially proposed in order to allow time for a careful examination with the benefit of advice from the Office of the Attorney General. However, we have consistently signalled our intention to proceed with this opt-in, subject to legal advice. In the intervening time, advice has been sought and considered, which has confirmed that there is no impediment to concluding the opt-in at this point.

The obligations arising from the EU's ratification of the convention fall primarily on the EU institutions. For example, the Council of Europe's expert body, GREVIO, is currently carrying out a baseline evaluation of how the EU's public administration has implemented the convention.

However, these activities also require consideration and oversight by member states from time to time. In practical terms, Ireland's ability to contribute is complicated by the fact that we are currently bound by one relevant decision but not the other. While these issues may be seen as somewhat technical in nature, this Council decision should be understood in its broader context. The Istanbul Convention is the gold standard international measure on combating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Ireland ratified the convention on International Women's Day, 8 March 2019. Zero Tolerance: Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence 2022-2026 is structured around the four pillars of the convention, namely, prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination. The Istanbul Convention is therefore a very important underpinning to the Government's zero-tolerance approach to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, ensuring all victims and survivors can access the support, protection and justice they need.

Domestically, we are taking unprecedented whole-of-government action to tackle the scourge of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This action is supported by record funding of almost €80 million under budget 2026, ensuring sustained support for front-line services. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is also introducing comprehensive reforming legislation in this area, including the introduction of the domestic violence register, Jennie's Law. Taken together, these national measures demonstrate real, tangible progress at national level across funding, legislation, prevention and victim support. Internationally, Ireland will use its Presidency of the Council of the European Union to maintain a spotlight on the scourge of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence which is so endemic in societies across Europe.

Concluding this opt-in at this point will serve to underscore Ireland's commitment to the Istanbul Convention and determination in facing the challenge, shared by all EU member states, of combating all forms domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and ensuring that victims and survivors are fully supported. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As the Minister of State said, this motion facilitates the State opting in to Council Decision (EU) 2023/1076, relating to the EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention in areas related to judicial co-operation, asylum, and non-refoulement. Sinn Féin will not be opposing this motion.

Primarily, as recognised by Ireland having the opt-out under Protocol 21, matters related to justice should be dealt with through domestic law, with the exception being areas where cross-border and international co-operation is required.

I am very conscious that as we discuss the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women, in the news today there are two cases of women who have been killed in violent circumstances, including in one case where a husband has been charged with the murder of his wife. These deaths are shocking and a reminder of how much more needs to be done to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. While we need to ensure there is focus on the prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, we also need to put the supports in place to help those who are seeking to escape such violence to get justice and rebuild their lives. I make the case that there have to be increased efforts to deliver refuge places, including delivering refuges in both counties in my constituency, Cavan and Monaghan.

I will raise a number of specific issues with the Minister of State. The first relates to bail and domestic violence. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on a number of occasions about the recommendation of the Staines report on bail laws that a breach of a domestic violence court order, as per section 33 of the Domestic Violence Act, should be added to the Schedule of the Bail Act. Issues related to bail and domestic violence have been raised with me, both by members of the legal profession acting on behalf of victims of domestic violence and those who are survivors of domestic abuse. From survivors, there is a sense that the application and enforcement of bail laws are not adequate to ensure their safety. They feel their abusers know they can get away with breaches of bail.

The Minister has acted by adding a number of additional offences to the Schedule of the Bail Act, as recommended by the Staines report, but the issue of a breach of a domestic violence order has not been added to date. In his closing remarks, I ask the Minister of State to set out the timeframe under which it is intended to add a breach of domestic violence to the Schedule

of the Bail Act. That, of course, also requires the maximum penalty on conviction to be increased to five years' imprisonment, if tried on indictment.

A specific issue that has arisen is the misuse of civil protection orders for coercive control. I raise the vexatious misuse of applications for civil protection orders as a form of coercive control or harassment. I am talking about circumstances where an individual repeatedly initiates unfounded court proceedings against the same person. I am aware of one particular case, but I am sure there are others, where such actions continued over a period of years, costing the persons subjected to the vexatious applications tens of thousands of euro as well as considerable time and stress. Cases were taken in multiple District Courts across the State and it was clearly a pattern of harassment of a former partner with whom the person had no ongoing contact. Is this something the Minister of State is aware of? Are legislative measures being considered to provide greater protections for victims in such cases?

One of the few options open to people dealing with such circumstances is seeking to obtain what is called an Isaac Wunder order in the High Court, but the costs associated with this make it prohibitive for many. Has the Minister of State looked at the issue of financial barriers faced by victims of vexatious litigation such as I have outlined?

Previously, I raised with the Minister what I believe to be the need to review the operation of section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act in relation to information regarding investigations and criminal proceedings. This needs to be expanded to include informing a victim of the death of an offender who is released under supervision. I raised this with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. I do not believe it would be overly burdensome if applied to those released under supervision. I hope the Department will examine this. However, there also needs to be a review of its operation to ensure the legislation is right to meet the needs of victims and that victims are constantly informed about its provisions. I recently spoke to someone who had secured a coercive control conviction against the perpetrator and who did not know about their entitlements under this section. When I asked the Minister about this previously, he stated that officials in his Department would highlight issues such as this with An Garda Síochána. I ask the Minister of State for an update on that.

I will also raise the issue of civil legal aid. The Minister of State may be aware that the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration published a report last week on the crisis in civil legal aid. We had the review of the civil legal aid scheme carried out by an independent review group, chaired by the former Chief Justice Frank Clarke. That has been on the Minister's desk since last year. There is an urgency in dealing with this and I raise it because of the particular issue as regards victims of domestic violence trying to secure civil legal aid representation. I ask the Minister of State to give us an update on plans to move forward with the recommendations in the independent review group's report or the justice committee's report published last week.

Violence against and abuse of women and girls are all too prevalent in society, with often devastating consequences, as we saw in news bulletins today. It is imperative that when this House becomes aware of anomalies or issues in the legal system that we address them head-on and with urgency. It is not good enough for us to simply sign up to conventions or EU frameworks if we are not domestically introducing the measures required to save people who are under constant threat of abuse, often in fear of their lives.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Social Democrats support the motion. Ireland should absolutely opt in to this Council decision. The Istanbul Convention is one of the most important international agreements we have on preventing violence against women, and domestic violence, and Ireland should fully participate in its EU ratification. While it is important to reaffirm our commitment to the convention, we also have to ask ourselves the much more uncomfortable question of whether we are actually living up to it.

The reality facing women in Ireland tells a very different story. Yesterday, Eleanor in my office and I started to prepare the speech I am delivering. Since then, another woman has lost her life and my speech is now outdated. I was going to address the fact that we heard about yet another deeply distressing case in the last few days, with the murder of Adina Costantin in Portlaoise. That murder meant we had reached the same number of women killed by a current or former partner as during the whole of last year. Today, we exceeded that figure.

That should horrify every one of us and force us to confront the fact that this crisis is not easing but is, in fact, getting worse. When women make the incredibly brave decision to leave, they are met with a country where 93% of domestic violence refuges are already full, where almost 1,900 women were turned away from refuge accommodation in just six months last year because there was nowhere to go, and which still falls dramatically short of the refuge spaces required under the very convention we are discussing. Every one of these women had probably reached the most frightening moment of her life. She had made the decision to leave and asked the State for help. The answer far too often was and is, "There is no room." Can we all take a minute to stop and imagine how that would feel? Can Deputies imagine being one of these women desperate to get themselves and their children to safety, only to hear days later about record-breaking Exchequer returns and budget surpluses when they have been told there is no room for them to flee from the domestic violence and potential threat to the lives of them and their children? Can they imagine the anger and devastation of living in a country we are told is rich, yet which cannot provide the most basic protection when a life may depend on it? That should shame us all.

Women's Aid recorded over 62,000 disclosures of domestic abuse last year, the highest number in its history. It recorded over 11,000 disclosures involving coercive control. We know abuse does not end when relationships end, with almost one in three women seeking support reporting abuse by a former partner. This is happening in every county, city and community in Ireland.

While I welcome proposals being examined to allow gardaí to remove perpetrators from their home in high-risk situations, we have to recognise emergency powers alone will never be enough. Women need somewhere safe to go. They need housing, refuge spaces, legal supports that work, a family law system that understands coercive control and, above all, a State that treats this as the emergency it is.

The Istanbul Convention is built around prevention, protection, prosecution and co-ordinated policy. The framework is there but the delivery is not. Of course we will support the motion but supporting the convention means more than signing international agreements or participating fully at EU level. It means making sure when a woman finally finds the courage to escape violence, the State is standing there to catch her and help her. Until no woman is turned away from a refuge because there is no bed and no woman has to choose between abuse

and homelessness, and until every survivor can access the protection this convention promises, our work is far from done. Ireland has the resources; we need the political will to match.

I have had three instances in my constituency this year where a woman made the brave decision to pursue a barring order against a partner from the home they were living in, in Dublin City Council accommodation. When the barring order ends, the perpetrator of the violence that had been inflicted to the point the victim was able to get a barring order is simply able to walk back into the home. I have tabled amendments to housing Bills to address this but it has gone unaddressed to this point. It cannot be the case that, continuously, women who are victims have to leave their homes.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The Council of Europe convention is quite a technical document. I was reading it today. For people listening in, I will explain a little bit about it but then I will talk about why it is so important we have it. It is a leading international treaty on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The four pillars are prevention, protection of victims, prosecution of perpetrators and co-ordinated government policy. Ireland signed the convention in 2015 and ratified it in 2019. It informs our zero-tolerance strategy - the four pillars are in that. This motion will allow us to opt in to council decisions - one does not require us to opt in; the other does - and that allows us to do things in the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It will allow us to be part of working party meetings and help us develop EU policies on violence against women and participate in EU positions under the convention.

I worked in a domestic violence project and this is really important for me. We need to explore every available option to make sure the policies and structures are in place for us in Ireland and throughout Europe and to make sure whatever we need to do on paper - structures, frameworks, all those things - is done because there is an epidemic of domestic and gender-based violence in this country and throughout Europe. When we want to put all those frameworks in place, we need to have the mechanisms to prosecute perpetrators and protect women and to make sure there are enough domestic violence refuge spaces. I am sure previous speakers mentioned that already.

Speaking last week on the Order of Business, I said we needed an urgent debate in this Chamber about domestic violence because there are not enough spaces. There are supposed to be 500 refuge spaces in Ireland but there are 172. That is clearly not enough. The moment a woman decides to leave is one of the most dangerous times. She may have nowhere to go and is then stuck living with that person. We all know the outcomes for the women who have been killed in Ireland in recent years.

Recently discussed in this Chamber was Women's Aid. Its report from 2025 said there were 62,275 disclosures of abuse, of which 4,755 involved children. We need to make sure any woman who needs a refuge space has it. I will say again that is not good enough that a woman has to leave her home with her children because of domestic violence. It is the perpetrator who should be leaving the home and the woman should be safe in her home. He should have to leave or she should have to leave - whoever the perpetrator is, they need to be ostracised, not the woman and her children.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: We support the motion. Gender-based and domestic violence is a problem across Europe and it is welcome that the EU is taking seriously its role in tackling the issue by signing the Istanbul Convention. Ireland is already a state party to the convention but opting in in full to the EU's ratification process will mean we can play a full part in the Europe-wide fight against gender-based violence. That will be particularly important in light of the EU Presidency. It is welcome the Government is taking this step. It is important but we need far greater action from Government on tackling violence against women and girls and domestic violence.

When it comes to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, the scale of the challenge we face is clear. The figures are stark. There were 22,700 contacts to the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre's national helpline in 2024, there were 32,144 contacts to Women's Aid in the same year and gardaí responded to an average of 1,250 incidents per week. While the zero-tolerance strategy commits to doubling the number of refuge spaces in the country by the end of 2026 - and that was a welcome step - the ambition falls far short of what is needed. The Government strategy to double provision to 282 places is based on one unit per 10,000 women, rather than one place per 10,000 population. Article 23 of the Istanbul Convention sets out a clear requirement to provide an adequate ratio of shelter places to the total population. That means Ireland would still need another 250 places to be compliant. All the while, our population continues to grow.

What terrifies me is that the number of women killed violently so far this year matches the total figure for 2025. We still have nine counties with no refuge. We know the Government is unlikely to meet the target of doubling refuge spaces by the end of 2026. We had 141 at the start; we are now in June and have 193. We have had 285 women die violently in this country since 1996. So far this year, a number of women have died violently. Adina Constantin, Yveta Donovalova, Kelly Marie Lynch, Amy Doherty and Ellie Flanagan have all died violently in this country. Some 50% of all victims are under the age of 35, while 63% were killed at home, 87% by a man who was known to them. When I talk about domestic and gender-based violence, I always think of the former State pathologist, Dr. Marie Cassidy.

7 o'clock

She said very pertinently that it is not the man under the bed you need to worry about, but the man sleeping beside you in the bed, whether it be your husband or partner. Last week, shockingly, 1,900 women were turned away from refuge places. That is why I called for the Minister for justice to come into the Chamber last week and take questions on this. In many counties we are failing women. In my own County Limerick, we do not have a sexual assault treatment unit. If a woman is raped in Limerick or the mid-west, including Clare, Tipperary and down as far as west Clare, unless the woman is willing to report the incident to the Garda, which can be more traumatising for that individual, she has to travel, often on public transport, in the clothes she was wearing and with the DNA and the semen of her attacker, to Galway in order to get a fulsome examination and an STI check.

While it is welcome that we are debating this motion tonight, we need to go much further. We need 500 refuge spaces and we need to make sure the Government meets the target by the end of 2026, as was set out by Cuan. I am also concerned that for victims and survivors of domestic violence who are leaving their home or moving county, the protocols brought forward by the Minister for housing last week do not currently cover those who are in receipt of HAP

and RAS. That is something the Government needs to look at and rectify. On many metrics, things are getting worse. We have an epidemic of male violence against women in this country. We have an epidemic of misogyny. Victims need to feel they have the confidence in the system to come forward such that they know their case will be prosecuted and investigated properly and they will get the justice they deserve. The number of failed prosecutions for rape in this country leaves an awful lot to be desired. I want to see a step change and a culture shift whereby we create a system in which women have confidence that they will be listened to and believed and that their perpetrator will be brought to justice.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Ceann Comhairle and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for facilitating the motion this evening, and the Deputies for their input. I wish to take the opportunity to express my appreciation at the unwavering commitment shown by this House to the fight against domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I take on board all the comments made by Deputies throughout the debate.

The Government is taking unprecedented action across Departments and agencies and with the support of civil society to tackle the scourge of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Our national approach is underpinned by the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention, namely prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination. Concluding this opt-in will allow Ireland to participate fully in the EU's activities related to its status as party to the convention within its own right. This step will serve at international level to reaffirm Ireland's commitment to the convention and the fight against all forms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, particularly in the context of Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. I am grateful for the support shown by this House for the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 7.05 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 7.05 p.m. and resumed at 7.10 p.m.

Planning for Constitutional Change Bill 2026: Second Stage [Private Members]

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

Tonight, the Dáil can take a major step towards Irish unity in our time. Tonight, we can begin the final length of our national journey from peace to reunification. The Bill that Sinn Féin brings before the Dáil this evening is historic. If passed, it would be the first ever legislation directing the Government to start planning and preparing for a united Ireland. The Bill compels the Taoiseach to produce and publish a Government Green Paper and set out its vision for reunification. It also establishes a first ever citizens' assembly - all-island - on Irish unity to consider those proposals. It would put the work of uniting Ireland at the very heart of the Government and the Oireachtas. The story of our nation is the story of challenge, adversity and struggle, but more importantly, it is a story of perseverance, hope and overcoming incredible odds. It is a story of enduring belief that a better future for Ireland is possible. That spirit is best reflected in the achievement of the historic Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Twenty-eight years ago, leaders from all communities came together and made peace. The

agreement brought conflict in Ireland to an end, and to this day it stands as a historic international success story in peace building. It created space to acknowledge the hurt, pain and loss on all sides, to build a bridge of understanding, a pathway for healing and a process for real reconciliation.

The Good Friday Agreement was about institutional arrangements and human rights standards. However, at the very core of the agreement is the provision of the right of all the people, North and South, to determine Ireland's future at the ballot box by way of referendums. We now need to do the work necessary to plan and prepare for the people to vote on a united Ireland. We are nearly 30 years on from the Good Friday Agreement. There has been nothing rushed, hasty or pre-emptive about this process. Over the past three decades, we have had big challenges. We have had disagreements and political confrontations. We have had highs and lows. Of that, there is no doubt. However, the peace is secure. It is robust, resilient and commands wide support. It is now time to write the next chapter, the chapter of reunification.

We in Sinn Féin believe in partnership and collaboration. Michelle O'Neill leads the Executive with the determination to make politics work for everyone. Above all else, we believe that we must build Ireland's future together. Reunification is, of course, about removing the Border, but not only that, it is about so much more. It is about seizing the moment and opportunity to create a new deal for the people of Ireland and every person on this island; a new deal for Protestants and unionists which protects their British identity and replaces the bad treatment and abandonment by Westminster with real ownership, inclusion and respect as a full citizen to have a real stake in the future where that British identity is secure; a new deal to break with the failures of the past and build a new republic that works for everyone where prosperity and a secure life is open to every citizen.

This new deal of reunification is about building a better life for workers and families right across Ireland. It is about harnessing the resources of the entire nation to build a better future but also to meet the big challenges of today, and to ensure that every citizen and family have a place to call home. It is the best way - the only way - to deliver an all-Ireland public universal health service. Through unity, we can build the best education and childcare systems for every child and young person. We can strengthen our public services, tackle poverty and build a fair society in which disabled people and those who care are supported to live full lives as equal citizens. Reunification provides us with the opportunity to use the engine of the all-island economy to create jobs, drive investment and secure a successful and dynamic economic future with world-class infrastructure. Irish unity very importantly also represents a new deal for our young people. Too many generations have lived their lives in a partitioned Ireland. It has held back young people. It has curtailed potential and ambition. It has denied them their right to live in a unified nation with access to all the possibilities that this can offer. We say, "Enough of that." We owe it to our young people to recognise unity as the historic opportunity of this time and to seize it with both hands. Now is the time to build a hopeful future for all the young people of Ireland regardless of background, tradition, religion or identity. That is what reunification offers, but we must start the planning and preparation now. That is what this Bill seeks to stimulate and advance.

Any government truly focused on a better future would positively - indeed, enthusiastically - draft and publish a Green Paper on a united Ireland, a positive vision covering all topics including public finance, taxation, public services, human rights, governance arrangements

and, of course, relations between Britain and Ireland. The establishment of the citizens' assembly will be groundbreaking. It will bring together representatives from the people of Ireland from all communities because all citizens have a stake in our shared future. It will allow a debate on competing ideas and different perspectives on unity, encourage debate on the shape of the future constitutional arrangements and facilitate discussion on the financial, social, economic and political challenges and solutions. It will be a forum for real discussion on what our new united Ireland will look like.

The Taoiseach's position, often stated, is that reconciliation must happen before reunification. I respectfully suggest that perspective downplays three decades of genuine reconciliation initiatives and real progress on the ground and in communities. That perspective fails to recognise that discussing and planning our future together is the very essence of reconciliation. Reunification itself is a reconciliation process. You cannot separate one from the other, no more than tell the dancer from the dance. The question is often asked, "Can we afford unity?" My answer to that is simple. We can no longer afford partition. We can no longer afford the dislocation of North from South. We cannot miss the opportunity that unity presents in terms of economic scale, development and progress, but also when it comes to the organisation of our public services. The scale of change we are witnessing demands that we prepare for constitutional change and reunification. Britain's union is now under unprecedented pressure. We now have pro-independence First Ministers in the North of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, all of whom see a future beyond Westminster and the post-Brexit chaos that has dominated British politics, or more accurately English politics, for a decade now; all who want a future where the people of our nations choose our destinies. That is our common cause. For us in Ireland, that means working towards and securing a date for referendums on Irish unity.

The Government really should not stand against this tide of change; it should embrace it. In fact, it should lead it. Good government, after all, is about recognising threats and weaknesses but more importantly identifying opportunities and grasping them. We need to recognise that a united Ireland is the greatest opportunity of our generation. It is the big idea for our future. The question is not if there will be unity referendums but when those referendums will be held. The far bigger question is whether we will be prepared for an informed, inclusive process of transition. I want a process that is peaceful and orderly and this demands that preparations start now and that is what our legislation is about.

Is í aontacht na hÉireann an deis is mó atá ag ár nglúin. Is í an fhís mhór í do thodhchaí ár dtíre. Is ré nua í d'oibrithe agus teaghlaigh ar fud na hÉireann. Ní mór dúinn an deis a thapú go huile is go hiomlán. Ní mór dúinn pleanáil agus ullmhú do reifreann aontachta. Is é anois an t-am. Taispeánaimis misneach, fis agus diongbháilteacht chun deireadh a chur leis an deighilt agus Poblacht nua a thógáil do chách.

Partition failed the people of Ireland. We all have our responsibility now to plan and prepare for unity and to lay the foundations of the nation we wish to pass on to our children and they to theirs, so let us not miss this moment. Let us work to ensure the Government of Ireland and this Oireachtas become the lead driver of reunification in our time. Let us now walk this length of the journey with confidence, hope and real purpose. That is what this legislation is about. It is with this unwavering belief in Ireland and in all of our people that I commend this legislation to the Dáil.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There are moments in the life of every nation when history presents a choice. Ours is the Irish generation that is living through one of those moments. For the first time in a century, the prospect of Irish unity is no longer a distant aspiration. It is a real, democratic possibility. The question before us today is not whether that day will come but it is whether we will prepare for it. Planning is the duty of every government - to plan and to explore the opportunities unity brings in areas such as healthcare, education, public services, the economy and much more. A failure to plan is a failure of leadership. Sinn Féin's Bill calls on us to prepare, to begin that work now and to ensure that when the moment comes and people go to cast their votes in a unity referendum, they will do so with confidence, knowledge and hope.

For generations, countless Irish men and Irish women dedicated their lives to the cause of Irish freedom and unity. Many endured prison, hardship and loss. Many made the ultimate sacrifice. The responsibility entrusted on this generation is different. We are not being asked to win the opportunity to shape Ireland's future. That opportunity has already been secured through the Good Friday Agreement. Our duty is to prepare for it with wisdom, confidence and respect. What an opportunity lies before us; an Ireland where every identity is respected, every citizen is valued equally and every community has its place. It would be an Ireland that unlocks the full potential of our economy, our people and our shared future.

This is about building the future of our country; a future better than the past, a future founded on unity, reconciliation, equality and respect. It would be a future that embraces our unionist fellow countrymen and women because a united Ireland belongs to everyone who shares this island. History, a chairde, has brought us to this point. The future now calls on us to lead. Others may choose to stand still; we choose to prepare with confidence, ambition and hope. Let us begin together the work of building a truly equal, free and united Ireland - a real republic worthy of its name - because it is up to us in this House to finish the job.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Every time my constituents speak to me about what matters most to them, they talk about their children. They ask whether they will be able to buy a house with the pressures they are facing as a family. Essentially, what they are asking is whether tomorrow can be better than today. Every one of those conversations leaves me with the same thought. People are looking for hope. They are looking for leadership. Politics asks us to solve today's problems but leadership asks us to prepare for tomorrow. Constitutional change is a democratic opportunity of the Good Friday Agreement and the Government has a duty to prepare responsibly, openly and inclusively. That means publishing a Green Paper, convening a citizens' assembly and listening to communities across the island and giving everyone the opportunity to be part of those conversations. The Good Friday Agreement did not ask anyone to abandon their beliefs or aspirations. All of us accepted that our future will be decided through consent, dialogue and democracy. That is one of the greatest achievements of the agreement and this Bill is firmly rooted in those principles, that no one should be asked to leave their identity at the door.

Every generation inherits an Ireland shaped by those who came before. My grandparents inherited a divided Ireland. My mother's generation lived through conflict. One of my first ever votes was in favour of the Good Friday Agreement. Today, another responsibility lies with

us, not to decide the outcomes of future referendums but to ensure people are ready for when that question is asked of them. That is not radical; that is good governance. One day if my grandson asks me, as we, as a generation, had the chance to prepare for tomorrow, whether we had the courage to seize the opportunity, I want my answer to be "Yes", that we did not wait and that we did not hesitate because I want the Ireland that he and every child inherits to be determined by what we do today. We have the opportunity to take such a step forward. Let us be the ones who move forward with courage to prepare. Let us be the ones who choose action over hesitation. Let us be the ones who believed Ireland's future was worth preparing for and that we chose to do it in hope and leadership and we built it together one decision at a time.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá todhchaí na hÉireann á cruthú againn inniu. Mar phoblachtach, ionadaí poiblí, fear Gaeltachta agus athair, tá a fhios agam nach dtógtar pobal láidir le dóchas amháin. Tógtar é le fis, misneach agus pleanáil. Is iad sin atá i gceist againn leis an mBille seo.

The future of Ireland should be decided by the people of Ireland and this debate is about whether we have the courage and common sense to prepare for that future. We have a historic opportunity now to end partition and reunite our country; to build a new Ireland; to invest in better public services; to strengthen communities; and to give a new generation real hope and real opportunity.

Tá dualgas orainn an obair sin a thosú anois chun todhchaí a chruthú ina mbeidh pobail láidre, an Ghaeilinn faoi bhláth agus deiseanna ag daoine óga fanacht ina gceantair féin agus saol maith a bheith acu.

This is why we must plan. This Bill simply asks the Government to do the obvious, the sensible and the responsible thing; to engage with communities across this island and prepare responsibly for every democratic possibility.

Tá Comhaontú Aoine an Chéasta bunaithe ar chomhthoiliú, meas agus daonlathas. Má tá muid dáiríre faoi na prionsabail sin, ní féidir linn neamhaird a dhéanamh ar an obair ullmhúcháin.

The Taoiseach has no right to stand in the way of hope, ambition and the future of younger generations. If he refuses to plan for unity, that refusal will become a black mark on his legacy and long after he has left office, Fianna Fáil will still have to answer for choosing to block preparation instead of showing leadership. It is irresponsible not to plan.

Ní bhaineann an Bille seo le páirtí amháin; baineann sé le muintir na hÉireann uile.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The majority of Members of this House want to do the preparation for Irish unity. They recognise we have a distinctive opportunity to create a new and united Ireland; to create an island where nobody is left behind; to create an architecture underpinned by our values as an Irish nation; and to create a national health service where optimum outcomes can be achieved by the world-class medical experts we have on this island and where timely access to healthcare is determined by need and not on ability to pay. They recognise the economic benefits of a new and united Ireland, an island where indigenous businesses thrive and grow alongside foreign direct investment, where we have energy security

by maximising our offshore wind energy opportunities, and where companies have incentives to decarbonise.

The purpose of this Bill is not to predetermine any constitutional outcome but to ensure robust planning is undertaken so citizens, businesses and investors are fully informed of the opportunities, costs and practical implications associated with constitutional change.

Our legislation would establish a framework for evidence-based planning, informed by independent expertise and engagement with business organisations, civic society, trade unions and communities across this island. Regardless of the constitutional preference, it is in everybody's interest that any future transition is properly addressed, costed and planned for in a manner that protects stability, safeguards investment and maximises economic opportunity.

I am disappointed the Taoiseach does not share the vision for a new and united Ireland that I and the majority of Members of this House have, indeed, the vision that the Taoiseach's own grassroots members have across this State. However, the Taoiseach cannot hold back the tide forever. Citizens the length and breadth of this island, as well as the Irish diaspora of the many young people who are desperate to come home to a new and united Ireland, will not be deterred from preparing for constitutional change. The work continues. Leanann an obair ar aghaidh.

The Taoiseach: The Government will oppose this Bill for a range of reasons. It would do little to achieve its objective and it would recommit us to an approach that has failed repeatedly over the past 100 years. Most importantly, it would distract from urgent work that is essential before any honest and constructive debate about our constitutional future can be held. This is the work that falls to everyone here and not just the Government. It is important that all of us who aspire to the unity of all Irish people are willing to discuss and debate it. However, denouncing people because they see a different means to a specific end is the very opposite of a constructive debate. Instead of waving flags in people's faces and talking about the inevitable march of history, we need people to be open about the scale of the obstacles to overcome and the spirit of a peace agreement, which is the bedrock upon which we can build our future.

For the past century we have not overcome a constitutional divide which had no foundation or precedent in our long history. Campaigns of sectarian murder and destruction not only failed, they further deepened division. It is also true that those of us who sought unification by peaceful means failed to create a vision for the future that could persuade others to agree with us. The proposal for a policy statement on unity backed by other nationalist parties is not new. In fact, it has been tried repeatedly. At its core are the assumptions of one more push, or demography is destiny, which have always failed. The model proposed in the Bill is not new. There has already been a lot of talk about Scotland, but the harsh fact is that the approach contained in this Bill is almost exactly the one that did not deliver constitutional change there in spite of a seven-year referendum campaign.

The Bill requires that all work must be commissioned, completed, analysed and then incorporated within a proposal for a unitary state within 18 months. All analysis and proposals about the economy, education systems, health services, public service pay, the replacement of sterling, legal systems, policing, legacy, culture, identity and constitutional structures must be completed in a year and a half. This is obviously not credible. Due to the research programme that I put in place, and the Government through the shared island initiative, we are now for the first time developing a systematic approach to gathering information and wider data on the

reality of life North and South. The cost of maintaining services and payments is one thing but the bigger issue of economic convergence would, under any scenario, involve profound changes in tax, benefits, public service pay and many other areas. The idea that we can finish building rigorous and independent data in 18 months and then answer questions on people's incomes and the structure of the economy is obviously not serious.

In relation to compelling the establishment of a citizens' assembly at the end of next year, I have consistently been of the view that a citizens' assembly is not the appropriate mechanism to advance the enormous work of securing the unity of the people of this island, work which by definition requires much broader participation of the public, of political parties and of all communities on the island. Addressing the real hurt of the legacy of the years of violence and destruction would be an essential step in building trust and an honest debate. Simply ignoring it causes new hurt and reinforces divisions. Given the reality of past experience, please let us move beyond the new slogan that all we need is Government advocacy and a citizens' assembly and then we will be ready. A policy of one more push, and hoping for an unpopular government in London, will achieve nothing.

In contrast, our approach is rooted in the Good Friday Agreement and in maximising the ability for breaking the cycle of failed policies from the last century. The starting point of true civic republicanism is to focus first on building understanding and shared interests between all communities. I am genuinely surprised by how dismissive some here are of the groundbreaking practical work being done under the shared island initiative. Not one speaker opposite mentioned it in any of their contributions. We have secured its legitimacy. We have shown that it is possible for people to reach across divides on the basis of shared interests. We have held forums involving many thousands of people from every walk of life. No one did this work at this scale before now. If we can share a common understanding of the facts then we can discuss our future on an informed basis rather than simply singing the old songs and expecting something new to happen.

It is up to each party here to stop demanding that others do the work of describing the constitutional, economic and social future of this island. For our part, we intend to continue to work in pursuit of Irish unity in ways that are consistent with the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and my belief that we have to break the cycle of 100 years where discussion of the constitutional future has always rapidly and inevitably devolved into competing camps. As this Bill attempts to recommit us to a strategy that has failed for so long, we will oppose it and recommit ourselves to a more credible, active and ambitious approach.

The Tánaiste: Let me say at the outset that I want to see our island united, I want to see our people united and I want to see a united Ireland. I want to work across party lines in this House, across this island North and South and, indeed, east-west, to build the durable consent that would make a new Ireland possible. I believe that is an aspiration shared in one form or another by an overwhelming majority of Members of this House.

I know how this Chamber often works. I am expected to stand up and say that the Opposition is bad and the Government is good, and they stand up and say the Government is bad and the Opposition is good. I think on an issue as profound as constitutional change, encompassed by the Good Friday Agreement, we owe the people something better than that.

We owe each other respect and we should acknowledge each other's bona fides. I fully accept the bona fides of Deputy McDonald and her colleagues in bringing forward this legislation.

While we differ on the approach, I do not question the sincerity of their ultimate objective. We all seek a better future for this island but there are genuine differences across the political spectrum on how we best go about that and how we best achieve that future. Respectfully, I do not think it is a question of courage. Nor do I think it is a question of if you are in favour of this legislation then you are in favour of a united Ireland, and if you are not in favour of the legislation then you do not wish to prepare. It is clearly much deeper than that. We may differ on process, we may differ on timing and we may differ on the structures that should guide these discussions, but none of these differences absolve us of the responsibility to engage or the responsibility to prepare.

That is why as leader of Fine Gael I recently outlined my own party's intention to publish later this year a new policy paper setting out our vision for the future of this island. Our aim is to engage with every tradition and every identity to encourage informed discussion and to identify the practical, economic, constitutional and societal questions that would need to be addressed were Ireland to be united. Nobody should fear these conversations: they are legitimate, they are necessary and they are already happening. Conversation, however, is not the same as countdown. Constitutional change cannot be driven by deadlines or arbitrary timelines and it cannot rest on assumptions. If it is to happen it has to be carefully prepared for, honestly debated and, above all, built on durable consent. That means listening to every community and every tradition. It means recognising that constitutional change would require significant adjustments for everyone. It is not simply a merger or a takeover. It means understanding that for many people, particularly those within the unionist tradition, these questions are deeply personal and cannot be dismissed.

If we are serious about building a shared future then reassurance has to come before rhetoric, persuasion has to come before politics and reconciliation is a requirement for constitutional change. That has been the approach of this Government and our position is clear. It is reflected in the programme for Government, which commits us to the unity of the Irish people while remaining steadfast in implementing the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts. That remains our guiding principle. The Good Friday Agreement provides the democratic, peaceful and agreed pathway to constitutional change, should it be the will of the people North and South. It is one of the greatest achievements in the history of this island and I believe one of the greatest peace agreements anywhere in the world. It replaced conflict with consent, division with dialogue and violence with democratic choice. These principles must continue to guide every discussion about our constitutional future.

I also want to acknowledge the impact of the shared island initiative and credit the Taoiseach with his leadership in relation to this. While we may be political rivals from time to time, I will not stand for a situation where the Taoiseach is described as a block in relation to unity when he has done so much for peace on this island. The shared island initiative represents the largest ever investment made in practical North-South co-operation. Whether through improved transport links, research, education, enterprise, tourism or healthcare, these projects are improving people's daily lives, regardless of constitutional preference, because practical co-operation helps build that trust and it helps build that future.

That same practical approach must underpin our engagement with the British Government. Last September, alongside the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Hilary Benn, I announced a joint framework on legacy. Legacy remains one of the deepest wounds left by the Troubles. Families deserve truth. They deserve accountability and, where possible, they deserve justice.

Turning to the legislation before us - and let me again say I do not doubt Deputy McDonald's bona fides; I do not doubt anyone's bona fides - the reason I do not support this Bill is that I do not believe that we need it to prepare. I am happy to engage. I do not believe we need a Bill to prepare and I do not believe that constitutional change should be tied to arbitrary timelines or that a citizens' assembly is best way, and nor did the Good Friday Agreement report when it looked at this issue on a cross-party basis and suggested a better model of a forum, which deserves serious consideration.

These are not reasons to avoid engagement. They are reasons to deepen it. My commitment this evening is to continue working across this House with party leaders from all parties in government and in opposition to advance the conversation that is under way and will continue on the preparation that is required.

It is a conversation that should be informed by respect rather than division, by careful preparation, not by seeking to label each other based on our position on a specific piece of legislation and based on consent rather than compulsion. If we are to achieve a united Ireland, and we will, it will not be built by one party or one Government. It will be built by the people. It will be built democratically, and it will endure only if it is founded on the principles that have served this island so well: peace, partnership and consent.

Acting Chairman : Hear, hear.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Anois an t-am le haghaidh Éire aontaithe. In one respect, I am stunned. Today I walked past the Mansion House where the First Dáil sat, and I wondered what it would be like to explain to people in that House that now, in 2026, we need to have a discussion on whether there is a case for a united Ireland. What would they think of a Taoiseach and a Tánaiste in a future Dáil essentially saying that 107 years after the First Dáil, 50 years after conflict, 30 years after the Good Friday Agreement and ten years after Brexit, that it is too soon to talk about delivering a free and united Ireland because that is what their remarks can be summarised into.

The Tánaiste: We did not say that. We said that we should all work together.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Today, we have every reason to believe that change is within our grasp if the political leadership is there to grasp it. The reunification of Ireland is the democratic right and the unfinished business of the Irish people. It is our right to live in a united country, free from a border imposed without consent and with devastating consequences, especially for Irish citizens North of the Border.

As representatives of the Irish people, we have a responsibility to shape the future of this island. Irish unity is not something that we should have to beg for. It is a right recognised by history, by democracy and by the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Border is, and was, artificial. It has divided communities and families. I have seen it every day of my life where the people of Cavan and Monaghan have been denied their natural hinterland of Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh. It has held us back for too long, so now is the time to plan, prepare and deliver the potential of this great nation, especially the Border region.

All of that is in this Bill. This is about choices. It is about making a choice to move forward or finding excuses not to. I appeal to Members to support this Bill and let us build a fairer, better and united Ireland together.

Acting Chairman : Hear, hear.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I cannot express how disappointed I am in the Taoiseach and that this Government has decided to vote against our Bill. Regardless of whether you are a united-Irelander or not, our Bill simply seeks to ensure we are prepared for the constitutional change that is knocking on the door. Preparing for unity is sensible and responsible, voting against this Bill, rejecting the simple premise of preparation, is reckless and irresponsible. Sinn Féin has said repeatedly that Irish unity is bigger than us, and I have spoken to enough Fianna Fáilers in north Kildare to know they feel that way too. One man's mean-spirited attempt to set the *ne plus ultra* to the progress of Ireland's nationhood has prevailed this time but better men and women than he will gain Irish unity while he is still muttering about the smoking ban because Ireland is full of generous, forward-looking people.

The Tánaiste: That is nasty and is not going to unite anyone.

Deputy Réada Cronin: We saw the generosity of the people of Derry and beyond when Arlene Foster was warmly welcomed to the funeral to the late First Minister, Martin McGuinness. We saw it in Dublin when a courageous woman, who attended the Stardust inquest, stood between the injured assailant and an angry crowd because despite being failed by the institutions of this State, she still believed in justice and Ireland's innate sense of justice. These are the forward-looking and hopeful people of Ireland that I know and love. Our island has carried the burden of division for far too long but no line drawn on a map can ever divide the generosity and humanity of the Irish people. We will unite the whole island, the whole people of Ireland, and heal old wounds with respect, generosity and equality. Together we will right the historic wrong done to our Irish nation, in particular our people of all persuasions in the North. We have spent too long defined by old wounds, missed chances and shame but the day is coming when this island will not be defined by that and will instead be defined by the people of Ireland who inspire us. Our best days are yet to come.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: In 1885, Charles Stewart Parnell said:

No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country thus far shalt thou go and no further.

That is where the Taoiseach is right now, and that is where he has been for a number of years. I thought of the Hume-Adams accord in 1993 earlier where the leaders of nationalism

and republicanism in the North united together in talks and made a series of statements. The then Fianna Fáil leader, Albert Reynolds, responded with positivity. He embraced it and moved forward. Bertie Ahern did the same. I am sorry to say, Micheál Martin, that you are no Albert Reynolds or Bertie Ahern.

Acting Chairman : Hear, hear.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Nationalism is united on this issue. We are asking for responsible preparation, a Green Paper and a citizens' assembly to make the plan and the case. The Taoiseach says that he is an Irish republican and a united-Irelander, then he should make the case and have a plan. That is what nationalism wants. The SDLP had a conference in recent days. This is not about one political party. This is about all of the voices of nationalism and united-Irelanders saying together that the Government must have a plan.

Micheál Martin, I ask you to reflect on the words of Charles Stewart Parnell and to think about what he said all of those years ago because he is that man right now and it needs to change. If not, he will not be here next year. His party will remove him, and we will come back, and this will be passed in due course.

Acting Chairman : What a nasty thing to say.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In the Taoiseach's script, he tells us that he is worried that this legislation would distract from the urgent work being done. I put it to him that this legislation is the urgent work. This is the work that we should be about in this Chamber, representing the views of the majority of people on this island.

I grew up in a Border town. I spent from the age of five to the age of 16 living along the Border. I know what that Border did. I know what it did to my community and my country. Of course, I want it gone, and the Taoiseach says that he does as well. I also know that it is not that simple. It will not happen because we want to wish it away. We must work for it. We must prepare for it. We must plan for it, and we must get it right. Unity will not happen by accident. It will only happen when we work for it. The Taoiseach's fellow countyman said it better than I could. He said that if you fail to prepare, then you may prepare to fail.

I was 24 when I voted for the Good Friday Agreement. I brought my daughter in with me. She toddled along and held my hand. My daughter is now a mother. I am a granny and we are yet to see the fulfilment of the promise of the Good Friday Agreement. I will not stand here, nod and say it is okay that the Taoiseach stands in the way of that work. He should reflect on his words but he should also consider the content of our legislation. It is positive, proactive and about discussion. It is about preparation and about making sure we deliver a republic that is worthy of its name by working together and by ensuring we deliver the republic and the promise of the Good Friday Agreement together. The Taoiseach should withdraw his opposition and work with us and all of the other parties in this House to get the job done.

Acting Chairman : Hear, hear.

Deputy Pa Daly: This is about more than legislation, politics or budgets. It is about being confident in ourselves. It is about féin-mhuinín. It is not about seeing how other nations perceive us but looking to the future as an island and deciding what is best for us as a collective.

The pandemic and Brexit showed us the illogicality of partition.

A united Ireland offers huge potential towards energy independence and environmental advancement. Imagine being able to share the wind turbine construction capabilities of Belfast Port. Imagine being able to divert unused wind energy across the island. Reunification offers an opportunity to take the measures that we need to ensure a sustainable future and to take the bold directions necessary to address the ecological catastrophe, which is currently way more challenging as two states. Imagine combining shared expertise in transport and combining access to airports and trains, with single ticketing schemes and a single purpose. We might pause to listen to hear some of the voices of the past to help us along that journey.

There is absolutely no economic advantage for a small nation in having two separate tax regimes, two separate legal systems, competing economic development programmes and two separate tourist organisations. We have Departments that are already working together. We must advance on that, push forward and have a plan that we can move together. As Edward Carson said, "no one shall have privileges over us", so we should work together ourselves on this island. North-South trade is currently thriving and with access to the largest market in the world, a unified island will prosper. As regards our health system, there are challenges North and South with waiting lists, but reunification paves the way for a universal, free at the point of delivery healthcare system for the whole island. We should embrace that positivity.

I know some unionists feel they are better off the way they are, but we want an inclusive country, embracing their identities and traditions, recognising the right of all the people to identify themselves and be accepted as British and as Irish. There will be referenda. The Irish Government must act on the Good Friday Agreement, plan for unity and demonstrate its commitment to engaging with citizens in developing the best future for the people of the island of Ireland.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill. I commend the Bill and am happy to say that the Social Democrats will support it. We are happy to support it because we support a united Ireland and we support the constitutional change needed to facilitate bringing about that united Ireland. What this Bill does is provide for the work and dialogue that need to happen for constitutional change.

Before I speak to the Bill itself, I will pick up on the comments by both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste in their contributions on the timeline. For me, that is really problematic. The Taoiseach went into quite a lot of detail about why an 18-month timeline is not appropriate for the work that is set out, but this is just another example that shows he is not willing to work with us. If 18 months is not appropriate, it can be dealt with in committee or extended further. It is about dialogue because that is what this does and that is what we are not getting from the Taoiseach. Fine Gael recently announced a blueprint. That is not what this is about. This is a discussion that has to come from all directions, and it is coming from all directions. It is already happening, so the fact that it is not happening in the appropriate way in this Chamber is an issue. That is what this legislation puts forward. As far as I am concerned, it does so in a way that is completely in keeping with the Good Friday Agreement and is very respectful of some

of the really important features that we need to consider in this debate. Those are some of the things that I would like to speak to now.

The first point is that language is important in this. This is something that I have learned over the course of my life. I have lived in the North and worked in a formal structure, a part of the Good Friday Agreement that set up the joint committee of the human rights commissions, of which I was chair along with my counterpart from Belfast. I have had that understanding of how some people like it to be referred to as the North but when you are in certain other settings, you have to refer to Northern Ireland. You have to respect the different ways in which people assert their own identity in this discussion. For me, language is hugely important. It is something that has to be respected. It comes through crystal clear for me in this legislation and is something that we have to acknowledge.

Another thing I have noticed in the discussions we have had is there is a huge imbalance on both sides of the Border between understanding of these issues and an appetite to discuss them. I have peers, who are friends of mine I have grown up alongside who have barely been to Northern Ireland at all, or who have maybe gone to see the Titanic museum. Unless people have friends or contacts, or have reasons to go to the North, there are many in our jurisdiction who do not have an understanding of the cultural differences we have on either side of the Border, or of the history and the issues. That is something we need to address. It is something that the Government and we, as a state, need to address. We need to foster that dialogue, we need to have these conversations at dinner tables around this country, and we need to do it here in this Chamber as well.

Self-determination is a core principle of international law. It is one that we must observe and practise on our own island. We talk about it in many other contexts in the debates in this Chamber. That is ultimately what this constitutional discussion is about. It is about self-determination. It is about saying that rooted in the Good Friday Agreement is the opportunity and the potential for these constitutional discussions and dialogue to happen and, ultimately, for us to go to the ballot at a certain point and vote about a united Ireland in a border poll. That is what we are working towards. The dialogue and the work around it need to be done. While I recognise the good work of the shared island initiative and the work that is done by this Government, I do not think it is yet facilitating the kind of dialogue, the kind of debate and the kind of very clear, prescient work that is described in this legislation.

As Social Democrats, what we see in this whole debate about constitutional change is the opportunity. In a lot of the discussions I have been a part of recently - Deputy Mac Lochlainn mentioned the recent SDLP conference which I attended and spoke at - there is so much excitement around that opportunity. There is a democratic opportunity for us to look at how we govern this country and see the improvements that we can make through the opportunities we are going to get through this constitutional dialogue. If we want people to get behind this discussion and be a part of the dialogue, we have to translate it into what it is going to mean for their lives. Where we do have North-South co-operation, it is always of benefit to the communities that it serves. We see this in the formal ways in which those in the medical profession on both sides of the Border work together to provide critical care when people need it. We need to formalise more and more of that. We also need to help people understand that we will be so much better off if we can have these conversations, as an island.

As I said at the outset, we need to do this from the bottom up. We need to make sure that we are not just coming at the population with a blueprint, but instead facilitating that dialogue from the outset. That is why the Green Paper facilitates the dialogue here. The citizens' assembly, and the very heavy emphasis on consultation within this, is also a huge part of it. One of the groups that comes up a lot within those recent discussions is the unionist community in Northern Ireland. Again, I think that is done in a respectful way in this legislation, but it is absolutely central to the conversations that we are going to have. What does a united Ireland look like? What does constitutional discussion look like for people within the unionist community? All of that, to my mind, is facilitated by this legislation, which is why we will be supporting it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. There are a lot of important aspects to this that merit serious engagement. I reiterate my colleague's call on the Government to seriously engage with this. I do not believe its response was a serious engagement. If we are serious about a united Ireland, it will take a massive amount of work on inclusion and engagement and that work has to start now. While the Government has set out the different initiatives it has taken, it is clearly not substantive in engaging all communities and offering a pathway forward.

For us in the Social Democrats, we believe that all communities must be engaged. Our vision for how we engage them is a vision of a united Ireland that is a social democratic Ireland, a new republic, where we are united on this island in ending child poverty, ending homelessness and ensuring everyone can have an affordable life, where young people can afford to buy or rent an affordable home, where disadvantaged communities across this island can have safe spaces, where children can play in decent playgrounds and sports facilities and where, whether they are unionists or nationalists, in the South or the North, everyone can live a life with dignity. What we believe in is a social democratic republicanism that wants to build a social democratic Ireland that radically reduces inequalities across this island, where everyone can live a decent life. We want to see a vision for a united Ireland that is a welcoming Ireland, inclusive of all communities - new Irish, immigrants, old Irish, unionist and nationalist.

Teastaíonn ó na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta Éire aontaithe a fheiceáil, is í sin, Éire agus Poblacht nua ina bhfuilimid aontaithe ar an oileán seo chun deireadh a chur le bochtaineacht leanaí agus easpa dídine agus chun a chinntiú gur féidir le gach duine saol inacmhainne a chaitheamh.

8 o'clock

We all believe that the work and process towards a united Ireland must be founded on the values that we want to see in the new island, namely, respect for everyone, inclusion of all communities, equality and human rights and, fundamentally, the belief in the decency and dignity of all. To do that will require changing the North and South in terms of how our economies and societies are structured. The scale of poverty in the North and South, including child poverty, is unacceptable. No one wants to see that.

Building towards and working for a united Ireland has to involve how we solve these fundamental problems that are rupturing the social contract, North and South, and leading to further division and hate and a decline in social cohesion. We believe in building a united Ireland and putting these issues to the core of that can create a fair united Ireland for all of us where all communities are included.

Deputy Jen Cummins: It is with great pleasure that I speak about this Bill. I congratulate Sinn Féin on the work it has done in putting the Bill forward. It is a very timely conversation. Preparations for a united Ireland need to start. It needs to be respectful, evidence-based and inclusive. The Social Democrats have called on the Government to establish formal structures to examine the practical implications for reunification. In order to have genuinely inclusive and respectful dialogue, it is vital that there is a framework to establish that evidence. The evidence will come from the establishment of a citizens' assembly or other such structured consultation.

In my brief of further and higher education, it is great to see the shared Ireland initiative bringing so much positivity to education on the island of Ireland. The measures include the creative connections programme, the RISE programme and the brilliantly named t-rex programme, which have the objective of improving educational attainment, reducing disadvantage, increasing collaboration between schools and third level institutions, encouraging student exchanges and building relationships between people across communities and jurisdictions. I am sure that is replicated in other areas which receive funding.

When I was preparing to speak, I did not think it was very useful to use this debate as a political game. This is not a political game. It is an important issue. The respect and inclusion that I spoke about start in this House. Playing politics with this issue is not acceptable. It is disrespectful to the people who have lived through trauma on this island because of that history. We need to get a grip. We all need to be part of the conversation. Playing politics and bouncing a ball from one side to the other is really unhelpful.

I grew up in a mixed household. I grew up in a household with one Republican and one person who just wanted peace. My dad grew up in a mixed household. My grandmother was the daughter of a British navy man and was Protestant and my grandfather was a Catholic man from Cork who fought in the IRA during the War of Independence and the Civil War. My family is a mixed family. There are lots of mixes.

There are lots of things we need to do, but what we do not need to do in this House is spend our time bouncing ideas around and dancing on the head of a pin in talking about Northern Ireland, the Republic, a united Ireland or who owns the idea. It does not matter who owns the idea. The fact of the matter is that we need a united Ireland. That is what we have all said we want. However, if we are dancing on the head of a pin and deciding who owns it and whose great idea it was or which Bill it is or is not, that is a waste of time and excludes people. It is no example to the people we are trying to encourage to have an inclusive, evidence-based and respectful dialogue. I request that people try to work together in this House and that we go outside it to try to have dialogue that is inclusive and respectful of everybody.

Deputy Duncan Smith: This is a welcome Bill and our thanks go to Sinn Féin for bringing it forward for discussion. It is not just a timely opportunity for the House to discuss the fundamental issue of Irish unity, but a chance for us and the Government to finally get serious on the important work of preparing for constitutional change. It has been clear for some years that not moving forward with urgency just will not cut it. There is a job of work to be done and this Bill sets out a path for beginning to get that work under way.

A Green Paper, a constitutional convention and proper cross-community consultation, North and South, are all steps we in the Labour Party have repeatedly called for over recent years, as it has become increasingly clear that this conversation is happening with or without the Government taking the lead. The decade since Brexit has seen the question of unity moving up the public agenda. That is a reality that has perhaps ebbed and flowed over those years, but it is crystal-clear that it is not going away.

In May, an Amárach poll from European Movement Ireland indicated that if a referendum on a united Ireland was held tomorrow in the EU, 59% in the Republic would vote in favour and 22% against, with 62% in favour in the North and 29% against. The prospect of a Nigel Farage-led government in London after the next UK general election, today's theatrics notwithstanding, would shift the parameters yet again.

We have heard calls to simply ignore the issue. Last year, the UK Secretary of State told us there was no appetite for constitutional change in Northern Ireland, but putting our heads in the sand is simply not an option. We need our Government to take the lead on these discussions and to be the responsible broker needed for the necessary preparations to take place. It is time for the difficult work of preparing for unity to begin in earnest.

We have seen the perils of running a referendum hastily. To proceed without the hard work of planning and debate would be deeply misguided. That is precisely why it is so important that we begin the process now of preparing for a united Ireland. We need a clear timetable to allow for the development of green and white papers, to allow the work of citizens' assemblies to take place and to allow for the conversations and debates that need to happen across our island.

The measures in the Bill are to be very much welcomed as common sense steps towards a responsible and structured process of preparation. It almost goes without saying that what is in play in this debate is not taken lightly. The deep questions that are in play when it comes to constitutional change get to the very heart of who we are as a people, how we want to live and what shape our country and society will take. These questions are, of course, shaped by history, deeply held identities and people's lived experience over the last century, North and South. We should always be sensitive and understanding to those realities. These are profoundly forward-looking questions of the future.

The conversation about Irish unity cannot be some hide-bound debate about an Ireland of the last century. It must be focused on a new Ireland that is not just united but is equal and fair for all its citizens. We all know the Ireland of 2026, North and South, has changed deeply from that of 1998. It is a vastly more diverse and more pluralist society. It is larger in population terms, with larger economies, North and South. It is more engaged and intertwined with the rest of the world. In many ways, it is a less equal society, with regional inequality growing significantly, North and South, since the Agreement. As our economies have grown, too many of our citizens have continually been left behind. That is not an experience unique to this island over the past number of decades, but we have a unique opportunity to correct our course with the opportunities of a new Ireland. There needs to be a conversation about how best we build a real republic across the island, not just built on the values of equality and pluralism but acting on those values and seeing them through in a way that delivers ordinary people.

The Ireland of 2026 is no longer one of the orange and green. It is home to mixed identities across these islands and beyond, identities that would have seemed unimaginable only a couple of generations ago. I believe that is something to be celebrated and protected, not just from those who would pull us backwards to a regressive and narrow vision of Irishness or Britishness, but from the risks that an unprepared and rushed unity debate would pose to that pluralist Ireland.

As we progress towards unity, we cannot allow ourselves to be drawn back to the lazy destructive binaries of the past. Crucially, we can never return to the normalised violence of the last century. Moving, removing or maintaining any border on this island can never come at the price of a human life. We in the Labour Party want a new united Ireland and we are unapologetic about that, but, vitally, we want to see real, deep and difficult preparatory work get under way.

The conversation is happening. To ignore it now is irresponsible and impossible. The Government, as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, has to play a leading role in this. The welcome work of the Taoiseach's shared island unit has been positive, but the time has come for more substantial preparations for change. This Bill, calling for a citizens' assembly and a Green Paper, sets out a roadmap for preparation that we can all support. I urge the Government to rethink its position and back it.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. I sincerely commend the Taoiseach and Government on the shared island initiative. It is important and cannot be understated. It involves €1 billion of capital funding and includes important projects such as the Narrow Water bridge and the new Enterprise fleet. I commend the work the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, has done over many years, what I call the quiet work of diplomacy and dialogue in terms of British-Irish relations.

I fully support the Bill.

The future of this island must be built on the bedrock of the Good Friday Agreement, on consent and on respect for diversity. I welcome the debate on constitutional change. In fact, we have already called for a timeline for a referendum. This Bill is a step in the right direction but we need to plan in an orderly, inclusive and democratic manner for constitutional change. It cannot just be about swapping flags and moving border posts. We must plan for a new and agreed Ireland that delivers a better quality of life for us all. I have in mind the famous statement by John Hume about the will of the Northern majority and the need for a new Ireland built on the principle of consent.

If we are going to write Green Papers and convene citizens' assemblies, they cannot become abstract talking shops. We must address the material realities of working-class people North and South. A truly united Ireland must mean the best of both jurisdictions. We need a unified universal healthcare system that is free at the point of delivery. The NHS model in the North could be combined with the best of Sláintecare. We need an all-Ireland housing strategy that treats shelter as a fundamental human right. We need strong statutory protections for workers' rights, collective bargaining and fair wages across both jurisdictions. We need a real plan for regional development. We cannot have a situation where investment gets sucked into Dublin and Belfast. Places like Limerick, Derry, Cork and Galway must feel the benefit of such investment.

The process must be inclusive. A new Ireland cannot simply be based on a sectarian headcount that isolates or alienates the unionist community. It must be built on the principle of an agreed Ireland in which all identities, traditions and minorities are welcomed and valued. We need to get on with the groundwork and build the legal frameworks for a referendum. We must lay the foundations for an Ireland free from poverty and homelessness and rooted in equality for everyone regardless of who they are and where they come from.

As a proud Irish republican and a united Irishman, I believe change is within our grasp. Many people thought we would never achieve peace on this island. We have done that. As somebody who regularly visits the North, I think Belfast is a fantastic city, whether it is the beauty of the Botanic Gardens or the vibrant atmosphere of the Cathedral Quarter. Equally, Derry is a fantastic place, especially at Hallowe'en. In fact, it has the largest Hallowe'en festival in Europe and was voted by *USA Today* as the best Hallowe'en destination in the world. Having gone there for Hallowe'en last year, I really encourage anybody who has not been to Derry to visit it. In addition, the Causeway Coastal Route is one of the most beautiful places in the world. Let us imagine the nation we could build if we could marry the beauty and wonder of those places with that of places like Cork, Limerick, Galway, Clare and the Wild Atlantic Way. I have a special affinity to Derry because I think it has much in common with Limerick city, which I represent. Both places have suffered from stigma, stereotyping and violence. Both are built around huge, sweeping rivers. I have seen how both cities have come on so much. They are now beautiful, vibrant and edgy places with so much heart and soul.

Our Republic is unfinished because of partition. It is an arbitrary, artificial and crude separation of a people. We must work together to reunite our people. As John Hume said, "You can't eat a flag". We need to win hearts and minds. Achieving Irish unity is more than just a geographical or political construct. We have so much more in common on this island than that which divides us. We must come together in a new spirit of inclusion and tolerance and we must do so under the umbrella of the greatest peace project in the world, namely, the European Union. I sincerely urge the Government not to block this important work. Letting the Bill go to Committee Stage would allow us to begin that work. We can work out the timelines, which are fairly arbitrary. My party leader brought forward a Bill last week to which the Government made a timed amendment. We were not particularly happy about that but it is something that could work with this Bill.

I was born in 1993. I am a child of the Good Friday Agreement. I never knew violence on this island, and thank God for that, but I firmly and sincerely believe that our Republic is incomplete. This Bill charts a pathway to a better, brighter future. I urge the Government to work with the Opposition on it, let it go to Committee Stage and let us lay the groundwork and start to prepare for bringing all our people together in the spirit of an inclusive new Ireland.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Down the centuries, generations of Irish men and women espoused the desire for a 32-county independent sovereign republic. As far back as the 1790s, Theobald Wolfe Tone, the father of Irish republicanism, focused on a vision of complete separation from Britain, the elimination of sectarian divisions and the unity of Catholic, Protestant and dissenter under the common name of "Irishmen". He wanted to see a restructuring of society whereby power would be wielded by the people rather than by the landed gentry.

The policies and ideas of Tone and the United Irishmen fanned the flames of rebellions after 1798. Those rebellions included Robert Emmet's attempt in 1803. The Young Ireland rebellion of 1848 was a very Tipperary-based action, the setting of which was the Widow McCormack's house near the village of Ballingarry in south Tipperary. Four of the leaders of that rebellion, William Smith O'Brien, Thomas Francis Meagher, Terence Bellew MacManus and Patrick O'Donoghue, were tried at Clonmel Courthouse, convicted and sentenced to death, with that sentence later commuted to transportation. The Fenian rising of 1867 came next. It produced a very radical manifesto declaring an Irish republic nearly 50 years before the 1916 Proclamation. That manifesto was a progressive document advocating separation of church and state, universal suffrage and the restoration of land to the people.

Then came the 1916 Rising, which was deeply rooted in the Fenian tradition. The rebels were joined by James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army, the aim of which was the creation of a 32-county socialist workers' republic. In his essay "Socialism and Nationalism", Connolly wrote: "If you remove the English Army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts will be in vain." How right he was.

Then we had the War of Independence, which, again, was very much Tipperary driven. The Soloheadbeg ambush of 21 January 1919 was the first military action of the war, led by the Tipperary big four of Robinson, Treacy, Breen and Hogan.

All of those actions, from 1798 onwards, were predicated on the demand for at least a 32-county independent sovereign republic. James Connolly, writing in the *Irish Worker* in 1914 in reaction to partition proposals at the time, said partition would create "a carnival of reaction" North and South. He saw partition as a reactionary device to divide the Irish working class. Again, how right he was.

This Bill requires the Government to prepare and publish a Green Paper on Irish unity, convene a citizens' assembly, engage with communities and provide regular updates to the Oireachtas. Reports, information and discussions can, of course, be helpful. However, the Bill is framed in the context of a border poll, with separate polls on each side of the Border. That is not a national referendum. Even the decision to hold such a poll is solely the prerogative of Britain and the British Secretary of State for the North. The current Secretary of State, by the way, has already said there is no prospect of a border poll for generations to come. We must not allow Britain to decide our future. I have no confidence that the strategy outlined in this Bill will lead to a united Ireland. We must develop a 32-county campaign for an all-Ireland referendum on Irish unity.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy McDonald for bringing forward this Bill. Having consulted with my colleague, the leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland, Mal O'Hara, I will support the Bill on Second Stage to allow this debate to continue. My support on this Stage should not be conflated with endorsement of any one party's framing of the constitutional issue. That issue is bigger than us all and everybody, from the ground up, must be involved in the conversation.

A grassroots approach to ensuring that the voices of all communities are adequately heard and represented is essential in planning for any potential change. Any such planning must also include unequivocal support for the Good Friday Agreement in its entirety. The consent

principle is non-negotiable and any future constitutional change must take place strictly within the agreement's existing voting and consent mechanism. There should be no suggestion of altering or diluting these safeguards. The memory of the Troubles remains a fresh wound in the minds of many and in order to ensure any peaceful outcome or transition, all citizens must be treated equally and given their say. That would be best done by consulting people directly through a citizens' assembly, as is proposed by this Bill, and also in the recommendations of the 2024 report from the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Green Party is an all-island one. We get votes in Bangor and Blanchardstown, Larne and Lismore, Newtonards and Navan. As voters in Northern Ireland look to alternatives to the sectarian policies that have kept Stormont from governing effectively, my colleagues in the Green Party Northern Ireland are seeing increasing support across all communities. Some of the most pressing issues of our time, such as energy and climate, are ones that cannot be contained within borders. The island of Ireland is a single, biodiverse unit and the Green Party has consistently advocated for increased co-operation across a range of issues.

With that in mind, any proposed Green Paper should explicitly address issues that affect everybody, irrespective of their constitutional preference. Climate and nature, renewable energy systems, water and environmental protection, tackling poverty, protecting human rights and improved cross-Border public services are practical, all-island challenges and they require that level of co-operation, irrespective of future constitutional arrangements.

The constitutional change must be codesigned with all sides in Northern Ireland's communities involved. It cannot be confined to the territorial question alone; it should examine democratic reform, governance and institutional design. The Green Party believes that the question of institutional design is fundamental. To date, the Assembly in Northern Ireland has only passed 15 Bill in its 2022-2027 mandate. The current system is not serving the people of Northern Ireland.

We will be supporting this Bill today. Sensible preparation should not be mistaken, however, for advocating a pre-determined constitutional outcome. A real opportunity exists now to build on existing work and to have detailed, respectful conversations on these issues. I hope that the Government will pay real attention to this Bill and move to set up the frameworks that will support this historic dialogue.

Deputy Brian Stanley: On a point of order, there is no senior Minister present at the moment for this debate. It is a poor sign of how Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael treat this subject. The national reunification of the territory needs to be made a priority. It has been 105 years since partition which was created by Britain and created an artificial, sectarian state, which has held back this country, economically, socially and politically for far too long. While I welcome the proposals to move forward on reunification, this Bill is very minimalist and limited. Much more is required than a Green Paper and a citizens' assembly, 105 years after partition. It has been over 28 years since the Good Friday Agreement, which provides for the holding of a referendum on national reunification. Those of us who believe in a united Ireland - and some of us have spent all our adult lives working for a 32-county republic - and those in Fianna Fáil who say they believe in it should step up matters a couple of gears. We need to build a republic where workers and families have their fair share and good public services.

The most recent opinion polls show that an increasing number of people North and South see the merits of national reunification. The question now is not can we afford it but can we afford not to reunify the national territory. More and more, the economics of it stack up and make sense.

As a small country of just over 7 million people on the north-western flank of Europe, it makes absolutely no economic, social or political sense to continue with a Border that was imposed under threat of immediate and terrible war by a foreign state. There is simply no logic to having 75% of the country in the European Union and the remainder of it excluded. Brexit has exposed the difficulties with that and how ridiculous it is. While the Six Counties remained - just about - in the EU Single Market for trade in goods, they are excluded from the EU and the Single Market in every other way, including having no representation in the European Parliament. I have not heard any party, including the largest Opposition party, raising this, which is surprising. There is no logic to having two currencies, two revenue systems, two sets of Government Departments - 14 in total working back to back - two police services, two transport systems and so on. All of this works against efficiency, co-ordination and economies of scale.

A citizens' assembly is a very limited proposal. While I will be supporting the Bill, what we should have is a commission on the future of the nation. This should be representative of the Assembly and the Dáil. All parties, North and South, including the significant number of Independent MLAs and TDs, should have a representative on it. It should hold hearings with various sectors, such as the trade union movement; the agriculture sector; the health sector, North and South, with the aim of creating an all-Ireland national health system; environmental lobbies; local councillors and local government; education; the housing sector; transport; energy and so on. This would be with a view to increasing co-operation in all these areas. We do not need to wait for a Green Paper or a citizens' assembly for this. The Government and all of us, North and South, should be working towards that now.

While some work has been done on co-operation, such as on the Narrow Water Bridge, moves towards getting the A5 in place at last and the Ulster Canal, that has to be accelerated, along with a whole lot of other areas, to the benefit of people, North and South.

Six all-Ireland bodies were created under the Good Friday Agreement: Waterways Ireland; the Food Safety Promotion Board; InterTradeIreland; An Foras Teanga; Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission and the Special European Union Programmes Body. There is provision for others to be created and this should be pursued. What is the Government doing about it? It does not even have a senior Minister here tonight, never mind the Taoiseach, to listen to this debate.

Deputy Mary Butler: He just left.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The all-Ireland energy system is an area for immediate co-operation and priority, in particular in the area of renewables. The North-South Interconnector should not be delayed any further. Parties that say they are for a united Ireland cannot have it both ways, on the one hand championing a united Ireland and on the other hand frustrating the construction of this vital North-South infrastructure.

A reunified Ireland has to be based on social justice, where workers and families are protected, with good public services in an inclusive republic. It has to be the republic of Fintan Lalor and Connolly more so than the republic of Griffith. It is long past time and we need to move it on and get on with it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo. Self determination is the most important political and democratic right. We in Ireland have learned that lesson hard. London rule has cost this country dearly. Millions of Irish lives have been lost through famines and wars and millions of people have been forced to emigrate as a result of that right. In case anybody has forgotten, Brexit has reminded us again. It proved without a shadow of a doubt that London does not give a tuppenny damn about the North of Ireland. The North of Ireland was the last thing on the minds of the little Englanders who pushed for Brexit. I have visited the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Westminster many times. Members have admitted to me that the fastest way to clear the floor of the House of Commons is to call for a debate about the North of Ireland. That has a real cost, with the economy in the North stagnant, because of the lack of self determination. Public services are falling apart at the moment because of that lack of self determination. Unity would radically increase the welfare of everybody on this island. The people of Newry are just as bright as the people of Donegal, the people of Dungannon are just as hard-working as the people of Monaghan and the people of Derry are just as enterprising as the people of Letterkenny. The key difference is the issue of self determination.

I had the honour of researching a report for the enterprise committee in 2018. This was the first ever report on the all-island economy since partition. I interviewed hundreds of people from farmers to trade unionists and from all different backgrounds. All of those individuals agreed with me that if we planned, funded and delivered services together, they would simply be better, more efficient services.

Irish unity is a clear pillar of Aontú.

We are a practical united Ireland party. We believe the process should start now. We do not even have to wait for a referendum to start that process.

The Border is like a wall with 1,000 blocks. Each of those blocks is a blockage to services on an all-Ireland basis. Each time we join up those services on both sides of the island, we take down a block, which reduces the height of the wall, improves people's lives and then makes unity easier on that sunny day.

Catherine Sherry was married with three children just north of the Border. She was diagnosed with lymphoma in September 2024 at the age of 42. Treatment was not available to her in the North. It was available in Dublin but, despite living 90 minutes away, she was not allowed to use it. Very ill, very sick and very weak, she was forced to leave her family and take treatment in London, where she died. Imagine if we had a simple policy where you got treatment in the hospital closest to you. Imagine the difference that would make in people's lives. That is the type of work we should do now. If Aontú had ministries in the Assembly in the North, we would work with our counterparts in the South in systematically going through each department to start to equalise services North and South. We welcome this Bill but we do not think a citizens' assembly is enough. We believe there is a need for a new Ireland forum

where all the political parties and all of civic society gets together to discuss what is needed for this particular plan.

Micheál Martin often says reconciliation has to happen before unity. What evidence does he have that reconciliation is more likely in a partitioned state than in a united Ireland state? Reconciliation has pretty much happened in the South and it still has not happened in the North because of that partition. Micheál Martin's position on a united Ireland is the most un-Fianna Fáil position on that issue of all Fianna Fáil leaders. The question is how a person so opposed to those key Fianna Fáil values could ever have become leader of Fianna Fáil.

Liam Mellows once said that if Ireland was partitioned, there would arise two establishments on both sides of the Border that would depend on the Border for their power. Sadly, Mellows was right. Micheál Martin's position is guided not by what is good for this country but what is good for his narrow, electoral interests.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: As I was reading through the entire Bill earlier today and over the weekend, memories started flooding back into my mind, stories of my grandparents, their parents, the republican struggles and the stories of their involvement in republicanism in Cork. In the house where I grew up, The Wolfe Tones was the only record played on a regular basis.

I welcome this Bill. I truly do because it has merit. There are problems with it. There are little bits and pieces that need tweaking. I appeal to the Government to have an open vote on this and to allow it to proceed to the next Stage so that it can be tweaked. While the Bill acknowledges self-determination, which is incredibly important, what is seriously missing is costing, funding and how we are going to do this. There are questions, which many Members of the House have raised, about whether a citizens' assembly is the right place to do it. Do we need a new structure?

Certainly, there is something radically wrong when our focus in this country, as an entire House, is not on self-determination and a united Ireland. That should always be the focus of this House. Let us all reflect on why we joined our political parties and got involved in politics on the first day. Whether we believe in left, right, centre or whatever, we are all born with a love for our country, and our country is still divided to this day. It is a very new State. Our work in this House should always reflect and look at the idea of a united Ireland. That should always be our number one focus. We have moved away from that in the last number of years. Some politicians and some people in leadership roles have almost made it seem like a dirty word.

I have to thank Sinn Féin, in fairness to them. There are many things I disagree with them on but, in fairness, let us get this focus back again. Let us talk about self-determination, let us run with it and let us unite and work together. Let us move this in the right direction. Let us all thrash it out and say, "I don't think you're right on this" or "I don't think you're right on that", or "I think we need to cost this" or "I think we need to do that." Let us all focus together in this House.

That is one thing that could unite the entire House: self-determination and uniting this country finally, recognising the work of those who died under our flag, and who had died previously trying to fly that flag and said it was a fight worth dying for. It is very important that we do that today. As I said, I do not overly agree with everything in the Bill, but I think it

is a step in the right direction. I applaud my colleagues in Sinn Féin for bringing this to the House. We spend a lot of time talking in this House about issues we will never solve, such as international issues or we talk about a president here or there or we say this, that and the other about things we cannot affect or where we cannot make the change. This is something real and tangible that we can make the changes in.

We need to go forward. We need to go to Committee Stage and we all need to feed in and sail the boat in the right direction. To my mind, the right direction has always been towards a united Ireland.

Deputy Michael Collins: I agree with the Bill and I thank Sinn Féin for putting it forward. However, when people come to my clinics in Cork, they are not talking to me about Green Papers, citizens' assemblies or constitutional reports. They are talking about trying to get a roof over their heads. They are talking about waiting months and years for healthcare. They are talking about crime in their communities, the cost of running a family car and the pressure that ordinary working people and small businesses are under every single day. That is the reality of life for people right across Ireland.

Independent Ireland fully supports the Good Friday Agreement and the principle of consent. That principle has helped delivered peace on this island and any future constitutional change can only ever happen with the consent of the people North and South. Nobody should have any difficulty with governments planning ahead. Good governments are supposed to plan. They are supposed to examine challenges and opportunities that may arise in the future, but what concern me are priorities. The Government has a habit of producing reports, launching consultations and establishing assemblies while the everyday problems facing ordinary, hard-working people are left unresolved. The public are entitled to ask where the same urgency is when it comes to housing. Where is the same urgency when it comes to healthcare? Where is the same urgency when it comes to protecting our communities and supporting family farms, fishing communities and small businesses?

If this Bill proceeds, it must be done properly. Any discussion about the future of this island must involve everyone. It cannot become an echo chamber where people only hear views they agree with. All communities must be heard. Those who favour constitutional change must be heard, as must those who have concerns. Respect is absolutely essential. If people are serious about reconciliation, they have to be prepared to listen to views they may not even like.

Before any further steps are taken, the people deserve honest answers to practical questions. What would this mean economically? What would it mean for healthcare, taxation, policing, public services and the cost to the taxpayer? These are not side issues. They are the issues that matter to ordinary, hard-working families. Independent Ireland believes in common-sense politics. We believe in dealing with realities, not slogans. We believe in careful planning but we also believe that planning for tomorrow cannot come at the expense of dealing with the problems of today. While we welcome sensible preparation and informed discussion, we will be looking carefully at how public money is spent, how communities are consulted and whether the Government can demonstrate the same commitment to solving the crisis that people are facing right now. At the end of the day, people want delivery. They want houses built, they want hospital waiting lists reduced, they want safer communities and they want a Government

that is focused on the challenges in front of it today, while responsibly preparing for whatever tomorrow may bring.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill and giving us the chance to discuss the possibility of a united Ireland. Since I was a young fella, all I ever heard was that was what we needed and that we could not stop until it was achieved. There is so much involved in this. As I grew up, I saw the Troubles of the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties. Every morning on the news you heard how many people had been killed during the night. There was The Miami Showband and all the people from the different sides killed in the mayhem, murder and slaughter every day.

We are glad the Good Friday Agreement has moved us away from that, and I want to thank all those who created the environment where people North and South can at least go to work every day, feed their families and continue with a normal life.

I can see it even here. We must be united here in this Chamber for a start, each and every one of us. We cannot be throwing Scud missiles across the Chamber at each other. We need to have a united front. This is a serious business.

We need to know where this will lead us. We know the problems that we have here in the Twenty-Six Counties with housing, the cost of living, energy prices and all the different things. What will happen? We need to know what the end result will be and what we will achieve. Where will England be? I do not hear them saying anything about it. We must respect the unionists' views as well. They were here in the South of Ireland and they are working with us now. They are very welcome here and we appreciate them for the way they carry on their work and living normal lives. We want that for the people of the North of Ireland as well but we must have the conversation as to what will be the story for all the different things.

We must be united in this Chamber and the people of the Twenty-Six Counties must, by and large, be in favour of reunification. We need to hear their views. There is so much we could be doing as it is. We should be inviting people from the Northern Assembly down here - its elected members. Whether it is with local government or the UK Government, we should have more interaction to hear and sense their concerns so we can move halfway. We must go halfway to meet everyone if we are to achieve agreement.

I think a vote tonight is a bit premature. We should work more together and have more discussion rather than falling out with each other now. It can be achieved if we all work together and provide a united front.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill, for the event in the audiovisual room today and for making us feel welcome. Peace and partnership on this island was not built around a single document, declaration or day but as a gradual process of dialogue, agreements and framework-building, a process that demonstrated time and again that neither violence nor coercion would ever unite us.

There is no doubt in my mind that we are living in a period of constitutional reappraisal but it has been decisions taken in Britain, not on this island, that have brought constitutional questions back to the forefront of public debate. If there is to be another chapter in the constitutional story of this island, it should not be driven by decisions taken elsewhere. It

should be shaped here as an expression of the hopes, ambitions and aspirations of the people who share this island.

The legitimate questions many people in Northern Ireland are asking about the future cannot be ignored, their frustration with repeated political stalemate and the impact Brexit has had on how they see their place in these islands and in Europe. If you are ask people to consider constitutional change, whether they live in Castleknock or Castlederg, we cannot speak only to their sense of identity or longing but to their everyday lives, jobs, healthcare, pensions, their children's education and their economic security. The lesson of the peace process is not simply that an agreement was reached but how an agreement was reached - patient dialogue, partnership and building confidence before asking people to make profound constitutional choices.

I served on the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement with some of my colleagues here today, whose work is referenced in this Bill, the recommendations of which I agree with. They were much broader than this Bill suggests, however, which is why it reached consensus. The committee recognised the scale of preparing for constitutional change - not simply ending partition but imagining how a new and agreed Ireland might work in practice. I want us to be true to that work.

This Bill proposes an 18-month consultation period to produce a Green Paper, followed by a citizens' assembly, within a fixed statutory timeline. I understand the desire to begin preparing. I share that impatience. I want us to work towards a Green Paper together but I do not believe we strengthen that preparation by placing deadlines on it, nor do I believe that a citizens' assembly - valuable though that model has been on other issues - can by itself shape the future constitutional settlement of an entire island. The conversation must be broader. It must invite new ideas and voices and every tradition to help shape what a new and agreed Ireland could become, not through deadlines but dialogue because that is what has worked before. It is about working in partnership and with respect. I want to work with everyone in this House to do that.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I, too, welcome this debate. It is an important discussion to have in this House around what possible future constitutional arrangements we can have on this island. It is important that we set out the vision for all of the people on this island and the opportunities that may present.

I sometimes think this debate can be couched in very simplistic language. A new Irish arrangement is not simply going to be a case of people marching up to Stormont and planting a tricolour in front of that building. Indeed, the unity we may see on this island will not be similar to what we saw in Germany in 1990. In many ways, for the new nation I believe we will be building, we will need to look at the South African experience, where we will be bringing together people with very diverse views and backgrounds but shaping a new nation and seeking ways in which a common identity can be built.

Whatever happens in the context of the 8 million or so people living on this island, there will be 1 million who will still be very strong in their British identity, in some way, and there will be about 750,000 who are neither green nor orange and who have come from outside of these islands to make this their home. It is critically important that we ensure every individual and citizen who lives on these islands feels part of whatever new arrangement we intend to

build. That means that everything needs to be on the table. It will mean, for those of us in the South, facing up to some very uncomfortable questions but it is important that we do that.

I share Deputy Currie's concern about very strict timelines. There will be some people who will be able to move much more quickly than others. There will be others for whom it will take time to present but the lesson we have learned from any time there has been a referendum held on these islands, either here in the South or with Brexit or Scotland, is that if we do not know all the facts and if all issues are not explored in great detail, then there will naturally be a conservatism and a fear among our people. I do not want to wait to see when in the opinion of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland a majority may exist. If there is agreement, we should be moving towards something where there is a general consensus that exists on this island. As somebody who campaigned on both sides of the Border for the Good Friday Agreement as a student, one of things that inspired me about that was listening to people from all communities who spoke about hope, and how they were able to feel that they were part of this new arrangement. Yes, there were challenges and the Good Friday Agreement asked many very awkward questions but key to, and underlining that, was hope.

As part of this discussion, what we have got to ensure is that for all sectors of our communities, there is that hope and a sense of building that shared identity and, I believe, a common home in Europe.

The role of the European Union should not be understated.

I commend the work of the shared island unit, but I will outline a concern I have. Around the time of the Good Friday Agreement and soon after it, some 20 or 25 years ago, there were far more cross-Border exchanges going on than there are now among community, youth, sporting and cultural groups. There were far more east-west exchanges happening at the time as well. Those exchanges are not happening to the same extent. I also find it bizarre meeting young people in my constituency who have travelled all over Europe and the world, but have never been to the North. We need to explore to a far greater extent how we can exchange and get groups of people on this island and these islands working closer together. This is a welcome debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I welcome the opportunity to deliver a closing statement on this Bill on behalf of the Government. I thank colleagues from all sides of the House for their contributions to today's discussion. Let me begin by reiterating our shared commitment to unity on this island. For the record, I come from a very strong Fenian and republican tradition. My grandfather on my father's side, Felix Feehan from Cullyhanna, County Armagh, was a republican. After partition, he ended up running a bakery in Tubbercurry, County Sligo. My grandfather on my mother's side, James Feely, was the commander of the IRA in north Roscommon. He was imprisoned in the War of Independence and released under the Anglo-Irish Treaty. He subsequently became a Sinn Féin councillor and one of the first gardaí síochána.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, signed by the Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, fundamentally changed Anglo-Irish relations by creating a framework that recognised both nationalist and unionist identities. It paved the way for the Good Friday Agreement, which brought peace and prosperity to our island. We remain

determined to realise the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement. The enduring peace it has brought to this island still needs to be protected, and the potential it provides for the unity of our people needs to be realised. It is the Government's view that it will only be realised through focus on and investment in reconciliation.

That is why reconciliation is at the heart of the programme for Government. There is no single, one-off act we can do as a Government, Parliament or even as a nation to unify the people of this island. Like anything complex or worth doing, such an endeavour can only be achieved through hard work and patience, honest discussions and people-to-people contact, listening to the sincerely held views of all communities on this island and genuinely cherishing all traditions in their riches and diversity. As the Taoiseach said last week, this requires a hard slog. This is not only Government policy; it is a lesson we have all learned from our history. Too often in our past, it has been easy to be convinced by the righteousness of our beliefs and to fail to properly engage with the views of others.

Twenty-eight years after the transformational endorsement of the Good Friday Agreement by the people North and South, we are in a different place, which all of us in this Chamber want to see. We can strive for inclusiveness and a connected island for all communities, where there is room for a wide variety and diversity of views, traditions and identities. This is what is guiding the Government's current approach, whether through North-South co-operation, our determination to address the legacy of the Troubles, the Government's reconciliation fund or the shared island initiative.

The reconciliation fund has been a flagship programme in the Department of foreign affairs since the 1980s. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, launched a new reconciliation fund strategy in March of this year. The value of our investment through this reconciliation fund to date stands at over €8 million. It was just €2.7 million in 2018. Complementing this work within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is the shared island civic society fund, which has a budget of over €6 million for the 2025-27 period. It funds North-South co-operation and engagement through increased cross-Border civic society activity.

More broadly, the shared island initiative, established in 2020, is working and realising the promise of a more connected and reconciled future on this island. It is the most ambitious agenda set out by any Government in the history of the State to promote co-operation and understanding across this island. We are backing it with €2 billion through the shared island fund.

These are all examples of real, tangible projects that help bring the people of this island together and to allow people who live on one part of the island to more easily work in another, further enhancing the all-island community. This is real investment in the future. It is also the hard slog. We should not be afraid of it; rather, we should embrace it. We know that patience, persistence and relentless hard work pay off. We saw that in the 1980s with the Anglo-Irish Agreement. We also saw it - some of us lived it - with the Good Friday Agreement in the 1990s. These landmark achievements were built on years, if not decades, of painstaking behind-the-scenes work that rarely makes the headlines. It was never a question of rushing to the finish line; rather, it was a patient cultivation of relationships and connection. That is the work the Government is focused on, and I am very proud to support it this evening.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): I add my thanks to those of the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and recognise all Members who have spoken in this debate. No one who sits in this House can be indifferent to the question of our constitutional future or the aspiration in Bunreacht na hÉireann to unite all the people who share this island, recognising the diversity of identities and traditions. The Government is committed to the unity of the Irish people. We believe the way to achieve this is through a sustained focus on reconciliation, mutual respect, partnership and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in full.

Self-determination was exercised by the people North and South when they approved the Good Friday Agreement by referendum. That is the Government's framework for all our policies. Six days ago, we took up our Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the eighth time. The EU was vital in creating the conditions for the Good Friday Agreement. It has also been a vocal and steadfast supporter of reconciliation and prosperity on this island through the PEACE and PEACEPLUS programmes, with a total investment of €3.4 billion since 1995. That work continues to the present day. We are working closely with colleagues in Brussels, Belfast and London to develop a successor programme through to 2035 to underpin peace, progress and prosperity.

Through the shared island initiative, we are making the largest investment ever in North-South co-operation. I did not hear that mentioned much tonight. There is a commitment of €2 billion to strengthen connections across this island. That investment is improving transport links, supporting research and innovation and investing in education, enterprise, tourism and healthcare, including mental health. On three occasions, I have attended the North-South Ministerial Council and got to know a lot of my colleagues in Northern Ireland.

The Government has committed €600 million towards the upgrade of the A5 western transport corridor in Northern Ireland and €102 million for the Narrow Water Bridge project, while €58 million has been pledged by the Irish Government for Casement Park. Respite care for children at Daisy Lodge in Cong, County Mayo, has been facilitated. There has also been €30 million in funding for ports to support connectivity. We are committed to new and innovative approaches to deepening island-wide civic engagement on crucial dimensions of our heritage, society and future. At the shared island forum last week, the Taoiseach set out how the Shared Home Place programme is contributing to this.

As a Government, we are intensely aware of the need to address the legacy of the past. As the Taoiseach said last week, the continuing challenges of that legacy must be acknowledged. They impact individuals, families and communities across generations each and every day. Ireland and the UK have agreed a joint framework on legacy. The aim of this package is to secure truth, accountability and, to the best extent possible, justice. We are moving forward at pace with its implementation. We are drafting the legislation to implement our commitments under the joint framework. We will introduce it into the Oireachtas as soon as the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill is enacted in the UK. We have also met our commitment to facilitate and support the Omagh bombing inquiry.

I am a proud republican and member of Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Jesus Christ.

Deputy Mary Butler: I am vice-president of the party, a party born out of a national movement to achieve an independent Republic and unite Ireland. This question is complex and politically sensitive. It requires patience, partnership and enduring consent.

Article 3 of the Constitution, as amended by the Irish people after the Good Friday Agreement, states, “It is the firm will of the Irish nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions”.

9 o'clock

The Good Friday Agreement remains our North Star in terms of how we approach that work. Our commitment remains steadfast to partnership, equality, and mutual respect as the basis for all of our relationships across and between these islands. Ní neart go cur le chéile.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I listened to the Taoiseach’s speech earlier and I have to confess that I am still trying to figure out which Bill he was responding to because it certainly was not this one. It was the Taoiseach’s single transferable speech on this matter - familiar, hackneyed, complacent and unserious. It asked us to imagine a process much less careful and less thoughtful than what is proposed and to ignore the dynamics on the ground and the fact that this is a live debate, North and South, east and west and internationally. It seems that the only people who do not wish to participate in this debate are the Irish Government.

The Taoiseach has a vision of himself as patient and prudent. I consider that a fiction. On this issue, I consider it a grotesque fiction. In reality, the approach of the Irish Government tonight is to take no positive action to plan and prepare for Irish unity. Nobody is saying this is happening overnight. This is about the process and about understanding and answering all of the very questions the Taoiseach and other colleagues have posed. That is what this process is for. That is profoundly reckless, careless and unserious. We do not have to look far for the consequences of unplanned constitutional change.

Yet while failing to prepare and plan is reckless, a united Ireland is profoundly exciting. I believe in Irish unity because I believe it can transform Irish society and improve the lives of all of our people, North and South. I agree with all of what has been said regarding reconciliation and I want a united Ireland that respects all traditions and is generous. However, it is cloth-eared to suggest that planning for constitutional change in line with the Good Friday Agreement is in any way in conflict with that. I welcome the shared island initiative. That is a good and sensible thing but it is explicitly, in the Taoiseach’s own words, not a vehicle for planning constitutional change.

After listening to the speeches across the Chamber today and talking to colleagues, to be honest, the only conclusion I can arrive at is that we would not even have a division tonight, except for the views of one man.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I put it to Micheál Martin. This is the vehicle we have put forward for planning and preparing constitutional change. Where is his? If he is not going

to accept what we are bringing forward, what does he propose? He must show us that he is serious about planning, preparing and doing that work.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I am proud to be able to contribute to support this Bill, and that our leader, Mary Lou McDonald, brought this Bill forward. It is a Bill of hope in our future. It is about planning responsibly, producing a Green Paper, which is a report used to start a public discussion, and establishing a citizens' assembly so that people can have a fully informed, inclusive and respectful conversation about Irish unity.

Almost 30 years ago people from different political traditions came together through difficult and sometimes extremely intensive negotiations. They listened to one another and found common ground and out of that came the Good Friday Agreement. That agreement has changed lives. It gave people hope and a peaceful and democratic pathway to shape our constitutional future and it recognised that every voice matters and every identity deserves respect. The future of this island must always be decided by the people who share it. For me that hope is deeply personal. Having been born in Belfast, I have lost family and had family interned and tortured, so I know well what partition has done. We were made to feel we did not belong. We moved South and were told to go back where we belong. Am I not Irish? Where do I belong? I want to belong to an island where my family can share the same health service, education and currency and where no matter where you are born, your future is equal.

The conversation is already happening and no matter which way this vote goes, this will happen. We hear this in our communities and in workplaces and around kitchen tables across the land. Now is the time to prepare. We all have a responsibility to engage honestly and openly, and we need to listen to every voice and tradition. This is not about forcing a united Ireland on anyone but shaping a new Ireland together.

There are those here who call themselves republicans, who stand at the graves of our patriot dead claiming they want a united Ireland, who in their hearts believe in a united Ireland and who know the hope they give people when they talk about bringing about a united Ireland but who are the very people who may vote against a very simple thing - a plan and discussion for everyone on a united Ireland. I do not get this. What are they afraid of? If they are so concerned, they can bring it forward for amendments. Is it that they are letting one person who may well soon be consigned to episodes of "Reeling in the Years" ensure they vote against their very hearts? If that happens, how will they explain that to people in their constituencies, namely that they voted against them being able to make their voices heard? How will they stand at the next commemoration with a true speech? Will they then be claiming they are for a united Ireland but against having to plan or a discussion it?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank people for contributing to this very important debate on this very important landmark piece of legislation that, in essence, is very simple. This is simply about planning, preparation and dialogue in that very spirit of respect and inclusivity that has echoed across the Chamber this evening. That is it. That is all we are asking for. We are not asking for a predetermined outcome to the referendum or to rush headlong into anything. God knows that is not going to happen here. We are simply asking that we do the

work that needs to be done in an intelligent, informed and respectful way. I cannot countenance the alternative and I do not get the idea that we are for Irish unity but absolutely against planning for the conversation and process for orderly, democratic and peaceful transition that is required. That makes no sense at all. The case for this legislation has convincingly and repeatedly been made by Sinn Féin Deputies but also by Deputies across the benches, and convincingly so. However, we have not had a convincing response from Government. Inertia is not an answer. A long, meandering series of rhetorical statements and self-aggrandisement and God forbid, dining out on the heroism and courage of former generations, including family members, is not a thing. That does not cut the muster.

I am a mother of adult children. I want to record in the House, because I think they are very reflective of their generation, what they hear and what they will see this evening. They will see the Irish establishment in all of its pomp and limited sense of the world standing on the ground that is comfortable for it, and that it knows and controls. They will see this - driven by Micheál Martin, of that there is no doubt - as a direct pushback against them. That generation is hungry. It has an appetite for change, that can see the next horizon and opportunity and that hears the same old tired, jaded rhetoric as blah blah blah and all the reasons we cannot have the Republic and have a new Ireland and all the reasons we will not trust and respect our people - nationalist, republican, loyalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant people, people of all faiths and none. Catholic, Protestant and dissenter, is that not how Wolfe Tone put it? I say to those on the Government benches that they are grossly and vastly underestimating where people are at on this issue. In one day alone last weekend, we gathered 30,000 postcards addressed to the Taoiseach asking that this legislation be supported. That was on one single day.

To anyone who believes this issue will go away, it is not going away. We will be back with this legislation because we know preparation is the only way forward - the Green paper and citizens' assembly. We make no pretence that is the totality of the work that needs to be done. Far from it. The Oireachtas committees need to continue and other platforms of dialogue and expertise need to be established. These are the basics. This is the most basic ask and request.

For Fianna Fáil, in its centenary year, to push this back is a matter of wonder to me - the party of Dan Breen and Seán Treacy. It seems the party cannot see the wood for the trees. It is the party that refuses to lay that preparatory ground for that peaceful, orderly, democratic transition to a united Ireland.

Remarks have been made about arbitrary deadlines and all the rest. After all the discussion, dialogue and negotiations - the long nights into the wee hours of the morning and beyond - in the end agreement was found precisely because structure, shape and deadlines were applied. Had we meandered and looked to the Irish establishment to rehearse *ad nauseam* all the reasons we cannot and all the things we cannot have, we would not have made the journey thus far. The Government's response is inadequate. I appeal to people to accept this modest proposal at this important moment in our journey to the peaceful reunification of our country. There is no avoiding the work that needs to be done; it needs to be done now.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Keira Keogh): Go raibh maith agaibh for that very respectful debate.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Keira Keogh): The division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Keira Keogh): Seanad Éireann has passed the Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025, without amendment.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Departmental Expenditure

1. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will publish the efficiency and reform proposals that he requested each Department to provide to him by 17 July 2026; if he will do so at the earliest opportunity possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51702/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Will the Minister commit to the publishing of the efficiency and reform proposals he has requested every Department provide to him by 17 July, in full and as soon as possible?

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank the Deputy. The Government agreed a medium-term fiscal structural plan in December last year. This set out fixed expenditure ceilings for the period to 2030. It provides for significant uplifts in expenditure over the coming years, with gross voted spending to reach €147.3 billion in 2030. As set out, the ceiling for 2027 will increase to €125.5 billion. This is an uplift of €7 billion on the 2026 expenditure ceiling of €118.5 billion. Delivery of this requires enhanced expenditure control and robust oversight mechanisms.

In April, Government agreed that additional funding of €646 million will be provided to the Department of Education and Youth. To accommodate this additional funding, the Government agreed to reprioritise funding from other Votes to deliver on the 2027 ceiling as planned. Other Departments have been asked to deliver a levy through the implementation of efficiencies and reforms, with a total of €446 million from 2027. This should be considered through the lens of an overall uplift of €7 billion for expenditure in 2027. It will not impact the 2026 allocations.

The delivery of reforms and efficiencies supports adherence to the fixed expenditure ceilings set out in the plan. It reflects the need to moderate the rate of expenditure growth across Departments to facilitate the Government's decision to reprioritise and provide additional investment to education within the agreed overall fiscal framework out to 2030. It

is a matter for each Department to determine how the levy will be applied across Vote groups and to identify the efficiencies and reforms required to ensure this. My Department wrote to Secretaries General of other Departments following the Government decision, informing them of the need to identify efficiencies and reforms. These proposals have been requested by 17 July. The proposals will form a key part of engagement in the Estimates process for budget 2027.

Budget 2026 placed a particular emphasis on achieving value for money. The budget strategy was developed using a whole-of-budget approach, which focussed on the totality of expenditure and linked expenditure and investment to improved outcomes. Part II of the expenditure report 2026 sets out details of reforms and efficiencies across Vote groups.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Just for clarity, did the Minister commit to publishing them? Maybe he can come back on that. I genuinely mean that I did not fully understand that.

When the Minister drafted these measures, he was presumably aware the Department of education was not the only one in the red. It turns out the Departments of health, justice and social protection are also on track to overspend by millions of euro. In the case of social protection, the Minister has asked it to make €6 million of cuts - an impossible ask for a Department with a projected €89 million overspend. Similarly, he slashed the health budget by €175 million despite the HSE projecting a €400 million overspend. I do not understand his taking an axe to our public services because of the failure of the last budget, which became clear in the budgetary oversight committee, as well as because the sums did not add up on budget day. Will the Minister commit to publishing them? Will he tell us what he is cutting?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy is completely misrepresenting what we are doing. I have said efficiencies and reforms will be provided to my Department during the summer. They will inform the Estimates discussions with Departments in the context of a 2027 allocation of over €125 billion. The €7 billion uplift forms the basis of negotiation with Departments, how they identify efficiencies and reforms and how we moderate overall expenditure, with those efficiencies and reforms, across Departments.

The Deputy referenced €6 million for the Department of Social Protection. That is in the context of a budget well in excess of €20 billion - I think it is €27 billion. It is a very minor change in the context of a budget that is likely to grow in 2027. The reason we have applied a levy for 2027 is to give Departments the space to identify efficiencies and reforms, prepare for them and utilise them through the Estimates process before we agree budget 2027. They will form part of their Estimates and allocations for 2027. That is what we have set out in the past and are setting out today. What will be submitted to me will form the basis of the wider discussion as part of budget 2027.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The reason we are in this mess in the first place is the Department of education clearly stated it required additional financing to make ends meet this year. The reality is the Minister's Department did not listen. As a result of that, we are in this mess. My question is will the Minister publish that which he has requested for 17 July. It is only through an FOI request that we discovered he is asking for this by 17 July. We know that is the week the Dáil goes into recess. It seems to me that he is trying to sneak it through during the summer

recess, when he knows there is not Dáil scrutiny. Will he commit to listening to each Department when it comes to this budget? We have had an issue whereby in the previous budget the two Ministers did not.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is efficiencies and reforms in the context of the allocation for 2027.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Yes, but tell us what it is.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We should have greater discussion in here around efficiencies and reforms across all expenditure lines. No Department is immune from driving greater efficiencies and improving productivity, outputs and impacts in the context of a significant increase in public expenditure in recent years. Notwithstanding the levy we have introduced to moderate overall expenditure, there should be greater focus on that in the wider discussions and demands we receive across expenditure allocations. The reason we are doing this is to fit the additionality we have provided to education within the wider fiscal framework. I believe we distributed it fairly. We protected health pay, protected social protection rates and the wider social protection budget, protected justice pay and protected key front-line areas in education itself. There is room for efficiencies across Departments that have grown significantly in recent years.

Public Procurement Contracts

2. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if his Department carried out a risk assessment in advance of publishing a tender to establish a new framework agreement for the provision of Microsoft solution renewals and associated services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51706/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Office of Government Procurement's Microsoft licensing framework expires on 13 September 2026. The estimated value range of the proposed new framework is between €750 million and €1 billion according to a reply the Minister gave me. Has his Department carried out a risk assessment in advance of publishing the tender for this new framework? I ask this at a time when other European countries are moving away from technological dependence on American companies.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Office of Government Procurement, a division of my Department, acts as a central purchasing body, aggregating the State's purchasing power and establishing framework agreements for a range of commodities, including ICT goods and services. The establishment of a national-level framework is a significant undertaking. OGP framework agreements are established based on public sector bodies' needs and market capabilities and are a key instrument in delivering value for money, promoting SME access to Government contracts as well as incorporating horizontal policy considerations.

Since its establishment in 2014, the OGP has gained significant experience in establishing national-level framework agreements. The OGP takes a diligent and disciplined approach to each and every framework, with frameworks taking up to 12 months to put in place. The OGP is supported in its work by key public sector bodies, subject matter experts and the Chief State Solicitor's Office, CSSO. In each case, the relevant risks, issues, assumptions and dependencies are carefully considered. All framework agreements commence with a pre-market engagement, which informs the market of the OGP's intentions as well as informing the OGP of the market's capabilities and developments. Following publication of the tender, the OGP typically receives feedback from interested parties relating to the design of the competition. Such feedback is dealt with on a case-by-case basis, including assessing the potential impact to the tender.

In respect of preparing the tender for the framework for the renewal of Microsoft licences, solutions and associated services, the OGP adhered to its standard, detailed and disciplined approach over an eight-month period, including engaging with the market through a structured, extensive and comprehensive pre-market consultation process, which seeks the market's view with defining the scope, structure and content of the tender.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Minister of State for the answer. Have alternatives to Microsoft actually been looked at as part of the process? That is what I am asking about it. There are a number of alternatives out there that other European countries and states are moving towards. They are doing so for value-for-money reasons and so they are no longer technologically dependent on the US but can rely on European-regulated services and products. There is LibreOffice, Collabora Online, Open-Xchange, Nextcloud, Thunderbird and openDesk by Germany's Zentrum für Digitale Souveränität der Öffentlichen Verwaltung, ZenDiS, which is a readily assembled government-grade suite. Have any of these been looked at? Are alternatives being examined? They are going for alternatives in other European countries, not just so they are no longer beholden to Trump and what he does - he does not just interfere in terms of red cards but in other areas as well - but also because it is better value for money. They are achieving actual reductions in the cost. Are alternatives being looked at and if so, what alternatives? If not, why has that not been part of the process?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: We are reviewing the operation of the existing framework and obtaining relevant input from subject matter experts across the public service to improve the scope, specification and features. We are obtaining relevant market-specific commercial advice from IT market analysts and industry experts, and also obtaining legal advice from the CSSO. As part of the OGP's governance process, we are conducting a review of the relevant risks, issues, assumptions and dependencies before final approval to publish.

The framework is only for the renewal of Microsoft licences. The prerequisite is that public service bodies using the framework must have already procured a Microsoft agreement appropriate to the licences being renewed. Again, interested parties are entitled to query any element of the procurement competition and such queries can arise through a number of channels, including clarification requests, direct correspondence or through the tender advisory service. The OGP considers each case on its own merits and decides on a course of action. In relation to this tender, matters of concern were raised by an interested party. Having carefully

considered those matters, the OGP determined it was prudent to cancel the competition and notify the market accordingly.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: What I do not understand is why alternatives to Microsoft have not been at least explored as part of this process. The German state of Schleswig-Holstein recently moved 30,000 staff from Microsoft to LibreOffice, Linux, Thunderbird and Open-Xchange. It is saving more than €15 million a year. The senior Minister has just told us we should always be looking for efficiencies and reforms and I agree. Why have they not been looked for in this process? The French police, the Gendarmerie nationale, switched over 100,000 desktops to Linux. They will save roughly €500 million, half a billion, over 15 years. Are these not the efficiencies and reforms that should at least be considered by the Government? The German Federal Chancellery moved to openDesk purely to enhance its digital sovereignty. The Irish Government is leading the Council of the European Union at the moment. We are looking for more European sovereignty, for example with the digital euro, so why are these things not being considered? I am not saying they should be moved *en masse* overnight but surely the alternatives should be explored in terms of value for money and whether there are better options out there.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The current framework expires in September 2027. Until then, public service bodies can continue to procure renewals of their Microsoft licences in line with the rules governing the existing framework agreement. The OGP's objective is to ensure that it can aggregate the State's expenditure, delivering value for money in all the expenditure categories that it manages. The OGP also remains committed to ensuring that public service bodies have access to a compliant and effective procurement mechanism for Microsoft solution renewals and associated licensing services. All the feedback received has been assessed by the OGP and the intention is to publish a new tender as early as is feasible.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There are millions here that the Government could save.

Public Sector Pay

3. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to give an update on the progress of a new public sector pay agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51703/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Government's approach to public service pay over many years has been to engage through an established framework of collective bargaining with public service unions and associations. This is a tried and tested approach that has supported sustainable improvements in pay for public servants and orderly management of the public finances, while also facilitating public service reform and changes to work practices.

Before expiring at the end of June 2026, the Public Service Agreement 2024-2026 delivered headline pay increases of 9.25% and provided for up to 1% of basic pay costs for local bargaining. Importantly, like previous agreements, the public service agreement was weighted towards the lowest paid, who received increases of 17.3% inclusive of local bargaining. The final increase under the agreement was on 1 June 2026. The Government is committed to

continuing to be a good employer and to providing competitive terms and conditions for public servants. This commitment is reflected in the significant investment made in public services in recent years. Since 2020, the public service pay bill has increased by €12 billion, reaching €34 billion in 2026, an increase of 55%. As well as providing for increases in pay rates, this investment has supported substantial growth in the public service workforce, with employment now exceeding 420,000, an increase of more than 70,000 employees since 2020.

Against this backdrop, and in advance of the agreement's expiry, my officials met with public service unions and staff representative associations to initiate exploratory discussions on a successor agreement. Officials remain available to continue engagement, with Government seeking to progress talks as quickly as possible through constructive dialogue. As the Deputy will appreciate, it would not be appropriate to comment on the detail of discussions, which should remain confidential to the parties. They take place against an increasingly uncertain environment. Suffice it to say, therefore, that in an increasingly uncertain economic environment, a new public service pay agreement can play an important role in providing certainty and stability for public servants while supporting the effective delivery of public services. That is why I believe every effort should be made over the period ahead to engage and try to reach agreement.

As is always the case, any agreement will have to be balanced, affordable and capable of being accommodated in the context of other expenditure priorities within the fiscal framework.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I completely agree with the Minister that this comes through dialogue. I am not expecting to have any information from inside the room coming to the outside. The question really relates to the fact that the previous public sector pay agreement ended last Tuesday without any deal to replace it. Of course, there will be public sector workers who are concerned about that. The Minister mentioned stability. That is what people will need and want. We know that we are in a cost-of-living crisis. We also know that the Central Bank is saying that real wages are going to fall by the end of the year.

These are the people who look after us in our hospitals; they are nurses, doctors, those who drive buses and trains and so on. These are people who keep the economy ticking over. Does the Minister expect to continue with this work?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I fully share the Deputy's reflection on public servants and the huge role they play in our hospitals, schools and members of An Garda Síochána keeping people safe. That is why we want to a new agreement. As with previous agreements, we want to make sure that it is fair, equitable and ensures a fair deal for workers and rewards them for the work that they do every day on behalf of all of us. There have been exploratory discussions. We want further engagement. My officials remain open to progressing those discussions. We want to ensure that can happen without preconditions. We also want to ensure that any talks can progress and that we can try to reach an agreement that we can accommodate in the context of budget 2027. Having stability, certainty and a planned approach to public service delivery and public service pay has been important in terms of our wider management of the economy. I want to make it clear to any public servant who is watching this that we want to see a new deal and we want to progress those discussions.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I am not sure how many are looking in at 9.30 p.m. because there may be a World Cup match on, but for those who are watching these proceedings and who take an interest in this very important matter, the reality is that they will look back and see that the first thing Government Members voted on in the lifetime of this Dáil was a bumper pay rise for themselves and for Cabinet Ministers at a time when they, the people to whom I refer, are struggling to make ends meet and when the cost of everything, including housing, is increasing. I am sure that every week Deputies deal with people who simply cannot make ends meet, whether they be public sector workers or other workers, because of political decisions that were made in this Chamber and that have resulted in, for example, rents increasing and supports in terms of energy costs being removed. I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to reach a fair deal.

Deputy Jack Chambers: As with previous agreements, our intention is to ensure that we arrive at one that is affordable and planned and delivers fair pay for public servants. I am absolutely clear about that. I want to see discussions recommence. Exploratory discussions have taken place on two occasions. My officials remain open to engaging.

On the issue of the wider workforce and the economy, we want to ensure that we bring forward a tax package in the budget that will support workers and that will reward work in the context of competitiveness and income tax. That is something that we advance, as well other critical priorities around housing and infrastructure delivery and everything else to which the Deputy referred in the context of the cost of living. The trade unions are balloting their members, which is an unnecessary escalation. We need to see engagement happen. Officials on the Government side are ready and willing to engage.

Departmental Strategies

4. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update on the national procurement strategy, which was due to be published earlier this year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51494/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Will the Minister provide an update on the national procurement strategy, which, as I understood it, was to be published earlier this year? I brought forward legislation in relation to procurement and was told that we had to take a wait-and-see approach on foot of the work that was happening in respect of procurement.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The forthcoming national public procurement strategy will set the strategic direction for public procurement in Ireland for the next five years. The strategy will for the first time establish a shared vision, values and objectives for the public procurement system, providing a common framework for the procurement of goods, services and works across the public sector. Given the scale and ambition of the strategy, it was important that sufficient time was taken to ensure that its development and implementation are informed by stakeholder engagement, evidence-based policymaking and practical delivery considerations. We have been engaging with our officials to finalise the strategy and ensure that the necessary

preparatory work is undertaken and that the foundations are laid for its successful implementation.

A number of initiatives aligned with the strategy's vision, values and objectives are already being progressed across the public procurement system, including measures to support sustainable procurement, SME participation, transparency and simplification. In parallel, significant preparatory work has been undertaken to establish the governance, capability and stakeholder engagement arrangements necessary to support its successful implementation across the public sector. Among the recent initiatives introduced are a new series of webinars to deliver procurement essentials to SMEs, representation from the social enterprise sector joining the SME advisory group and journey-mapping exercises with public buyers and suppliers to identify opportunities for simplification and practical co-design solutions.

Taken together, the extensive consultation process, the preparatory work undertaken to date and the initiatives already under way will provide a strong foundation for the effective implementation of the strategy across the public sector. I expect to bring the strategy to Government in the coming weeks.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The issue that I have is that this time last year, I brought forward legislation specifically around procurement. We know that billions of euro are spent on procurement every year. We know that if this money is spent in a way that will benefit society, it can have a massive social, environmental and, indeed, economic impact. To be honest, the Government is moving far too slowly when it comes to tackling this issue. This is something that can have an economic benefit. The Minister of State and I are both from the west of Ireland. The impact that good use of procurement, tendering and contracts can have on small communities is massive. Is consideration being given to how the strategy can be used in smaller geographical areas that may not have the economic strength that other areas have in order to ensure that those areas can withstand economic shocks?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I share the Deputy's view. The strategy has not been delayed. As I stated previously, this will be Ireland's first overarching strategy for public procurement. It will set the direction of travel to 2030 to support delivering the Government's commitments. Given the scale and ambition of the strategy, it is important that it is informed by extensive stakeholder engagement, a robust evidence base and careful consideration of implementation arrangements. It is important to note that significant work has already been undertaken in this regard. We are engaging closely with my officials to finalise the strategy and to ensure that the conditions for its successful implementation are in the place.

The Deputy referred to SMEs and local communities. She is absolutely right. This will help SMEs, but, more importantly, it will also help small family businesses and local communities. The strategy will take into consideration many of the matters she mentioned.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I am probably one of the people who is most looking forward, apart from the Minister of State, obviously, to reading the strategy. I hope that it will look two things. First, the economic impact we can have with the money that is spent. That impact can be huge, economically, socially and environmentally. There is a massive impact we can have,

particularly if we look at what has happened in places like Preston, for example, and how measures there have worked.

The strategy also needs to look at cost overruns and at how public money is wasted. The legislation I brought forward this time last year, in respect of which the Government kicked the can down the road, suggested that information should be provided in an annual report by the Minister to show the type of procurement procedure used by public bodies, the use and type of social clauses in contracts, details on contracts awarded to SMEs and a scoring of the performance of contractors in the context of whether they go over time and over budget. Will the Minister of State commit to looking at that?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I am very mindful of how time-poor small businesses are. We want to put them at the centre of the strategy from its inception. The idea for the strategy derived from a programme for Government commitment to review the public procurement process and make it much more transparent.

We are trying to support SMEs in identifying and pursuing public procurement opportunities.

In most businesses - and I was part of a business myself - you would work all hours of the day and would you want to step in a back office and go through these applications? We also are trying to work with mentors who will help small businesses with their applications. The strategy is trying to redefine value for money but include longer-term social value for Irish taxpayers. A pillar of that strategy will focus on procuring for the future and we want to embed social and environmental innovation, as well as local social resilience, into the current public procurement strategy.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 5 taken with Written Answers.

Artificial Intelligence

6. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the progress being made on the adoption of artificial intelligence across the public service to improve efficiency, reduce administrative burdens and enhance public services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51518/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: AI has enormous potential to reduce administrative burdens, improve productivity and free up public servants to focus on delivery. Will the Minister outline what measurable progress has been made to date in adopting AI across Departments and Government agencies, what gains have already been achieved and when we will see further gains?

Deputy Jack Chambers: My Department has taken a proactive and co-ordinated approach to supporting the responsible and effective adoption of AI across the public service. A key component of this was the publication of the Guidelines for the Responsible Use of Artificial

Intelligence in the Public Service in May 2025, which provide a practical framework to assist public service bodies in designing, developing and deploying AI in a manner that is ethical, transparent and aligned with public service values. Responsibility for applying the guidelines rests with each public service body to embed them within governance arrangements pertaining to relevant work programmes.

To build capabilities within the public service, my Department has worked with the Institute for Public Administration, IPA, to develop a suite of training courses on AI in the public service. Since they were launched, very high uptake has been observed with over 5,500 people having completed the course on the use of AI in the public service, and over 10,000 having completed the course on wider AI in the public service.

In addition to training, my Department is in the process of establishing an AI advisory unit to provide advice and expertise for public service bodies on how to deploy AI in a way that maximises impact, mitigates risks, and supports integration with existing systems and we are also engaging with stakeholders to determine the feasibility of establishing an appropriate central procurement arrangement for AI.

Against this backdrop, adoption of AI is actively taking place across the wider public service. In order to track diffusion of the technology and to understand the types of applications it is being used in, my Department is currently undertaking a comprehensive survey of all public sector bodies to obtain the most up-to-date data on AI adoption across the public service and to catalogue sectoral use cases to support cross-government information-sharing, learning, and strategic and operational oversight. This will also highlight a selection of flagship deployments in high-impact areas and we hope to provide a report on the findings of this survey in the coming months.

Deputy Grace Boland: While I heard about a framework and a lot of training, I did not quite hear that we are actually measuring what cost savings, efficiencies and benefits there are, not only for the public service and Civil Service but to the people, our constituents and the public at large. Will the Minister confirm he will be measuring the real gains made in those terms?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Absolutely. The first step, and Deputy Malcolm Byrne who has been a strong advocate of it is present, is to provide a basis to encourage AI's use. From a system where the digitalisation of public services has been challenging over the past number of decades to one that positively embraces AI, it is people who will provide that interface to both design AI's use in the public service but also to use it. The fact we have had a strong uptake on training is a positive sign. We have really good test cases across different areas in terms of automation in many Departments and agencies. They are being centrally monitored and tracked now and trying to deploy and scale some of what has been developed is an important context. If you read our national AI strategy entitled Digital Ireland - Connecting our People, Securing our Future, it is against a backdrop of an aim to have 100% of key public services digitalised by 2030 and 90% of them accessed online and supported by a wider centralised AI advisory unit. This will all drive digitalisation, better public services and enhance the use of AI across the system, something I think we are doing properly by ensuring those deploying it have the appropriate training to do it.

Deputy Grace Boland: I am more encouraged by the Minister's most recent response. It is important that the public, as well as people working in the Civil Service and public service, sees the benefits of AI. It is important the Minister's Department makes sure there are measurable key performance indicators, KPIs, measurable deliverables and that the benefits and gains are clearly articulated to people.

One of my concerns is that in using AI for efficiency, and we absolutely need to do that, we need to be careful not to leave people behind, particularly those who cannot use digital technologies, but also not to lose the authenticity of person-to-person communication. It is about striking a balance and I really think the Department needs to take a very central role in articulating that to the Civil Service, the public service and to the people we represent.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): There is a supplementary question from Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome and support the views expressed by Deputy Boland and I welcome the Minister's commentary. The experience has been that across Departments, the level of engagement with AI differs. Specifically when we are talking here about public sector procurement, which was mentioned, we need to explore the use of agentic AI. I want to be clear there should always be human oversight in this space but I mean the use of agentic AI in, for instance, how we can map vendor capabilities to Government needs, in terms of tender design, and particularly in terms of intelligent bids and contract monitoring. I often say that if we were able to use agentic AI in the case of the national children's hospital, for instance, where so many variables were being addressed it could be done more efficiently. I appreciate the guidelines for the responsible use of AI are very important and we do need to have human oversight but at different levels of Government this is moving at different speeds and it varies from Department to Department.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank both Deputies. In terms of the wider digital public services plan we, have the life events approach which is about embedding a lot of people's interface with public services through life events, and how they can be digitally enabled through a life events portal, which will provide a much better interface to people's interaction with the State. Also to Deputy Boland's point, we will ensure we protect that human interface as well where people are required. That is a central part of our wider digital public services plan.

Part of it will be setting out, as Deputy Farrell has raised as well as Deputy Byrne, that the new procurement strategy will have a real digital focus as to how we future-proof procurement. That is something that will be set out in the coming weeks when we publish it. We will be using a lot more digital tools and technology across the procurement phase. We will set that out in the coming weeks in terms of our reform agenda and I will put the finer details on that during the period ahead.

Departmental Funding

7. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the criteria applied in assessing projects under the digital public service transformation fund, including the way in which service improvement,

efficiency gains and potential for wider roll-out are considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51534/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Question No. 7 in the name of Deputy Ó Cearúil is being taken by Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I ask the Minister for Public Expenditure; Infrastructure; Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the criteria applied in assessing projects under the digital public service transformation fund, including the way in which service improvement, efficiency gains and potential for wider roll-out are considered.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The public service digital transformation fund, PSDTF, was established to support the delivery of Government priorities under the Digital Public Services Plan 2030. The digital public services plan is the Government's roadmap for delivering seamless, inclusive and user-centred public services through digital transformation. This Plan is a flagship initiative under the Better Public Services strategy. It aims to ensure that by 2030, 100% of key public services are available online and 90% of applicable services are consumed digitally.

The fund is intended to accelerate digital transformation across the public service by supporting projects that improve services for the public and strengthen cross-government collaboration. It does not operate as an open competitive fund. Instead, applications are invited from selected public service bodies in line with the strategic priorities identified under the Digital Public Services Plan 2030, particularly the delivery of priority life events services and the development of shared digital capabilities that can be used across Government.

Projects seeking funding must demonstrate alignment with the Government of Ireland design principles and outline how they will advance the delivery of human-centred digital services across organisational boundaries; adoption of new and emerging technologies with the potential to support life events service delivery and the development and scaling of proven digital innovations

Projects are also expected to demonstrate how they will contribute to key public service outcomes, including customer satisfaction, public trust, service quality and increased use of digital channels.

Efficiency and value for money considerations are central to the assessment process and projects are evaluated on their capacity to streamline processes, reduce administrative burden and duplication of effort, improve data-sharing and interoperability, and deliver more integrated services across government. The potential for wider roll-out and reuse across the public service is another important consideration. Applications that demonstrate scalability, cross-government applicability and the ability to support multiple life events services are particularly encouraged. The fund is one of a range of supports provided by Departments and public service bodies to help accelerate the digital transition. Others include the provision of a suite of public digital infrastructure building blocks designed to be fully compatible and interoperable with other systems across Ireland and the EU. This ensures a consistent approach.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome in particular the moves towards the digitalisation of life events. I commend the work of the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer on everything that is being done there. It is also very important not just to have the business case but that there is also the technological know-how around what it is we are hoping to achieve. One of the most critical things the Minister's Department will be overseeing is the digitalisation of health records, obviously in conjunction with the Department of Health. It is deeply frustrating to me how long it is taking. I would like assurances and perhaps the Minister will outline where we are with the plan for awarding of contracts on that. Will the Minister give assurances that, with citizens' consent, there is the possibility that anonymised health records can also be used for clinical research? That would make a lot of sense in terms of how that informs our health service. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide us with an update.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I do not have a specific update here with me on digital or electronic health records. We have taken the leap as a Government, with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to put significant capital funding aside to digitalise our health system, which is the correct strategic move in the context of Ireland being behind many other countries in the efficient use of health data for personal reasons and for patient records. There is huge duplication across our hospital system with paper records. There is a tender process ongoing around that. The use of research, data-sharing and anonymity is something I will have to revert to the Department of Health. It needs to be scalable and interoperable and avoid duplication and some of the mishaps we have had in other digital health systems. Given the fact that many are much more mature, it provides a real opportunity to really deploy AI in the health system in terms of diagnostics and better advanced therapeutics. It will provide a real opportunity to drive reform in our health system and better enable practitioners and clinicians to provide the best care.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome that commitment. It will be transformational. It is my own view, and I do not think it is underestimating it to say, that our records not being digitalised is probably costing our health service up to a billion euro a year in terms of delays and in the failure to be able to use some of that data towards clinical research. We need to start to talk about a campaign for when we move to that situation to encourage citizens to agree to this data being used in an anonymised form to inform clinical research, which will result in further efficiencies. I am worried that we are not moving quickly enough on some of this. Along with the digitalisation process we also need an information campaign to explain to citizens the benefit of what we are actually achieving. There have been 20 years of the Clinical Research Centre at UCD. We should think about the achievements it could have if it were able to have access to some of this data in partnership with other clinical research centres.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Certainly there is a massive opportunity in terms of data as we digitalise our health system. We need to do it in a way that builds trust, is transparent and obviously protects individuals as well. I would be open to that wider engagement with the Minister for Health and others, as we are tendering for this and delivering it, on how do we build the case so that people can use really important data to deliver better clinical research, and how people's personal health records can provide a huge capacity in the context of prophylactic therapeutics. There is a huge opportunity to really improve the lives of citizens in terms of population-based healthcare and the identification of issues before people develop

symptoms. It is really limitless with digital health and in a way that is transformative for people's healthcare and for delivering a real public health system that is digitally enabled. Research is absolutely connected to that. I am absolutely willing to engage with the Deputy and to get the Minister involved as well around starting that wider engagement on clinical research.

Strategic Infrastructure

8. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update regarding investment in critical infrastructure in the west of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50878/26]

21. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update on infrastructure investment in the west of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51496/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Will the Minister provide an update on investment in infrastructure in the west of Ireland?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 21 together.

As part of the budgetary process each year, my Department sets overall expenditure ceilings for each ministerial Vote group. These are laid out at Vote level in the budget day expenditure report published in October, with further detail provided in the Revised Estimates for public services published in December. Following the allocation of each ministerial expenditure ceiling, it is a matter for each Minister to assign funding as appropriate at programme and subhead level for their Departments and the agencies under their remit, accounting for the demands for services in different areas and regions and having regard to demographics and other factors. Within this process, both current and capital expenditure are allocated on a departmental basis and not a geographic basis.

More broadly, the achievement of balanced regional development is a key priority of this Government and is at the heart of Project Ireland 2040, which includes the national planning framework, which sets out the wider spatial strategy for the next 20 years, along with the national development plan, NDP. Since Project Ireland 2040 was launched in 2018, the Government has overseen the delivery of many impactful NDP projects across the country, including in the west of Ireland, for example: the enterprise centres in Boyle and Tulsk in Roscommon and in Belmullet and Swinford in Mayo; the N59 Moycullen bypass; the Salmon Weir Bridge in Galway; the Killaloe bypass in Clare; and heritage and tourism projects in Portumna in Galway and Aghleam in Mayo.

The NDP Review 2025 was published in line with the programme for Government commitment. The plan committed €275.4 billion in public capital investment to 2035, the largest and most significant capital investment in the history of the State. Arising from this, €19.1 billion in Exchequer capital investment will be provided in 2026. On budget day, Ministers set out the capital projects and programmes they will prioritise within their allocation. Over the end of 2025 and early 2026, Ministers developed sectoral plans for investment

considering sectoral needs, including across balanced regional development. The plans published to date include planned investment and projects across the country, with many across the west of Ireland: Uisce Éireann upgrades of water and wastewater treatment plants in Lough Mask and Claremorris in Mayo; 35 social and 310 affordable new housing units in Crown Square in Galway; new transport infrastructure with Bus Connects Galway, the Galway city ring road, and the N5 in Roscommon; and sports and community facilities with the Renville Sports and Community Centre and the east Galway sports campus. That is just a small flavour of some of the projects that are being identified across the sectoral plans, which are multi-year plans to deliver across critical areas.

Progress in achieving balanced regional development and detailing the delivery of the NDP is monitored through regular updates on the capital investment tracker and the MyProjectIreland interactive map viewer. The capital investment tracker provides a composite update on the progress of all major investments, with an estimated cost of more than €20 million. Accompanying the tracker, the MyProjectIreland interactive map details projects across the country by county and contains smaller investments such as schools, healthcare facilities and social housing projects. In addition, my Department also publishes the Project Ireland 2040 annual report and regional reports, highlighting achievements and giving a detailed overview of the public investments that have been made, are being made and are planned to be made right throughout the country.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I want to raise a really important piece of infrastructure from a tourism perspective in County Galway, which is Dunguaire Castle in Kinvara. The Minister may be aware that this iconic landmark has remained closed to the public in recent years. It is in the ownership of the Shannon Group. There have been attempts to have ownership transferred to Galway County Council with a view to the council bringing it up to a safe standard and ultimately reopening it but funding issues have prevented that from happening. As per an update provided by Galway County Council, I understand that the OPW and the Department of housing are now exploring acquiring the castle and that an expression of interest may have been made. That would be very much welcomed by the local community, who are very eager to see the building in new ownership and ultimately opened up to the general public again. It has been a huge loss to the tourism offering in Kinvara and the wider region.

10 o'clock

This question might be more appropriate for the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. Will he confirm that this is being explored or at least give me a commitment that he will come back to me with an update?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I will come back to the Deputy. There has been a meeting between Galway County Council and ourselves. I do not know what stage it is at, but if the Deputy bears with me, I will come back to him in due course.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: How much time do I have?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): Deputies Farrell and O'Hara have one minute each.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I have a minute, then he has a minute, and I have a minute again. Is that correct? I am sorry but it is a bit confusing.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: It is a long night.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): Deputies Farrell and O'Hara have a minute each, as have the Minister and the Minister of State.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That is perfect. That is all I wanted to know.

The underfunding of Galway County Council is an issue that I and Teachtaí O'Hara and Kerrane recently raised. We did not get a commitment in relation to that from the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, but my issue is that we have a crumbling infrastructure in the west of Ireland when it comes to the basic necessities. If we cannot get a commitment from the Government that it is going to adequately fund the county council to be able provide the basic services that are required for the people living in rural County Galway, then we need to see a commitment from Government that it will invest in that infrastructure. If the Government is not going to fund the council to be able to do those things it needs to have done, then we need the Government to intervene and provide that funding.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am not privy to the interaction the Deputy had with the Minister for housing on this, but the Local Government Fund distributes the respective funding across different local authorities, and Galway County Council and Galway City Council would receive allocations through that.

I was clear in my initial response to Deputy O'Hara. We have significant investment across many projects in the west of Ireland for water and wastewater treatment, which is required to build new homes. There is also the investment that ESB and EirGrid are doing in the context of our grid to ensure we can get energy connections, as well as the many critical projects, including the Galway ring road, which has been sitting there, as it were, for years. We need to drive on and get things built. That is what we are seeking to do across much of the infrastructure.

The specific day-to-day funding of local authorities is a matter that the Minister for housing engages with local authorities on and the funding model is separate to the wider infrastructure conversation in terms of the national development plan, some of which, to be fair, is delivered through local authorities, especially funding for particular roads, but some of the bigger road projects are funded through Transport Infrastructure Ireland. It depends on the particular project the Deputy is raising.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I am going back to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. This is in relation to the castle. It is a key and world-class attraction on the Wild Atlantic Way. This castle has been closed for the past three years, as I mentioned, and is a huge loss to the local community. I know the OPW has a lot of other similar sites in County Galway, of which Athenry Castle and Portumna Castle are two that come to mind, and the OPW does a good job of running those sites. They are fantastic attractions, and I have a lot of confidence and faith

in the OPW's ability to make a success out of Dunguaire Castle as well. Local people would welcome the OPW being involved in that particular castle. I urge the Minister of State to do everything he can to progress it. It is an awful shame to see the castle closed. We need to see the remedial works being done to bring it to a safe standard and, ultimately, reopened to the public. I welcome anything the Department or the OPW can do to progress that.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I thank the Deputy for his kind words. The OPW does good work right across the region and particularly in his constituency, as he has outlined. I get asked to take over this castle or this monument every day of the week, and I do not have an endless pot to do that. Galway County Council has reached out to the OPW and meetings have taken place, but I cannot say what further engagements have taken place at this time, but I will come back to the Deputy in due course. His colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has also raised this issue with me, as have other TDs in the constituency. I will continue to work with the Deputy. If we can work something out together, that is fine, but I cannot give him that commitment today.

National Development Plan

9. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the progress made to date under national strategic outcome, NSO, 3 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51311/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: As Minister, I am responsible for the setting the overall capital allocations across Departments and for monitoring monthly expenditure at departmental level. In 2021, the NDP review originally committed €165 billion for the period to 2030. The revised development plan set out €275.4 billion in capital investment to 2035, the largest and most significant capital investment in the history of the State, and gross capital expenditure ceilings for all sectors have now been set. In addition to the €275 billion, we have an additional €10 billion in equity release up to 2030. This includes €3.5 billion for energy grid capacity, €4.5 billion for water and €2 billion for low-carbon transport, including MetroLink.

Departments subsequently published sectoral investment plans setting out the capital projects to be prioritised to 2030. These plans provide visibility of the delivery pipeline, giving construction firms the certainty they need to invest in hiring, training and scaling their operations. This multi-year approach is designed to support industry planning and ensure that regional capacity can grow in line with demand. The plans include planned investment in projects across the country.

National strategic outcome, NSO, 3 deals with strengthening rural economies and communities in a number of areas, including communications. In terms of broadband, significant progress was made in 2025, with over 440,000 homes and farms passed ahead of the target of 420,000. This programme is due for completion by the end of this year, which is ahead of schedule. In terms of arts and culture, some of the ongoing projects in the investment programme that has published include the National Archives Repository, the Crawford Art Gallery, phase 1 of the National Concert Hall and the National Gallery. In terms of sport, we have the Sport Ireland campus investment. This includes the national velodrome, badminton

centre and cricket centre. In terms of the media, the Government will continue to support the development of Irish language media, with investment in TG4's studio and broadcast facilities.

Further details of projects, of which there are many, being delivered under NSO 3 can be found in the latest capital investment tracker, which is published.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: While national progress is welcome, people in the north west want to know what NSO 3 is delivering for Sligo, Leitrim and south Donegal. Our region has huge potential in tourism, enterprise, remote working and the blue and green economies, but the potential is still being held back by infrastructural deficits and poor connectivity.

Roads funding is a major concern in Sligo, Leitrim and south Donegal, and planned roadworks are now being scaled back because rising construction costs have outstripped available funding. Local authorities cannot continue to do more with less. Projects that have already been identified as priorities should not be deferred simply because costs have increased. If these works are dropped this year, there is no guarantee that they will be funded next year. That is a great concern for the region.

Will the Minister outline the NSO 3 projects that have been delivered in Sligo, Leitrim and south Donegal? What share of rural regeneration funding has come to the north west and will additional roads funding be provided to ensure critical road projects are delivered? The critical road projects I am referring to are the Sligo-Galway road, the N17, the N15 and the N16.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The published tracker sets out the region-by-region specificity in terms of infrastructure investment. I understand and agree that we need to give that regional uplift to the north-west, where there is a documented infrastructure deficit. That is why we have prioritised transport in our national development plan and, in fairness, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has rebalanced some of the transport funding so that many of the roads projects that were delayed in the previous Government can progress where there have been difficulties.

The transport investment cycle is about €24 billion over the next five years, and there is a big uplift in transport funding in 2026. Specifics on road allocations are something between the Department of Transport and specific local authorities, but we are a Government that is front-loading significant investment - I would say in an unprecedented way - in our transport system to ensure we have that balance so that we are getting better public transport investment and seeing projects being delivered, but also that many of the roads projects, which are critical for the north-west in terms of regional development and road safety, are being delivered as well.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: The success of NSO 3 should ultimately be judged by whether rural counties can attract and retain people, jobs and investment. In the north-west, communities across Sligo and Leitrim and south Donegal continue to argue that stronger intervention is needed to overcome decades of underinvestment. They point to the need for accelerated broadband delivery, greater support for town centre regeneration, expanded remote working infrastructure, enhanced tourism and outdoor recreation investment and, crucially, for improved transport connectivity and roads infrastructure. We should also mention Local Link,

which has been a great success in rural Ireland but there are blank spots that need to be looked at as well.

The Minister accepts there has been underinvestment in the north-west. I am glad he recognises the fact. I ask that we progress these projects, particularly the national primary roads, which are crucial for jobs.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy and I were in Ballymote last summer, and I am very familiar with the wider territory of Sligo and the north-west, including that great county, Mayo, next door to the Deputy, where I was last weekend.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Minister loved to get that in.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We recognise the need, whether in north-west Donegal, where I was a few weeks ago, or all the way down to Kerry. There is a need along the Atlantic corridor to give that uplift to investment in roads and to enhance Local Link. I will ask the National Transport Authority to engage with the Deputy on that. There are also huge opportunities in tourism. Where we build out the tourism infrastructure, people come in their droves. We have seen that in many parts of the west, where trails, greenways, blueways and various pieces of infrastructure have been developed. Fáilte Ireland has a plan for that too. We want to ensure that the uplift in capital investment is seen, experienced and delivered for the north-west. That is something we are committed to doing.

Information and Communications Technology

10. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will outline the advice and support provided by his Department to other Departments or bodies under their aegis regarding the procurement of IT systems. [51486/26]

Deputy Frankie Feighan: My Department has responsibility for public procurement policy development, guidance, systems and advisory services, as well as the establishment of central buying solutions that serve the needs of public service bodies, PSBs. My Department provides a wide range of supports to assist public service bodies in the procurement of information and communications technology systems and services, both through practical procurement assistance and the provision of guidance and central procurement solutions.

The public procurement guidelines for goods and services, published by my Department, are designed to promote best practice and consistency in the application of public procurement rules in relation to the purchase of goods, services and works, including ICT goods and services. In addition to these general guidelines, my Department has also developed ICT-specific supports, including comprehensive guidance on the procurement of cloud services and recent guidance on measures that PSBs may take to mitigate potential cost and supply impacts arising from the global, AI-driven shortage of critical memory and storage IT components.

PSBs can access a broad range of ICT expertise through my Department's central procurement solutions, including ICT research and advisory services, ICT consultancy

services, procurement consultancy services and ICT professional services. PSBs can also access central procurement solutions for common ICT products and services, ranging from communications and networking solutions to data centre equipment, personal computers and a number of software licensing renewal arrangements. A number of public sector bodies undertaking procurement of ICT systems have also been provided by my Department with guidance, documentation and advice at key stages of the procurement life cycle.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Government IT projects have become synonymous with overspends, not best practice, as far as I can see. Of 220 such projects since 2024, 67 have projected overspends or have had overspends. The Department contains various units in agencies that sanction projects or provide advice on the activities of Departments and State bodies. I am thinking of the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, OGCIO, the Office of Government Procurement, the National Shared Services Office and the advisory services that the Minister of State mentioned. Yet, somehow, when it comes to IT projects, time and again, there are gross overspends and even project write-offs. Does the Minister of State accept there is a problem and that his Department has a role to play in addressing this? What is he going to do about it?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: My Department provides broad governance, oversight and strategic supports for digital and ICT initiatives. The arrangements for the oversight of digital and ICT-related initiatives in the civil and public service require PSBs to obtain approval from my Department before commencing new digital or ICT initiatives, publishing procurement documentation or entering into commitments involving expenditure. These arrangements promote early engagement, support whole-of-government co-ordination and help to avoid duplication of investment. My Department also delivers a range of shared digital and ICT services for use across government, including government networks, the national low latency platform, a managed desktop and a government private cloud. There is a lot of good work going on. I thank the Deputy for her questions.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I do not know how the Minister of State can say there is early engagement when a €4.3 million Fórsa project was abandoned, an unaffordable affordable childcare ICT system exceeded its original estimate of €3.5 million by nearly 50%, and now, €30 million spent by Irish Rail has effectively been written off. These are just examples of the tens of millions of euro in taxpayers' money that is as good as gone. I am not seeking to absolve the Accounting Officers of the responsibility but it is clearly widespread across Departments. It is a big problem. In the context of the Arts Council, some €5.3 million was written off. We saw a State body report its concerns. It tried to seek assistance from the Department but never got it and in return, the Department allowed it to flounder and did not give the help it was seeking. We found this out at the Committee of Public Accounts. There is a multimillion euro public expenditure crisis due to the lack of competence. More needs to be done. I ask the Minister of State to ensure the necessary reforms are introduced to end the unnecessary waste.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I take the Deputy's valid concerns on board. While my Department provides extensive guidance, oversight and procurement supports, individual PSBs ultimately retain responsibility for determining the suitability of their requirements, governance arrangements, project delivery approaches and the successful implementation of

ICT projects under their remit. There is support for the Public Appointments Service and for digital and ICT initiatives of significant scale, risk or strategic importance, including all projects with an estimated lifetime cost exceeding €5 million. The OGCI operates a formal peer review process, which assesses governance, delivery approach, cost risks and alignment with wider public service strategies, and provides an independent challenge to ensure robust decision-making and, more importantly, value for money.

Departmental Expenditure

12. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the actions that have been taken to implement cost control in Departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51538/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: It may not be the most interesting subject, but it is probably the most important subject in the Minister's brief, and that is the issue of cost control. What actions are being taken to implement cost control in Departments?

Deputy Jack Chambers: In December 2025, the Government published the medium-term fiscal and structural plan, which set out fixed expenditure ceilings for the period 2026 to 2030. This provides for significant uplifts in expenditure over the coming years, with gross voted spending to reach €147.3 billion in 2030. My Department has responsibility for developing expenditure policy in line with agreed Government objectives, including adhering to the expenditure ceilings set out in the plan. My Department establishes the governance frameworks, or rules, setting out the principles of how money should be spent to support sustainable increases in public expenditure.

These include the public financial procedures and infrastructure and procurement guidelines. These frameworks have been developed to promote the efficient, effective and sustainable application of resources.

In May, I published Circular 21/2026 relating to expenditure control and the escalation process. Issued to all Departments, it provides a clear framework for managing expenditure and sets out phases for escalation if spending overruns emerge. This escalation process is designed to be transparent and clear, setting out the different phases that can be taken to address overruns. It defines roles and responsibilities across Departments, ensuring strong accountability for expenditure management. Importantly, it is responsive to emerging spending pressures and enables timely and proportionate corrective actions where required.

Where expenditure pressures persist, the circular sets out a framework for when and how my Department will engage with others. These steps are focused around strengthening governance, reprioritising expenditure within Department allocations and ensuring that overruns are addressed in a timely manner. The circular also reiterates that responsibility for managing expenditure rests with each Department's Accounting Officer.

As published, it refers to nine phases of expenditure controls. These could involve an expenditure oversight group all the way to examining non-pay pressures to pay pressures, if they emerge in a Department. It is about aligning budgetary allocations with priorities and ensuring that we get better delivery of budgets across Departments.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister for his response. We have interacted quite a bit at committee level on the same topic and will continue to do so. The starting point is a detailed, accurate and complete budget. This must be prepared on a zero-waste budgeting model where all costs must be justified and it is not just assumed that last year's budget funding is a given. This, then, must be closely monitored on a month-by-month basis so that cost overruns are discovered early and action is taken. How do we incentivise managers to save money?

Today, I met a constituent in my clinic who told me of two school buses going from one town to a special class in another town, both of which were less than half full. What is the motivation to stop this waste of money? School transport costs rose by 34%, or €162 million, this year, from €478 million last year to €641 million this year.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why we should have reforms in the Department of Education and Youth around how that operates more efficiently. It is the role of the Minister and Accounting Officer in that Department, to use that example in terms of efficiency in respect of school transport, to ensure that we do not have duplication or two half-empty buses when there could be one. That is something that should be examined by the Department of Education and Youth to drive value for money.

We have been clear in the value for money obligations we have set out, as published in Circular 18/2025 around value for money obligations for all civil and public servants, and that is essential. We have moved away from the system of existing level of service, ELS, plus additionality, which we discussed with the Deputy at the budgetary oversight committee, to ensure that we examine the total base of spend through the Estimates process, something we did last year and will do again with a greater focus for budget 2027. The expenditure levy will drive greater efficiencies and reforms and incentivise those in the context of a moderating increase in current expenditure.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I will list some specific items, but the list is not exhaustive. Regarding funding given to quangos, can we review whether there is overlap between these organisations and if the Government is funding them to do the same things? Can we use the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, to do more work on bid rigging prevention? Do all Departments publish reports on overtime, the cost of agency staff and consultancy costs? This should be the norm.

Is there a cost control champion in each Department? Can we expand digital services to reduce processing times, paperwork and costs, increase the use of electronic records and reduce unnecessary printing and brochure costs? We should use data and KPIs to monitor the cost and outcomes of services, encourage the use of shared buildings and dispose of underused properties to reduce overheads and waste. Finally, there are any number of things that can be done and I am sure some are already being done, but we must strive to continuously improve and motivate the wonderful people who work in our public service to reduce spending that is growing too quickly.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We want to digitalise our public services, drive efficiencies and advance reforms, and that is a necessity. In everything we are doing in the escalation

framework and implementing cost controls in respect of Departments, it is all about efficiency, how we improve productivity, digitalise more and, ultimately, build better public services for people who want to see them improve. People want to see the endpoint of the increased expenditure the Deputy referenced to ensure that the outputs improve and the impacts are better. We are focused on how we improve delivery. That is our wider focus and why we have moved away from the model used in previous years to one that better serves a focus on efficiency and reform. That will be a key part of the Estimates process.

Public Expenditure Policy

14. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if his Department has outlined any projects under the Critical Infrastructure Act 2026 yet to be given priority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51548/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Critical Infrastructure Act 2026 provides a statutory basis for the acceleration of decision-making regarding projects and programmes that are designated as critical infrastructure. The Act requires that all reasonable steps be taken by public bodies, individually and collectively, to progress any functions that they may have in regard to these projects and programmes as quickly as possible.

Section 1 of the Act specifically highlights transport, energy and water infrastructure in the definition of infrastructure. However, it does not limit the potential to include other infrastructure, should it be considered necessary.

Section 3 of the Act sets out how projects or programmes will be designated as critical infrastructure. In summary, the Minister for public expenditure will make a recommendation to the Government in respect of the designation of an individual project or programme. The Government will consider the recommendation and, if approved, an order designating the project or programme as critical infrastructure will be laid before the Dáil. Provision is also made to allow the Dáil to annul any order laid before it.

This section also sets out those factors that I as Minister may have regard to in making a recommendation to the Government. These are as follows: the need to ensure the effective and efficient delivery of a project or programme; whether delay to, or disruption of, the delivery of a project or programme or failure to deliver a project or programme would have adverse economic or social consequences for the State; whether a project or programme may impact in a positive or negative manner on the delivery of any specific programme; the national development plan; and other matters that the Minister may consider appropriate.

When I bring an initial recommendation to the Government, my focus will be on a small number of critical projects or programmes in the energy, transport and water sectors, with a particular focus on those projects that will benefit the most from an immediate designation. That has yet to happen, but I expect it will in the coming weeks.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his response and clarity. Since he has come into his role, he has been very strong in pushing for the need to speed up infrastructure. Through

successful economic handling of the State, we have money to spend, which is the most important thing. Of course, we have to spend it wisely and ensure we have infrastructure.

I am Leas-Chathaoirleach of the infrastructure committee, which has MetroLink before it tomorrow, the exact type of project the Minister might have in mind. I do not want to pre-empt anything. At the same time, that is the key sort of project we need, along with a DART+ West. My colleague to my left would love to have the same facility in DART+ South West.

The population of the State has grown quite rapidly and we need to build critical infrastructure. I look forward to areas being designated and accountability and transparency for projects.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate all of Deputy Neville's inputs on the wider reforms we have advanced. We expect to have an initial designation for a small number of projects and will then set out a process around how that will happen. The focus is on the projects that can benefit from an immediate designation and how they can be accelerated quickly. Some projects are on lists and going through particular processes, but are not necessarily ready for designation. That process is concluding for a small number of projects that will benefit. We are focused on driving delivery of anything that is designated. That work is being finalised in my Department and I will then have to bring a recommendation to the Government.

Deputy Joe Neville: As I said, I am delighted that the Minister is considering pursuing this matter and that we will have decisions on some of these projects quickly. It is very important that critical infrastructure is developed. We know we must get it built. Projects like DART+ North West are coming in both our areas. We need to ensure they are developed as rapidly as possible.

In bringing through a Bill like this, the real question is what it ultimately looks like in reality. The best way to see that is in how the examples stack up behind it. That is when we really will see the impact of the legislation. As a country, this is something with which we have struggled. In fairness, the UK is no different, as are other countries in the western world, in terms of struggling to build infrastructure. It is great to have legislation in place to help us to do that. As I said, the ultimate proof will be when these areas are designated and we see how they develop.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I absolutely agree. It is about the cumulative impact of all the reforms, including cutting out some of the process at the earlier stage, the external insurance process, which saved half a year, and some of the regulatory reforms we have introduced, with a 30% time saving under the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, for example, for marine licensing. The wider regulatory reforms ensure we have a better balance in terms of the legal system, including in respect of judicial reviews and the environmental legal fees caps. The 30 actions, cumulatively, will bring real delivery to our system and will make a real difference.

The Act is a really important part of that in terms of driving delivery when projects can be designated. Again, we are working with the wider regulatory and delivery system to ensure it is prepared to drive progress across many of those projects. I am confident that for many of the projects, instead of a sense of endless delay, we will see real acceleration in the period ahead.

National Development Plan

11. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the progress made to date under national strategic outcome, NSO, No. 6 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51367/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): Question No. 11 is in the name of Deputy Fleming. With prior approval, it will be asked by Deputy Shane Moynihan.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Táim ag glacadh leis an gceist seo thar ceann an Teachta Moynihan. Will the Minister outline the progress made to date under NSO No. 6 of the national development plan to 2030?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As Minister, I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations across Departments and monitoring monthly expenditure at departmental level. The NDP review was published in July last year, with Departments subsequently publishing sectoral investment plans setting out the capital projects to be prioritised out to 2030. Furthermore, the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan, which was published in December 2025, outlined a range of reforms to speed up delivery of critical infrastructure across Ireland to support the realisation of the funding allocated under the NDP and to optimise delivery.

NSO No. 6 deals with the delivery of high-quality international connectivity. The relevant sectoral strategies include the national aviation policy, the national ports policy and the telecommunications chapter of the national marine planning framework, which relates to international telecommunications connectivity.

In terms of our airports, a range of investments are planned and under way. Dublin Airport has announced a major programme of improvements, which include enhanced operational capacity to manage more than 120,000 passengers per day. The Shannon Airport Group continues to implement its investment plan, including upgrades to airport infrastructure such as new research and development engineering and manufacturing units. Waterford Airport is undergoing a transformative investment to be completed by the summer of 2027.

In relation to ports, the Port of Cork's Ringaskiddy development, container terminal, CCT, 2 project, is under way, which will see the redevelopment and extension of the existing facility to accommodate larger sea vessels and increase port capacity. The Shannon Foynes Port Company is progressing with capacity extensions at the port. Co-funded by the EU, this further strengthens freight and trade and establishes the estuary as a global offshore wind hub. Dublin Port is actively implementing its masterplan 2040 to ensure sustainable growth and long-term capacity planning.

Further details of projects and programmes being delivered under NSO No. 6 are published as part of our investment tracker of projects with a cost greater than €20 million. In addition, the sectoral plans published by Departments at the end of 2025 set out the planned investment

cycle of projects, by county, across the country. Those plans are available from the relevant Departments.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive response. I am glad to see progress is being made on a number of fronts, including aviation, port policy and digital connectivity. The first part of this question asks how confident we are that these projects are now future-proofed in terms of the next 30- or 40-year cycle. The Minister has spoken at length about some of the bottlenecks that exist in the economy arising out of the massive growth we have seen in our population over time. With the continued success of the economy and the continued identification of Ireland as an international hub, connectivity becomes all the more important.

I am particularly keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on how we can improve digital connectivity. Ireland is a global data and technology hub. Subsea connectivity is extremely important to us as well. What plans are being laid out under NSO No. 6 with regard to improving overall connectivity from the subsea infrastructure point of view? Are those plans being future-proofed with an eye to 2050, 2070 and 2090 to ensure we maintain our status as a global technology and data hub?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have been clear about the absolute necessity to protect the huge ecosystem of digital and infrastructure investment in Ireland over the past ten to 20 years. Part of that has been the wider and ongoing discussion on the security of subsea cables. In terms of our immediate capital plans, the Department of communications, when it comes to digital infrastructure, has been prioritising the nationwide roll-out of the national broadband plan, particularly in terms of rural broadband and connectivity. Any longer-term approaches to digital connectivity in terms of State intervention regarding subsea cables is something we would have to consider as part of a future national development plan. We want to continue to embed digital infrastructure and the technology investment that exists in Ireland to promote jobs. That is a key part of NSO No. 6.

In addition to the wider capacity the Deputy mentioned-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): I will allow the Minister to come back in after Deputy Moynihan's contribution.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I accept the role of the State with regard to global subsea connectivity. I have a two-part question on aviation and port capacity. Are all the NSO No. 6 projects the Minister expects to be completed by 2030 on track? Second, what sort of thinking is there in terms of future-proofing for Dublin Airport and Dublin Port? Is the Minister confident there is sufficient headroom for both to grow if we continue to see the amount of connectivity and the volume of trade and passengers coming into the country that we are seeing at the moment?

Deputy Jack Chambers: This is a pro-enterprise Government that wants to grow our economy. Critical to that is our airport and port capacity. Dublin Port's masterplan drives increased port capacity out to 2040. There is a separate wider discussion on additional east coast capacity, which I think we will require in the medium to long term in addition to Dublin

Port, the capacity of which will be constrained. We need to drive its infrastructure plan efficiently.

There have been constraints and planning complexity at Dublin Airport in recent years but the work by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has ensured we lifted the cap. There is a significant capital plan for the airport, some of which is in the planning system and some of which is built out around a major programme of improvements. Ensuring the long-term viability of the airport is very much connected to its being a transatlantic hub, which requires advancing some of the more long-term plans to expand some its piers. There is a real opportunity there. With some of the operational constraints removed, the airport can really drive that delivery. The second runway, which was built during the previous Government's term, offers huge opportunities for additional growth and connectivity.

National Development Plan

13. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the progress made to date under NSO No. 4 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51359/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): Question No. 13 is in the name of Deputy Ó Fearghaíl but will be asked by Deputy Shane Moynihan.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: This question is on the progress to date on delivering NSO No. 4, which relates to sustainable transport and mobility.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will not tell the Deputy again about how I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations, as outlined in the reply in front of me. I will proceed instead to address the question itself, which is about NSO No. 4. This objective is about investing in high-quality sustainable transport and mobility to improve quality of life for all our citizens, support our transition to a low-carbon society and enhance our economic competitiveness.

The Department of Transport published the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, in 2021, which sets out the prioritisation for future investment in the land transport network. The right transport investment helps to deliver high-quality travel and supports positive outcomes for society, the environment and the economy. Investment in NSO No. 4 projects set out in Project Ireland 2040 include the DART+ programme, which is a series of projects that will create a full metropolitan area DART+ network for Dublin, with all the lines linked and connected.

An Coimisiún Pleanála has approved the railway order application for DART+ Coastal North. The procurement process has commenced for a design and build contractors. Once the contractors have been appointed, a period of detailed design will commence followed by construction. Since the previous NDP, there has been significant progress on MetroLink, including most recently the positive planning decision by An Coimisiún Pleanála, as well as

the NDP's allocation of €2 billion from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund to ensure MetroLink moves forward to construction within the lifetime of this NDP.

BusConnects is an investment programme designed to fundamentally transform the bus systems in our major cities, so that journeys for passengers by bus will be fast, reliable, punctual, convenient and affordable. There are 12 bus corridor applications for Dublin and construction on the first of these routes from Liffey Valley to the city centre has commenced with a completion date of 2028. The National Transport Authority is in the process of developing cycling plans for each county under the CycleConnects plan. Further details of projects and programmes being delivered under NSO 4 are with an estimated cost of greater than €20 million are published on the investment tracker.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister. It is right to say that huge progress is being seen on delivery of transport infrastructure across the country. The Liffey Valley to city centre bus corridor that he mentioned is the route I cycle to Leinster House most days. I see the active progress there. I am hopeful that it will be delivered on time, if not ahead of schedule. Like the Minister, I am a TD for a Dublin constituency where population density is increasing at a rapid pace, and rightly so and it is important that we provide housing for our people but it also important that we provide the transport system to underpin that. Progress on MetroLink is very welcome. The DART+ programme is very close to my heart. I have engaged with the Minister and the Minister for Transport in particular on this. It would be remiss of me with this opportunity not to advocate for the DART+ South West programme to be accelerated as much as it can. I am very pleased to see DART+ Coastal North and DART+ West will be moved along quite promptly. DART+ South West is particularly important, given the amount of housing now being delivered in Clonburris and Adamstown, in particular.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate the Deputy's advocacy and input on the DART+ and DART+ South West programmes. We want to deliver many of these projects over the next number of years. That is why the continued uplift of transport investment is essential. On a positive note, we are seeing many of these projects move out of the planning system now to allow us to move to procurement for BusConnects and DART+. The Deputy referenced the importance of delivering this low-carbon transport in terms of housing supply and ensuring that a lot of the homes that are planned for some of the DART+ lines are built in line with our wider public transport investment.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is managing the annualised allocations from a transport perspective. He is working with the NTA to maximise that investment opportunity and deliver as much as possible across the NDP.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: That is right. We are on the same page regarding the need to put these public transport systems in place as the houses are being built so that the private car is not the default option for a lot of these people moving into these homes. That is why I am keen to continue to lobby the NTA. I am pleased that it has opened a consultation on new bus routes for Clonburris and Adamstown. Those developments were not built at the design of the original BusConnects phase. That is somewhere we need to address. There are many other developments like that not only in Dublin, but around the country, where bus stops need to be put in and routes at the same time, as opposed to waiting for the demand to manifest itself. We

know the demand will be there. We know people will move into those homes. From day one, let us give them an option of public transport. That may not necessarily be a heavy rail system like DART+ South West, though I am hopeful we will be able to move quickly on that. It is important that we put the bus services in place. I hope the Minister will support me and other colleagues in lobbying the NTA to move quite quickly in delivering amendments to the BusConnects plan that enhance additionality and respond to the new population settlements forming in Dublin and around the country.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I agree. BusConnects should continue to evolve, particularly with increased development in parts of west Dublin and elsewhere. It should future-proof development as it is occurring. I support the Deputy on that. The NTA needs to be developing that real-time adjustment to BusConnects so that we future-proof our bus system for residential development, which is being built out in certain areas. The NTA needs to prioritise that. We should not leave any new community islanded without bus connectivity. BusConnects needs to advance in parallel with the wider development. I have seen certain issues in my own constituency where people do not have the level of connectivity I believe they should have in certain parts of it and maybe in terms of frequency and reliability. That is a shared objective across our two constituencies.

Questions Nos. 15 and 16 taken with Written Answers.

Flood Relief Schemes

17. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update on the South Galway Flood Relief Project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50877/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I ask the Minister to provide an update on the south Galway flood relief project and a timeline for delivery of this scheme, which is critical to protect homes in the area.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Office of Public Works, OPW, and Galway County Council are working together on the development of the south Galway, Gort lowlands, flood relief scheme with Galway County Council acting as the lead authority. Gort lowlands catchment is a karst landscape with a combination of underground water, river water, groundwater, swallow holes and turloughs. It is unique at an international level from an ecological perspective. Due to the complex nature of the area, Trinity College Dublin and Geological Survey Ireland have been contributing to the development of the scheme's design. They are working alongside the engineering and environmental consultants who were procured to develop a viable scheme design.

There has been a significant amount of public and stakeholder consultation for the scheme and Galway County Council and the OPW are presenting the emerging preferred option. The scheme, when completed, is expected to provide protection to 115 properties: 50 residential and 65 commercial.

Environmental assessments are currently being undertaken for the preferred option, which involves an integrated mechanism to effectively move water through overflow channels across the turloughs in this area. The specific nature of these assessments are being informed by discussions with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS. The timeframe for the consent submission depends on the ongoing environmental survey results and the outcome of the NPWS engagement. Should planning for the scheme be granted, Galway County Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, will re-engage on the matter of culvert capacity, which came to light while the M18 motorway was under construction.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: As the Minister of State will be aware, flooding in south Galway caused devastation in previous years. This scheme has been on the cards for a long time. There is frustration locally at the slow pace of delivery and that communities in the area continue to be left exposed as a result. The weather has become more changeable and extreme. We have seen the impact that flooding has had in the south-east in recent times as well. There is a real fear in south Galway that the longer this drags on, the more it increases the likelihood of a severe event impacting the area again. The last timeframe I was given for submission of the scheme for planning was quarter 4 2026. That had been pushed back a number of times but now in my most recent questions to the Minister of State's office, that timeline has disappeared completely. Now, there seems to be no timeline for the project and that is concerning.

I appreciate that this is complex environmentally but it is extremely urgent. People's homes and livelihoods are at stake. Will the Minister of State give a renewed timeline today and an assurance to the community?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I understand the Deputy's frustration and that of the people in the Gort lowlands. This is a very complex scheme. It is one of the most complex we have in the country. When we talk about swallow holes, turloughs and underground water, it is very complex. That is why we have the experts in the field working on this. Like the Deputy and everyone else, I get frustrated but I understand when I meet the consultants and officials in my Department that the delays are necessary. We get one chance to get a scheme right and this is one of them. While there is frustration about delays in the scheme, I assure the Deputy that I have put my full resources into trying to deliver this scheme. I have also given the local authorities funding for an executive engineer to drive these schemes on. It is not always the case that the OPW is delaying it; we are not. We are working collectively with Galway County Council in this case and with the people. We have had a number of consultations and I will continue to engage with the Deputy and others. I have been invited down to a meeting there shortly. Like the Deputy, I want to be able to deliver good, positive messages to the people.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): We are over time but I will allow the Deputy back in briefly.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I acknowledge that Galway County Council's engineers are doing great work on this. The south Galway flood relief committee has documented the issues and delays the scheme has faced. The Minister of State mentioned the NPWS engagement. That was originally scoped just around one technical question on the flow controls but that has since

seemed to have blown up into a full environmental review of the scheme. It has dragged on for 18 months. A timeline needs to be put on this to bring it to a conclusion.

As has been mentioned, the committee there is keen to meet the Minister of State, go through these issues and discuss them with him. I hope that can be facilitated. I hope we can progress this as quickly as possible and get a renewed timeline in place because it is so important to protect the homes and businesses in the area.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: This is a complex scheme but as the Deputy is aware, I made changes to the minor works scheme to allow local authorities to look at measures to facilitate them and the funding is there in that regard. That could be looked at. I make the point to the Deputy that we are so advanced on the scheme and it is so complex - I agree with the Deputy on that - that we have to allow the experts on the ground to deliver on these schemes. I would love to rush it through. I would love to say that to the Deputy but I cannot. I have been down there and have witnessed first-hand what has happened in that part of the country but it is no different to what is happening all over the country. People say we are taking too long but we have one chance to get it right. It is frustrating given the length of time it is taking but I assure the Deputy that my Department and I are working with the experts to deliver on this scheme. It is something we want to see ourselves.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): 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 Albert Dolan - To discuss the need to support existing retail investors though implementing the funds 2030 review.

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

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the enforcement of e-scooter legislation.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the usage of scramblers, e-bikes and e-scooters in Cork city.

Deputy David Cullinane - To discuss the need to develop Dunmore East harbour to facilitate fishing, leisure, and cruise activity.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the progress in provision of a new school building at Scoil Chrónáin.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - To discuss the need for additional accommodation at Coachford Primary School.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss supports for households affected by the ending of the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme.

Deputies Conor D. McGuinness and Natasha Newsome Drennan - To discuss CDNT issues in Waterford and the south east.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the issues being created in the court system by the new legal aid model.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss progress of the Cork southern distributor link multi-modal route.

The matters raised by Deputies Louis O'Hara, David Cullinane, Shane Moynihan and Aindrias Moynihan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Turf Cutting

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme was set up in 2011 to compensate domestic turf cutters who were forced to stop cutting turf on bogs designated as special areas of conservation and national heritage areas. In the time this scheme has been in operation, over 3,000 applicants have availed of the €1,500 index-linked payments for 15 years. The issue now is that many households are coming to the end of this 15-year period and there is no clarity as to what will happen once their payments end and whether there will be a successor scheme.

I have been contacted by many constituents who have been impacted by restrictions on their right to cut turf and some have received their final payment under this scheme. Despite the ending of this compensation scheme these households will not be allowed to go back to cutting turf on their bogs. They voluntarily entered into this scheme but now the payments are coming to an end it seems the Government is choosing to abandon these households. This is only the beginning of it because, based on the parliamentary questions I have submitted, there are thousands of households that will see their payments end over the next number of years. This will mean that for the constituents who contacted me and for thousands of households, they will have neither turf to cut nor a compensation payment.

It appears that the Minister and the Department are still reviewing their options on this but the problem is that, obviously, the Government has known for quite some time that this scheme was coming to an end. The Government knew there was an end date to these payments yet it seems the Minister is going to leave it to the last minute while household payments are already ending before deciding what the Government is going to do in this area. That leaves a huge deal of uncertainty for households who have relied on these compensation payments for the past 15 years. The Government has provided no detail or clarity as to when a decision will be made.

Is the Department considering a successor compensation scheme for these turf cutters? What is the Government going to do to ensure these households are supported and can the Minister of State give a timeline for when any successor schemes will be announced?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister.

Ireland is one of 196 signatories to the Convention of Biological Diversity, signed in 1992 and ratified in 1996. However, the treaty requires Ireland to establish a system of protected areas to conserve biodiversity. To implement this across member states, the habitats directive was adopted by the European Council of Ministers in 1992 and this was transposed into Irish law in 1997.

Commencing in 1997, Ireland has protected 441 special areas of conservation, SACs, thereby recognising that Ireland is endowed with a rich network of peatlands. These include 53 raised bog SACs within the scope of the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme. The main threats to these sites are the actions that remove vegetation, drain water or cause them to dry out. For active raised bog, the average water level needs to be close to the surface for most of the year.

As the Deputy said, turf cutting involves a combination of these activities and associated draining lowers the water levels. These change the bog structure and result in loss of drainage. For this reason, turf cutting cannot continue on these raised bog SACs. From the outset, the State recognised the significance of turf cutting for many families and communities and ensured a significant lead-in period for those affected. The Deputy spoke about the 15 years.

Notification of these raised bog SACs were issued between 1997 and 2002. The voluntary bog purchase scheme was launched in 1999 and a ten-year derogation for turf cutting for domestic use only for these sites was also announced in 1999. A complete cessation of turf cutting was announced for all raised bog SACs in 2012 and 2011, accompanied by the launch of the cessation of the turf cutting compensation scheme. This means the affected households received an advanced notice of the restrictions but also the 15 years of financial support to assist with the transition. This scheme has provided an annual payment of €1,500 linked with inflation, together with a once-off legal agreement payment and if not, an alternative option was available.

Over the lifetime of the scheme, the State will invest approximately €96 million in compensation to turf cutters affected by the restrictions on protected raised bogs. More than 3,500 active turf cutters have benefited from these supports. The Government continues to support those affected through a range of other initiatives, which include home energy efficiency grants through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, which can provide grants up to 100% for home retrofitting and fuel allowance payments through the Department for Social Protection for households at risk of fuel poverty.

These sites continue to hold significant ecological value and they are vital for biodiversity, they mitigate climate flood impacts and they are part of our cultural and ecological heritage. In many cases habitat restoration measures are necessary to restore these bogs to a healthy ecological condition.

The State has worked collaboratively with the turf cutters, contractors and their representatives under the scheme and this has resulted in a cessation of turf cutting of 85% of the raised bog SACs since 2011. These restrictions are necessary to address these issues raised

by the European Commission in legal proceedings against Ireland in the European Court of Justice.

I thank the Deputy for raising this. What he has raised here tonight, I will have to ask the Minister about. Unfortunately, at the last minute the Minister could not take this matter. I can see the Deputy's concern about the 15 years and what is going to happen going forward. I will revert this question to the Minister. I think it is important we do appreciate the work that is done.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I thank the Minister of State and I appreciate it is not her Department. However, it is deeply disappointing we do not have any clarity on what is going to happen in terms of supports for households, if anything, once these payments end. I have outlined the situation where families are no longer going to be receiving a compensation payment while not being allowed to cut turf in their bogs and we know we have a real crisis in terms of energy poverty and so on in this country at the moment. It is very concerning and many constituents have been in touch with me about this. They have not been able to get any clarity and I cannot provide any clarity to them either because of the lack of response coming from the Government.

At least if clarity could be provided that a continuation of the scheme or an alternative was being considered, that would provide some reassurance to people. That is the bare minimum families should expect because they should continue to be compensated for not being allowed to cut turf in their bogs because that has a very significant impact on them.

11 o'clock

This situation demonstrates a broader failure of the Government to engage with turf cutting communities. One issue I have raised a number of times is the situation in Ardgraique, Barrougher and Clonmoylan bogs in south-east Galway. I raised it with one of the Minister of State's colleagues, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan. Again, I would ask that he engages with the families impacted. In that case, there has been no effort to do that so far. In order to find a solution on that issue, the Minister of State might pass that feedback on to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, as well.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I would like to assure the Deputy that every effort is being made to support individuals who have ceased turf cutting on protected bogs. The cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme has operated, as the Deputy said, for 15 years, and the majority of turf cutters on these sites have accepted compensation. Many others have consented to restoration works under the protected raised bog restoration incentive scheme or have agreed to sell plots to the State. I can say that a lot of work has been done on this but the cessation of the turf cutting compensation scheme is a landmark achievement in balancing environmental preservation with community support.

Over its 15-year term, the scheme has successfully compensated over 3,500 active turf cutters, providing families with index-linked annual payments or relocation options to ensure energy security. This initiative has been instrumental in conserving 53 special areas of conservation and 36 natural heritage areas, addressing legal action against the State and protecting peatland sites of unique ecological value for future generations.

Through this scheme, the National Parks and Wildlife Service has demonstrated that significant ecological restoration is possible through fair and sustainable community engagement. It is very important that we will continue to support local peatland communities through schemes such as the peatlands and nature engagement scheme and other initiatives that sustain biodiversity, and enable these sites to deliver a wide range of environmental and climate benefits. As I said, the Minister could not make it but I will definitely go back with the Deputy's concerns. There is a lot of good communication there working within the communities. I thank the turf cutters for all their great work as well.

Harbours and Piers

Deputy David Cullinane: In 2019, RPS was commissioned to develop a feasibility study on developing Dunmore East Harbour. As the Minister of State knows, Dunmore East Harbour is in the east of County Waterford. It is a fishing port. It is also a home to a lot of leisure activity that is very busy, by the way, during the summer months. There are fantastic facilities for children and adults. It also takes in cruise liners, although that can be difficult because of the lack of facilities. There was one cruise ship that was unfortunately turned away from Dunmore East a number of weeks ago because of bad weather and the fact that the harbour finds it very difficult to be able to take cruise ships under certain circumstances.

A big cruise ship came in at the weekend. I was there myself. I met with the harbourmaster and saw how difficult it was for the harbour in very tightly controlled circumstances where the space just does not exist to try to manage almost 2,000 passengers coming off and all the logistics that comes with that, while at the same time trying to cope with all the fishing boats. There are emergency crews and a lifeboat is anchored there as well. Then you have all the leisure activity.

There was, as I said, a feasibility study carried out in 2019. That feasibility study looked at how we can improve the harbour in Dunmore East and ensure that the fishing vessels, fishermen, leisure activities, aquasports and all of that going on at the harbour, plus facilitating cruise ships, can all coexist and work in a pragmatic way that benefits the local village and community but also the local economy. It came up with a number of options and variations. The option that it proposed at the time would have cost about €12.5 million. I would imagine that it would cost more now. The difficulty is that nothing has happened and that feasibility study has essentially sat on a shelf. We now have a situation where we have a very busy port. The harbour master and those who work in the port are trying their best to facilitate the fishermen and all the other activities and to take in cruise ships, which is becoming more and more difficult.

We as legislators and policy-makers in the Dáil and in the Government have to decide what it is we want from the harbour in Dunmore East. I spoke to people coming off that ship. There were about 2,500 people on it. They were travelling all over the place. They were travelling to Kilkenny - the Minister of State's own constituency - Carlow, Wexford, Cork in some instances, down to Midleton to visit the brewery and, of course, Waterford city. These were thousands of people spending money and adding to the local economy. However, it is going to become much more difficult for that harbour to take more vessels and, at times, it cannot take vessels because of the limitations of the port. There are already issues for fishermen at the port. You can see the boats that are lined up three abreast because the berthing facilities simply are

not there. That feasibility study looked at more berthing facilities, an additional breakwater or an extension of the existing breakwater and more facilities at the harbour to allow all of those different activities to coexist.

What is the Government's plan for the port and the harbour? Is it serious about developing Dunmore East Harbour? Is it serious about wanting that harbour to be able to cope with more cruise liners coming, with all the benefits that will have for tourism, plus supporting the fishermen and all the other activities that happen there? If the Government is serious about that, it needs to come up with a plan and look at one of the options that were outlined in that report. There were about ten different options, if you look at the options and variations. It is not difficult to look at what is best for the harbour, talk to the harbourmaster and local communities and come up with the capital funding. It simply has not happened up to now. My question is this: why, after that report was done in 2019, is there still no movement on developing that harbour?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned fishery harbour centres. The Department also has responsibility for the North Harbour at Cape Clear Island, as well as the maintenance of a small number of specific piers, lights and beacons throughout Ireland.

Investing in our marine infrastructure is particularly important to the resilience of our seafood industry. The Department, subject to project feasibility and resources, administers the annual fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development programme consistent with the objectives of the national development plan. The strategic objective of the programme is to contribute to the future viability of the fishing industry and the sustainability of our coastal communities. Between January 2015 and December 2025, the Department invested almost €335 million in the State's publicly owned marine infrastructure through a mix of national Exchequer and Brexit adjustment reserve funding. Dunmore East Harbour received over €21.5 million during that period.

On 16 February 2026, the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, announced an allocation of €27 million for capital projects in Ireland's publicly owned harbours through the 2026 fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development programme. Dunmore East has been allocated nearly €2 million for projects including cliff protection works, which have recently been granted planning permission, and preparation for a new harbour breakwater. These are likely to be multiannual projects.

The Department's engineers prioritise projects that will bring infrastructure for which the Department has responsibility up to best international standards. Some projects may be scheduled over several phases to take account of the availability of annual funding, competing national priorities and the capacity of the division to manage multiple large projects simultaneously.

In 2016, the Department commissioned consulting engineers RPS to design a small craft harbour at Dunmore East. Following public consultation, the project's scope expanded to incorporate leisure, fishing and cruise vessel facilities. A comprehensive technical feasibility

study was finalised in 2019, as the Deputy said, to evaluate various harbour layouts. While a preferred development option is under consideration, progressing the project depends on securing regulatory consents, annual national funding and complying with the Department of public expenditure's infrastructure guidelines.

Dunmore East is one of Ireland's principal fishing ports. The main basin of the harbour has three quays for the fishing fleet. The harbour features an adventure centre, a coastguard unit and a Shannon-class Royal National Lifeboat Institution, RNLI, lifeboat station.

Waterford Harbour Sailing Club runs a busy spring-summer schedule, using an open-access slipway. In summer, Dunmore East acts as a Port of Waterford cruise ship tender port, with an average of ten calls each year. As recently as Sunday last, 5 July, a cruise ship visited the area carrying 2,700 passengers.

The Department is evaluating the responses to a tender for a consultant to prepare a seven-to ten-year business plan to enable each of the fishery harbour centres to work to clear, strategic objectives. The business consultant will look at each of the harbours, consider the characteristics and produce individual plans. It is expected that there will be town-hall-type consultations in each harbour with all relevant stakeholders to consider their needs. There will be town hall meetings in this regard.

Deputy David Cullinane: In the Minister of State's response, she acknowledged that in 2016, the Department commissioned a feasibility study. It finished its work and reported back in 2019. We are now in 2026. That is seven years later and no progress has been made. Since 2019, that plan has sat on a shelf. The Minister of State said the Department has seven-to-ten-year plans for all fishery harbours. Dunmore East Harbour does not need a seven- or ten-year plan. The feasibility study has already been commissioned and reported back. It has already provided options.

The Minister of State acknowledged all the activity I spoke about, including the leisure activity, how busy it is during the summer, the cruise ships, including the most recent ship that arrived, the fishermen activity and much more that goes on at the harbour. That is acknowledged, recognised and accepted. We have a feasibility plan that made options. The only thing that did not happen was the Government making any decision as to what to do. When I raise the issue seven years later, I am told that we can look at a seven- to ten-year plan for the port and maybe have town hall meetings. A town hall meeting might work if there is good news, but we are not starting from scratch here. That is the point. The Minister of State with responsibility for this area has to have a good look at this. It is time now for the two local Ministers of State, Deputies Cummins and Butler, to start fighting for capital investment for Waterford and the south east.

This also benefits the Minister of State's constituency. As I said, I spoke to many people coming off that cruise ship. They were travelling to Carlow, Tipperary and the Rock of Cashel. Others were going to Wexford, the John F. Kennedy Arboretum and Cork. Of course, some were going to Waterford city and parts of County Waterford. We all benefit from it. The south east operates as a tourist entity in its own right with all of its offerings. All I am saying is that we do not need seven or ten more years of examinations and procrastination. We need a decision taken based on the feasibility study that was carried out. Put the investment in and

allow the port to flourish, which is in the best interests of me, the Minister of State and the constituents we represent.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I was in Waterford recently. There is a lot of work being done in Waterford. I understand what is happening. Dunmore East is an important part of the infrastructure that supports the Irish and EU fishing fleets, and it facilitates an increased level of leisure and tourism activity. There are ongoing improvement projects that have increased the operating efficiency of the harbour. Work has been done in that regard. I understand what the Deputy is asking but the Department is working and doing this.

With a total of €21.5 million having been invested since 2015 and nearly €2 million having been allocated this year alone, the Department continues to promote the development of Dunmore East Harbour. The future of the harbour will be guided by a seven- to ten-year strategic business plan, shaped directly by stakeholders' feedback. There is a big plan in this regard. As I said, a lot of money has been invested. The Department remains dedicated to securing the necessary regulatory approvals and the national funding to guarantee sustained, long-term infrastructure growth.

I will absolutely bring the Deputy's concerns back to the Minister. As the Deputy said, tourism is vital. I was in Waterford and I noticed how well it looks. I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue.

School Accommodation

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mór agam é labhairt anseo oíche anocht ar chás Scoil Chrónáin. Is Gaelscoil í i Rathcoole i mo Dháilcheantar. Tá sí 50 bliain ar an bhfód agus tá sí ag tabhairt aghaidh ar a céad 50 bliain eile. This evening, I am speaking on behalf of the school community of Scoil Chrónáin in Rathcoole who have asked their Oireachtas representatives to bring the school's case to the floor of the Dáil on a number of points.

Scoil Chrónáin is at the heart of Rathcoole village. It has a proud tradition of providing Gaelscolaíocht to communities in Rathcoole, Saggart and farther afield. I attended Coláiste Chillian where there were many alumni from Scoil Chrónáin. It has a proud and noble tradition of education and a vibrant and active school community.

Part of the school's story is its wait for a new school building. There was great celebration agus ceiliúradh in the past few months when Scoil Chrónáin was identified as one of the priority school building projects under the national development plan's educational sectoral plan. The project was to deliver a 16-classroom school, including two special education classrooms on the permanent Rathcoole site. The school is already relying on prefab accommodation, so the need for progress on this project was particularly urgent and acute.

The project ended a tender process in February 2025 and submissions were received in May, but the preferred tenderer has withdrawn after due diligence. The challenge that is now being faced is that the school expected to see ground being broken at this stage. Its planning permission expires in November of this year. I am conscious that the Department is aware of all of this information. The school is at a crossroads in that it does not know where its permanent school building is at. There is a lack of clarity and certainty in that regard. Given

that the school is 50 years in existence, has such a proud tradition of schooling and provides a first-class education to the students in its building, it is difficult to justify to that school community that it is still relying on prefab accommodation, especially when it expected a new building to be delivered. It is not the only school in Dublin Mid-West that faces this situation, but it is the one I am speaking about today.

The school also faces an additional challenge in that its enrolment means it lost its 16th teacher for this coming school year. The average class size is approximately 25-26 students. This will result in the creation of three multi-grade classes of approximately 34 students between fifth and sixth classes. This loss of a teacher, along with education being provided in a building that should have been replaced and about which there was great hope it would have been replaced, will inevitably place additional pressures on teachers and students.

I raise this case in particular because Gaelscolaíocht is very important and close to my heart. We know that scoileanna in the Gaeltacht receive additional teacher provision because of their status as scoileanna Gaeltachta. That privilege is not extended or afforded to scoileanna in non-Gaeltacht areas, despite the fact that they are Gaelscoileanna. The programme for Government that we support commits clearly to reducing the pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1 and to providing additional support for schools that have particularly large classes.

My asks are threefold. First, I seek an update on where the new permanent building for Scoil Chrónáin that was promised in the NDP sectoral plan is. Second, what progress can we make to reducing the overall pupil-teacher ratio? Third, will consideration be given for scoileanna in non-Gaeltacht areas to have additional provision for a higher pupil-teacher ratio, where practical? Scoil Chrónáin has 50 proud years of education behind it. I hope it will embrace the next 50 years with the vibrancy, culture and the grá don Ghaeilge it has demonstrated in its five decades in Rathcoole. I hope we will be able to bring it some good news about the school building soon.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this serious issue. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for education. The Department of education wishes to outline the current position in relation to the new school building for Scoil Chrónáin in Rathcoole, County Dublin. Scoil Chrónáin is an all-Irish, co-educational primary school under the patronage of the Archbishop of Dublin. The brief for the permanent project is to provide a new 16-classroom primary school and accommodation, including two classrooms for children with special educational needs on its permanent site in Rathcoole, County Dublin. This project will be delivered under the Department's employee-led design team, which uses a professional external project manager to co-ordinate and drive the design team to achieve the best possible timeframe for the project through the stages of architectural planning to tender and then to construction.

The project progressed to tender on 28 February 2025.

The tender returns were received on 2 May 2025 and tenders were evaluated by the design team. Following due diligence and discussions with the preferred tenderer, the company withdrew its tender. The Department's design team is now carrying out due diligence in relation to the next-placed tenderer, with a view to submitting a tender assessment report for the Department's consideration. Projects are subject to relevant due diligence at each stage in the process, within the context of overall programme and budgetary parameters.

The Department and the design team are monitoring the current progression of the project in terms of planning permission and, if necessary, will prepare the documentation for an application to extend the current planning permission ahead of its expiry later this year. That is good and it is important to get that information back to the parents and teachers. They are looking at the planning permission ahead of its expiry later this year. They are seeking to extend it.

The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally. The enrolment of Scoil Chrónáin fell from 381 pupils to 354 pupils, which is 19 pupils below the threshold required to retain the 16th class teacher. As a result, the school's mainstream staffing is to reduce to 15 teachers in September. The staffing arrangements for the 2026-27 school year are set out in Circular 0025/2026. As the Deputy knows, it goes on the year before. That circular contains information and application forms on the staffing appeals process, whereby schools may appeal their staffing allocation to the primary staffing appeals board. The appeal submitted by the school was unsuccessful. The appeals board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

The Department has a strong track record of delivering the school building programme, with more than €6.9 billion invested since 2020. This has delivered approximately 1,400 completed school building projects and more than 4,000 small-scale improvement projects. A total capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth has been confirmed for the period 2026-30 under the national development plan. As part of the NDP implementation plan for the education and youth sector, a first tranche of projects to progress to tender and construction during 2026 and 2027 was published in January 2026. This list includes the permanent school building project for Scoil Chrónáin National School. The Department will continue to keep the school and its patron body updated as the project progresses.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I acknowledge this is not the Minister of State's brief and I appreciate her taking the time to go through this.

I welcome the indication from the Department that it is aware of the need to extend planning permission. Without being flippant, the central point still holds here in that these parents and the school community were promised the school would go to construction during this two-year period. If we are talking about extending planning permission, there is a gap there in terms of the school building needing to be provided. It would be great to get an update from the Department about when it thinks it will have completed the due diligence on the next preferred tenderer and whether it thinks it will be able to move to construction imminently. If a minor extension on planning permission is needed, so be it, but the priority for these parents is the permanent school building. They have been waiting an awfully long time for it. The students are learning in prefabs. The site and money is there. Tá an toil ann. Parents want to see to see delivery on this building. I urge the Minister of State to bring this back to the Minister for education to make it very clear to her that the school deserves and needs a very clear update on when progress will happen in respect of construction. While it is important to place contingency, let us not make contingency the plan. It is important that we try to focus the mind and get to the plan we need to get to.

With regard to the staffing issues, the Minister of State set out the figures quite clearly. Scoil Chrónáin is a Gaelscoil providing a first-class education and, as I mentioned, Gaelscoileanna get flexibility in terms of their pupil-teacher ratio. There is probably a case for that in the case of Gaelscoileanna in non-Gaeltacht areas, though I am also very conscious that there are other schools in my constituency that have also lost teachers as a result of falling enrolment numbers. That is why it is even more important that we as a Government, and I as a Government backbencher, continue to support the calls to bring down the pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1, to ensure we reduce our class sizes to the levels they need to be, and continue to support our teachers. In an environment where there are more special educational needs and teachers are under pressure as a result, and where there is more expected of our teachers, that reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio is extremely important.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this. The Department will continue to build on the progress made over recent years with continued roll-out of projects on a priority basis to meet the most urgent needs in terms of provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities. In this regard, the Department published a list of 105 school building projects in the first tranche to proceed to construction or tender over 2026–27, totalling €1.6 billion in investment. These projects will deliver 27,000 additional modernised school places. I will definitely go back to the Minister as the Deputy is right. Communication is so important. I understand, as a parent myself, that when a person has children at school, while working with staff, communication with the Department is absolutely crucial. I see it in my constituency with schools which I know are being prioritised. I will go back and tell the Minister the Deputy has highlighted this. I thank him for raising the matter. Communication with the different sectors and working with the Department is so important for the schools, representatives and parents. The parents and staff need answers to the questions the Deputy has asked me. That is something I will absolutely bring back to the Minister. I thank the Deputy for highlighting this really serious issue.

School Accommodation

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I raise the very serious accommodation difficulties that Coachford National School is experiencing. The school has done everything asked of it. The board, principal, staff and parents have all worked together to accommodate significant growth in pupil numbers, but they are now at a point where there is simply nowhere left to go. The numbers tell the story. The school had approximately 109 students in 2020, and it is expected that there will be 171 pupils in September. That is an increase of more than 57% in just seven years. Two additional teaching posts have been sanctioned by the Department. That is an acknowledgement that the growth is real and substantial. The difficulty is that although the teachers have been sanctioned, the accommodation has not followed.

The school has used every available space. An SEN room is being used as a classroom, a staff room has become an SEN room, a general-purpose room is being used for multiple purposes and there is no spare capacity left in the building. The school sought approval for temporary prefab classrooms onsite and that request was refused. The appeal was also unsuccessful, yet the underlying problem still exists. The children are still there, the teachers are still needed and September is still coming.

Coachford is a growing village and community. Its catchment area has a population of approximately 2,500 people and we have seen significant housing developments in recent years. The Cnoic Eoin development has brought new families into the area and the Vicars Glebe development has already been occupied, with further phases progressing. There will be up to 70 homes in that. At the same time, Ceann Scribe is nearing completion. That is 26 homes that will shortly be occupied, with further phases prepared afterwards. Those families are going to become part of the community and will also be looking for school places.

An important piece of the puzzle is the new wastewater treatment plant in Coachford. For so many places, capacity is a limiting factor, but in Coachford that plant has been put in place and it allows spare capacity for housing and future development growth. If we want villages like Coachford to grow, families to settle there and rural communities to thrive, the public infrastructure has to grow with them. School accommodation cannot be an afterthought.

What is concerning me is that the solution proposed by the Department is the conversion of the school's general purpose room into a classroom.

The school has made it abundantly clear that that room is a central hub in the building. It serves as the school's only indoor PE area and assembly space. The school has raised concerns about circulation, accessibility and suitability of the room as a classroom. The Department has indicated that rented accommodation could be considered where suitable premises were available. The difficulty is there are no suitable premises nearby. The practical and commonsensical solution is about getting temporary accommodation on the site. We are not looking for anything exceptional or extravagant. It is about providing a safe and suitable classroom for children already attending the school.

I ask that the Department revisit the case, work with the school and find a solution that reflects the reality on the ground. The Department has sanctioned the teachers. It now needs to provide the classrooms.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this serious issue. While a lot of work is being done in the Department, information is needed. That will be vital when I speak to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, tomorrow and bring back these issues. I am taking this matter on her behalf.

The school building project for Coachford primary school was approved to enter the Department of Education and Youth's pipeline under the additional school accommodation scheme. The project will provide a two-class special educational needs unit, one mainstream classroom and one special education teaching room. The project has been devolved for delivery to the school authority. The school received approval to progress the project to stage 2b, detailed design. It is currently with the planning authority for approval as additional information was required by the planning authority. Departmental officials are awaiting the planning outcome and the submission of the stage 2b report for approval.

Although this project is not included in the first tranche of school building projects to proceed to tender and construction under the NDP sectoral investment plan, it remains part of the Department's overall pipeline. The plan emphasises maximising existing capacity and prioritising projects that address the most urgent needs, with a strong focus on special education provision. That is important for the Department.

The Department will continue to progress projects on a prioritised basis to meet demand for additional capacity and the modernisation of existing facilities. The next tranche of projects to proceed to tender will be announced in 2027 and planning for this and future tranches will continue throughout 2026 and 2027, with projects assessed based on their progress through the design pipeline, capacity needs and overall prioritisation. This process will involve engagement with stakeholders and schools and will be supported by the findings of the energy and condition survey, due for completion later in 2026. As prioritisation continues, additional projects will be progressed where justified by urgency and readiness to proceed and subject to feasibility within available funding parameters. Opportunities for advance enabling works will be considered for the most urgent and complex projects to support delivery from 2028 onwards. Interim accommodation needs will continue to be assessed on a case-by-case basis to determine appropriate solutions. The Department will continue to engage with the school regarding accommodation.

I welcome this because it is important that everybody get information. At least there is some clarification there for the Deputy. I know we need to get more. The school has the teachers but needs to know what is going forward. I will go back to the Minister with this one.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the fact that the permanent building project is progressing. There is quite a bit of work to do on that. The difficulty remains in the here and now. The fundamental question is where these children will be accommodated while everybody is waiting for that building to be put in place. The school has already stretched every available space in the existing building and nobody could reasonably say the board has not done everything possible to make things work. Enrolment in the school is not levelling off; it is continuing to increase. We have seen substantial growth in recent years, new homes occupied in Cnoc Eoin and Vicar's Glebe, a further 26 under construction and nearing completion in Ceann Scríbe, and additional homes planned. The infrastructure is there, with the wastewater treatment plant, to support further growth. Everything is pointing in the direction of further population growth and demand for school places.

An off-site solution would be really difficult. The area around the school in Coachford already faces challenges around traffic, parking and pedestrian access. Splitting classes across locations would create additional difficulties for families, pupils and staff. A prefab classroom on the school grounds is a practical, sensible and proven solution. It keeps the school community together, provides safe accommodation and bridges the gap until the permanent extension is developed. The Department has already recognised the need for additional teachers. I ask that it recognise the need for accommodation of those teachers and the children. I urge the Minister of State to engage with the school and seek a workable interim solution before it becomes a bigger problem for the community. The children are enrolled and the teachers are approved, but the accommodation still is not there.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The Department is committed to ensuring that appropriate accommodation is available for all school pupils and will, in the wider context outlined, ensure that each school project on the school building programme is subject to the due diligence required under the Government's infrastructure guidelines.

Since 2020, the Department of Education and Youth has provided €796.5 million in capital funding for Cork schools. Over this period, a total of 168 schools have been upgraded through provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or modular accommodation. Twelve school projects to go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027 were included in the NDP implementation plan. There are currently 18 school projects in Cork under construction. The status of all projects continues to be set out under item 10 on the Department's website under building works for the construction, extension and refurbishment of schools. This is updated regularly to reflect projects' progress through capital appraisal, site acquisition, design, tender and construction stages. The accommodation requirements at Coachford school will be considered as part of the ongoing overall Department prioritisation process, in consultation with the school's patron and school authorities.

I will bring this matter back to the Minister. I see the Deputy's concerns. The school is growing and getting extra teachers. It is important. The Deputy has been speaking to the school and wants to see if we can get a modular build in the interim. I will contact the Minister's office tomorrow and highlight the issues that the Deputy has highlighted this evening.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.38 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 8 Iúil 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.38 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 8 July 2026.