



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 16 Iúil 2026

Thursday, 16 July 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Special Educational Needs

1. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the number of children with additional needs who require but have yet to receive an offer of an appropriate school place for September 2026, based on her most recent meeting with the National Council for Special Education, NCSE; the date of same; the measures she is taking to ensure that every child with additional needs has an appropriate school place for September; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54456/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I wish the staff and the Minister all the best for the summer. I know it will be a busy summer but I hope that everyone gets a break. I ask the Minister to state the number of children with additional needs who require but have yet to receive an offer of an appropriate school place for September 2026, based on her most recent meeting with the NCSE; the date of that meeting; and the measures she has taken to ensure that every child with additional needs has an appropriate school for September.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I thank the Deputy for his comments and I too wish everyone well over the next couple of weeks.

An estimated 25% of students, or approximately 240,000 children and young people, have special educational needs. While the majority are supported successfully in mainstream settings by their class teacher, special education teachers, SET, and special needs assistants, SNA, as necessary, there remains an increasing need for special class and special school places for children with more complex needs.

The parents notify process has played a key role in forward planning, supporting the delivery of 584 new special classes, the establishment of four new special schools for the coming 2026-27 school year and expanded capacity in existing special schools. The National Council for

Special Education has verified that some 7,860 children and young people who were notified to them by 1 October 2025 are eligible for a specialist place for the 2026-27 school year. The NCSE continues to work with families where children have come forward since then, to secure appropriate placements. NCSE data indicates there is sufficient overall capacity to meet identified demand. However, the Department recognises that places may not always arise in a preferred school or locality. The NCSE is actively engaging with these families to identify suitable placements. Approximately 7,000 of the 7,860 students have a diagnosis of autism and, given there are generally adequate places for students with other diagnoses, the focus is on new places for children with autism. NCSE data shows that approximately 75% of those who came forward by 1 October are already enrolled in school.

As in previous years, students without a school place are prioritised for access to specialist placements. My Department receives regular updates on placements and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, meets the NCSE every week. I have regular engagement with the NCSE and the Minister of State met its representatives as recently as yesterday to monitor progress.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister finished on the bit I am interested in and that I specifically asked about,. What was the latest weekly update? The information the Minister has just given me was previously provided to the House on 23 April. It is now 16 July. Does the Minister have any additional information to provide to the House as of this week?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There is weekly engagement with the NCSE. Since January, 584 special classes have been sanctioned for the upcoming school year. That includes 68 inclusive classes. Of the 584 new special classes, 378 are being established in primary schools and 206 in post-primary schools. This brings the total number of special classes sanctioned to date to over 4,300. The NCSE continues to work with families and schools on this. As we know, there may be more children throughout the year who will need specialist placements. The NCSE is working proactively with them in relation to that.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Again, we have those figures from a briefing we had with the Department as recently as yesterday. It is all welcome progress but the question I am asking today is what is the unmet need as things stand? How many children do not have an offer of a school place? How many children have an offer of a school place but it will not be ready for September, in terms of advancing of works? It has been reported in the media this week that an extremely high number of children will not have a place for September. Many of them are taking legal cases. The Minister can confirm or deny that. I am providing her with the opportunity but she has not done it so far.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: A huge amount of work is being done on securing specialist places, be it in special classes or special schools. We are far ahead of where we were this time last year. We had a budget for 400 special classes. I got increased funding in March of this year. We are ahead in relation to forward planning. There are now 584 special classes allocated. This is far more than any previous years because of the parent notify system, on 1 October. I brought that forward again this year. This enabled the Department to forward plan even better for when I go into budget negotiations for September 2027. A huge amount of work is happening with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and me. There is sufficient overall

capacity to meet identified demand. There is a pathway for children to receive a specialist place or supports within mainstream settings. As I have said, about 25% or approximately 240,000 children and young people have special educational needs and the majority of them are supported in mainstream settings but the focus and priority will be on children who do not have a place and are coming into the primary school system or moving from primary to post-primary, for example.

Youth Work Supports

2. **Deputy Aidan Farrelly** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she will provide an update on the commitment in Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028 to produce a workforce development strategy; if an advisory group has, or is intended to be, set up; the terms of reference for the group; if pay and conditions are to be considered as part of the strategy; if she intends to publish the findings of the surveys and consultations undertaken to date to inform the strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53905/26]

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I ask the Minister to provide the House with an update on the commitment with regards to Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: As Minister for Education and Youth I am committed to supporting the workforce in the youth sector to deliver high-quality youth work and non-formal developmental opportunities for young people. Action 7 in Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028, commits to developing a workforce development strategy in respect of the youth sector. This is to include consideration of training needs and the requirement for high-quality, accessible and inclusive youth work services and opportunities.

The Department has engaged extensively with youth workers and managers in youth organisations and is aware of the recruitment and retention challenges being experienced in the sector. This engagement included completion of a workforce survey and employer questionnaire. These were followed by 11 regional, in person and online consultations. The data captured from the consultation period will inform the development of the strategy. Important data from the consultation include: the high level of job satisfaction in the sector; learning and development opportunities; the challenging recruitment and retention environment; the varying youth worker pay scales; different contract types; and details on average and median youth worker pay. Profile data on youth workers was also captured, including their qualifications, length of employment, age range, gender and ethnicity. It is important to highlight that this is the first time this information has been sought and received from the youth work sector.

It is important to highlight that this is the first time this information has been sought and received from the youth work sector and that will establish critical baseline information for us for the development of the strategy. To support the development of the workforce development strategy, a workforce advisory group will be established. My Department is working in

partnership with the National Youth Council of Ireland to agree the role of this group, including its membership. It is intended for the advisory group to have its first meeting in September.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister. If she will indulge me, it is very rare I get the opportunity to speak about my life experience prior to being in here but I have been a youth worker for about 16 years or the guts of three Dáil terms. The day before the general election I submitted my PhD thesis, which was on professional youth work. It asked youth workers many of the same questions that were asked afterwards by the Department. I will happily share the findings with the Minister.

Youth workers, in the main, are very satisfied but equally they are very concerned about what the future looks like because we are losing good youth worker after good youth worker to other sectors who can offer more. They can offer more in terms of pay and remuneration but also the burnout associated with the occupation is really difficult.

When the Minister says that advisory group is going to meet in September, who makes up the membership of that? The information the Minister's Department has collected is golden with regard to the sector. Will the Minister publish the findings of that survey? It would be really useful information.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank Deputy Farrelly. I would be very happy to receive that information. It would help our data collection and make sure we are getting a really good picture of the youth work sector across the country. The work that has been under way within the Department is to try to get that profile, to really understand our youth work sector and to get feedback from them.

The first advisory group will have its first meeting in September and the terms of reference of that group will be finalised once the group is established. My Department is working in consultation with the National Youth Council of Ireland to agree the role of that group. The workforce survey data will be shared with the workforce advisory group in the first instance to inform its work in overseeing the development of the strategy. The workforce data will also accompany the strategy in the publication. So, it will be published.

While the subject of the pay and conditions of the sector has been raised through consultations, they will not directly form part of the strategy. As the Deputy knows, youth workers are not employed by my Department. They are not public servants and funding is allocated on the provision of service spaces to meet the needs of the youth population in an area. The employment of the staff, including youth workers, is a matter relevant for youth organisations and services.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: It is acceptable that data will be shared with the task force in September but I ask that it be shared more widely once the terms of reference have been agreed. It would be really useful for the academic sector and for those who are in the market of training and professionally qualifying youth workers in the field.

I have been around long enough to have seen youth work move from Department to Department. The only conclusion I can come to in terms of analysis is that the Minister has a real opportunity in her Department to map out what the future of youth work looks like, and

not just for the young people. We are consistently talking about the issues facing young people and how youth work is often a response to those issues. Actually, youth work is an occupation and profession that is one of the best jobs to have but we need to make sure the landscape is there for budding youth workers to go through appropriate professional qualification programmes and that the job will fulfil them not just from a rewarding job perspective but also from a financial perspective and from the perspective of promotions and so on, right through their 20s, 30s and 40s.

I wish that group the best. I also wish the Minister's Department the best in its endeavours with that and I thank her again.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: It is very fitting that youth has moved into the Department of education. It is a good fit. I have met with many youth organisations across the country since I was appointed and they seem very happy with the formal education and the informal education. I have witnessed the huge expertise on the ground. This is the data we want to collect and there is a willingness there and an appetite for training as well. As the Deputy knows very well, it is so important we have the right skill set in our youth services across the country, dealing with children and young people and with trauma, and making sure we have the best, which we do, and that workers are accessing the training they require.

For example, in response to some of the calls from the sector, a bursary initiative was established in June to support eligible youth workers and youth work managers to undertake the three-year MA qualification in community and youth work, part-time, in-service programme in Maynooth University. Also, the workforce advisory group will regularly update the nation youth sector reference group, which is also currently being established. That group will include representatives from across the youth sector, including academics and youth representatives, and will support a balanced and transparent input from across the wider sector.

School Staff

3. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if her attention has been drawn to the fact that Ireland has the largest primary school class sizes in the EU; the measures she is taking to address the recruitment and retention crisis in primary school teaching; if she will provide for 1,000 more primary teachers in budget 2027 to allow more individual attention, more effective teaching, and stronger support for pupils with additional needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54457/26]

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: This Government is committed to improving staffing levels in primary schools and supporting the recruitment and retention of teachers. According to the latest published data from November 2025, there were more than 97% of allocated primary teaching posts filled. Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 6,000 since 2019 and now stand at the highest level ever recorded at over 43,400.

The Government is investing a record €14.1 billion in education and schools through budget 2026. This record level of investment has enabled significant progress in tackling educational disadvantage and supporting children and young people with special educational needs to

achieve their full potential. Funding has been provided for 860 additional special education teachers across special schools and mainstream settings, together with more than 1,700 additional special needs assistants.

Budget 2026 also includes an additional €48 million full-year investment across both the DEIS strategy and the DEIS plus scheme. That provides more teaching positions and more staffing and supports for schools as well. That DEIS programme will benefit approximately 30,000 children and young people attending DEIS plus schools as well as one in four children across schools in the DES programme.

Under the programme for Government, there is a commitment to reduce the general primary pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1 over the lifetime of the Government and to introduce targeted measures for schools with very large class sizes. This builds on substantial progress already made. The primary staffing schedule has improved from an average allocation ratio of 26:1, five years ago, to 23:1 for the current school year, which is the lowest ever at primary level. Average class sizes have fallen from 24.1 to 22.2 pupils, while the overall pupil-teacher ratio improved from 15:1 in 2019-2020 to 12.8:1 in 2023-2024, which is comparing favourably with the OECD average levels.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister. She said from November that 97% of posts were filled. In real terms at the same time, 996 teaching posts were unfilled, which is almost 1,000. Figures as recent as last week tell us that over 39,000 primary school students were in classes of 30 pupils or more in the past school year. A figure of 36,805 were in classes of 30 to 34 pupils and 2,237 were in classes of between 35 and 39 pupils. That is simply incredible in 2026 in Ireland and it has a direct impact on the type of attention children can get in the classroom. It is as simple as that. It is also contributing to the burnout for teachers.

I did not hear the answer in her initial response and maybe the Minister will provide it in her next response. Is it her ambition to move on the pupil-teacher ratio in this budget cycle and will she provide for 1,000 primary school teachers?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: It is an absolute commitment in the programme for Government to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio over the lifetime of the Government. The Deputy will appreciate I cannot announce anything here in the Dáil. I have to go into negotiations in relation to the upcoming budget.

In the past ten years there has been a five-point improvement to the primary staffing schedule. In 2015, teachers were allocated to primary schools at a general average of 28 pupils for every one teacher. This is now reduced to 23:1.

Lower thresholds are in place for DEIS urban band 1. That includes DEIS plus schools. We have 17:1, 21:1 and 19:1 for junior, senior and vertical schools respectively. A three-point reduction in retention thresholds assists schools in retaining existing staff. As the Deputy knows, there are over 43,000 teachers employed in our primary schools. This is an increase of over 9,000 teachers at primary level in ten years. I understand the importance of ensuring that every child gets access to their special education teacher and all of the supports required. That is obviously ongoing work with me and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, in the context

of this upcoming budget. I hope to put in place more measures to support our schools right across the education sector.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is a statement of fact that in recent years we have seen a reduced number of classroom teachers. Budget 2026 led to the removal of 498 classroom teachers, a net reduction of 381 when one looks at the gains. The year 2025-26 saw a reduction of 290 and 2024-25 a reduction of 237. That has a real impact.

I can give the example of Lismullen National School. I hope to correspond with the Minister directly in relation to Lismullen National School, if she is agreeable. Parents have written to me. Next year, there will be a class of 36 and parents, as the Minister would herself, are identifying the challenge that will present as regards the type of support that is going to be available for their children, the type of attention and schooling opportunity, and also for the teachers involved. I would appreciate the Minister considering this issue.

It is my ambition to have 1,000 extra primary school teachers and I will strongly be making the case for that in the Sinn Féin budget. I ask the Minister to do the same in her own negotiations.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: There is a number of issues here, such as the staffing appeals criteria. The numbers going into primary schools are reducing and our population bulge is in post-primary. That is a reality of the way trends are going. There is a staffing appeals circular, set out in Circular 0025/2026, and it includes specific appeals for small-school enrolments in the previous October, involving projected enrolments, accommodation difficulties and where there may be language support. The primary staffing appeals board operates independently of myself and the Department.

Mainstream appeals posts are allocated provisionally on the basis of the school achieving the required appointment and retention figures in the coming September rather than the previous September. The appeals board considers the circumstances of the school in deciding if a teaching post is warranted a year ahead of the normal staffing arrangements. The appeals board held meetings in May and June and it will meet again in October. Schools will be notified of the closing date for applications to appeals boards in early September but I take the Deputy's overall point in regard to the pupil-teacher ratio.

Question No. 4 taken with Written Answers

School Curriculum

5. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the arrangements in place for parents and parent representative organisations to raise concerns directly with her Department regarding the national education curriculum and provision of educational resources; and the frequency with which she personally meets with such bodies. [54436/26]

Deputy Paul Lawless: What arrangements are in place for parents and parents' representative organisations to raise concerns directly with the Department regarding the national education curriculum and the provision of resources such as books, etc.? How frequently does the Minister meet with these organisations, stakeholders and parental bodies?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The National Parents Council, NPC, is the representative body for parents of children in primary and post-primary education. It serves as an important channel of communication between parents and my Department. Annual funding is provided to support its work, including €765,782 in 2025. The National Parents Council represents parents' views on education policy, curriculum reform and educational resources, ensuring that parental perspectives are reflected in policy development, implementation and decision-making.

The NPC is on the primary and post-primary education forums, which support the planning and sequencing of change across the school sector. The National Parents Council is also a key stakeholder of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, and its advisory structures, ensuring that parents' perspectives inform curriculum development and related resources across early childhood, primary and post-primary education. In addition, the NCCA facilitates parental participation through surveys, written submissions, consultation events and focus groups. It represents parents on a wide range of Department-led groups, including those relating to special education, senior cycle redevelopment, DEIS, anti-bullying procedures, student and parent supports and disability participation and consultation.

The NPC is also on the convention on education, ensuring that parents' views are reflected in national discussions on the future direction of education in this country. My Department has also engaged with the National Parents Council on the development of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill.

I met with the National Parents Council in March of this year. In addition, both the parents council and individual parents may raise concerns directly with me and my Department regarding the curriculum, educational resources and other education matters. This direct engagement helps ensure that parental views inform policy development and decision-making at national level.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Confidence in our education system depends on quality resources but parents remain seriously concerned about inappropriate material that is being promoted in our schools, libraries, etc. Concerns have been raised in relation to the book *What's the T?* by Juno Dawson, which contains sexually explicit material and was promoted to children by Children's Books Ireland and RTÉ. It received significant publish backlash, and rightly so. It has been reported that a teacher raised concerns with the Department in an email back in March 2023, and indeed the former Minister for justice, Charlie Flanagan, raised this personally with the Minister's predecessor in December 2023. Despite those concerns being raised, the book remained recommended as a good resource for children.

Very plainly, what has the Department done since this controversy broke? What review has happened? Can the Minister outline to the House the results of that review, if it took place at all?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I do not know exactly what the Deputy is asking me in relation to the Department of education. I do not know if it is a book used in schools but, so the Deputy understands how it works, in regard to schools that use textbooks or other teaching and learning resources, that is a matter for the individual school. Decisions around materials

are made at a whole-school level. Textbooks are commercially produced and my Department does not endorse publications, products or services from individual, commercial or other providers. Any concerns regarding material included in specific textbooks should be raised with relevant publishers.

From an education point of view, I have absolute confidence in our teachers. There is a huge amount of training and supports. We have Oide, which has in-service days. We have curriculum reform and a huge amount of consultation and training happens around that. It is always age-appropriate and I think schools are very well aware of any issues that parents may have and parents may come and talk to schools directly. We have a very good track record in relation to that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Is the Minister aware of the controversy surrounding the *What's the T?* book by Juno Dawson? Is she aware that the book was promoted by Children's Books Ireland? That is very important.

The idea that the Minister would say she is basically not responsible is, I believe, questionable. She is the Minister for education; the buck stops with her. For her to say she is not responsible is unacceptable, in my view. The Minister has such an enormous responsibility for the children of this country and if it is the case that there is inappropriate material being promoted to children, she actually is responsible and it is her job, I believe, to make sure that never happens again and that there are robust processes in place to make sure no child will be subjected to sexually explicit, age-inappropriate material in our schools and libraries and promoted by Children's Books Ireland and RTE.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I will repeat it for the Deputy. In regard to our schools, I come from a teaching background myself. I do not know exactly what the Deputy is inferring in relation to the education system.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Is the Minister aware of the *What's the T?* book?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I have not read that book but what I can tell the Deputy in relation to our education system is that, be it social, personal and health education, SPHE, or relationships and sexuality education, RSE, there is a huge amount of consultation between schools and parents.

With regard to the NCCA as our curriculum is developed, there is huge amount of consultation. Our teachers are so well trained in this country to make sure that when they are engaging in SPHE, for example, they are ensuring that all of our children are in a safe and supported environment within our schools and that any lessons are age appropriate. Where parents have concerns, they can approach and contact their schools. I know of cases where parents will reach out to schools and where schools will actually hold information nights for parents in advance of, for example, a SPHE lesson so that they were very aware of what their children are going to be taught in relation to any particular sensitive area but it is always age appropriate. We always have to make sure that our schools are inclusive, that we support our young people and that they feel safe and supported.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

6. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to outline her plans to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio in primary schools to 19:1, as per the programme for Government commitment, and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54419/26]

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: What does the Government intend to do to meet the programme for Government commitment to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in our schools to 19:1?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Government is investing a record €14.1 billion into education and schools through budget 2026. This record level of investment has allowed the Government to invest in tackling educational disadvantage and supporting those with special educational needs to achieve their full potential. It has enabled huge investment in the school buildings programme, in curriculum reform, in school leadership and in continuous professional development for teachers.

Under the programme for Government, there is a commitment to aim to reduce the general pupil-teacher ratio at primary level to 19:1 over the term of this Government and introduce targeted measures in schools with very large classes. This will build on the progress that has been made by the previous Government. The general average of pupils to teachers in the primary staffing schedule improved from 26:1 five years ago to 23:1 for the current school year. Average class sizes in primary schools have improved from 24.1 to 22.2 through the investment we are making in schools.

The Department's primary staffing schedule is the key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level. This school year, the primary staffing schedule operates on a general average of 23 pupils to every one teacher, which is historically the lowest ever ratio of pupils to teachers at primary level. More favourable ratios are implemented for DEIS urban band 1 schools.

The numbers employed in our schools have now reached the highest ever level. Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 6,000 between 2019 and 2025. This has led to a steady improvement in both the pupil-teacher ratio and in average class size statistics during this period. I am very conscious of the primary staffing schedule and the need to prioritise teacher allocations in primary schools. I am considering how best to make further progress as part of the annual budgetary process in reducing the primary pupil-teacher ratio in the context of that programme for Government implementation.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I acknowledge the work that was done by the previous Government in reducing the pupil-teacher ratio. Good work was done and, to be fair, in the last budget, good work was done in respect of the capitation grants to schools and that needs to be recognised. It was a huge issue this time last year, particularly at the Oireachtas education committee. The pupil-teacher ratio is key and we have committed very clearly to 19:1 by the end of this Government. I will highlight some data that has come out of the Department in recent days. A total of 39,000 students in the country were in classes of over 30 students for the 2025-2026 academic year. One school in particular in Tipperary - St. Peter and Paul's CBS in Clonmel - actually had 38 students in one class in the academic year just gone, which

realistically is twice what the programme for Government says it wants class sizes to be, so I reiterate that very important call for the reduction to 19:1 over the course of this Government.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Where we can, we give guidance and I know schools are very well aware of this. They do this well themselves so that where possible, the more junior classes would have a lower class size. Where there are higher numbers in some classes in many schools, one will find other classes within the school that would have lower numbers to accommodate for that earlier, so that the junior classes would have lower class sizes where possible but I hear the concerns highlighted by the Deputy.

I am very aware of our commitment in the programme for Government on this. Prior to 2016, teachers were allocated to primary schools at a general average of 28 pupils for every one teacher. In budget 2016, we improved that ratio by one point at 27:1. In budget 2018, we further improved it by one point to 26:1 and in 2021, we improved it by a further point to 25:1. In addition, there has been a three-point reduction in the retention schedule and that schedule assists schools that would otherwise be at risk of losing teaching posts, so this measure helps to better ensure teacher retention in primary schools while also ensuring that fewer pupils are required to retain or to recruit a teacher.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The ask from this budget from the INTO is very important - 1,000 additional teachers - to help us reduce class sizes for every child to give him or her more attention, to support inclusive education, to meet growing pupil needs, to ease the workload pressure and potential burnout for teachers facing those very high numbers within the classroom and to bring stability to school and strengthen leadership. Coming from a rural constituency, I acknowledge a lot of those rural schools that are struggling at the moment to maintain their two, three or four teachers because they are always faced with the threat of losing one because they are just barely over the number at the moment. Those additional teachers will help with that. We need to fill the posts that are there, of course. However, hiring those additional 1,000 teachers will certainly help with our key commitment. It has been done step by step but this year's budget will be very important step towards that key figure of 19:1.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: We have more favourable ratios as part of our DEIS urban band 1 schools. The Deputy heard me announce the DEIS schools earlier this year, so there are measures for children and students who are most at risk of educational disadvantage. We have been reducing the pupil-teacher ratio incrementally over the years and that is something I want to continue over the lifetime of this Government but, as the Deputy can appreciate, I cannot go into detail on any budgetary decisions because I have yet to have my meetings with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. I have to look at the whole of the education budget, making sure that we are supporting children with educational needs, reducing the burden on our leadership teams within our schools, because I hear those concerns around burnout very clearly, and looking at ways of listening to the stakeholders on what we could do to ease the pressure on our schools so they can focus more on teaching and learning, which is what they are all there to do, notwithstanding the administrative necessities required in our schools.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

School Accommodation

7. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if further consideration will be given by her Department to a refused additional school accommodation scheme application for a school in light of the school's projected increase in enrolment numbers and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51363/26]

Deputy Noel McCarthy: Will further consideration be given by the Department to a decision to refuse an application for the additional school accommodation scheme from a school in light of the school's projected increase in enrolment numbers?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The school referred to by the Deputy submitted an application under the additional school accommodation, ASA, scheme for an additional temporary classroom in 2025. This school had previously been approved for a permanent extension under the ASA scheme in 2021 for a two-classroom special education needs unit and one mainstream classroom. The project is devolved to the school for delivery and my Department is currently awaiting a submission of the stage 1 design report from the school. The school subsequently applied in 2024 for reconfiguration of an existing classroom to cater for a second special class pending completion of the permanent extension project. The Department approved this application and it has already been delivered. The NDP implementation plan for the education and youth sector 2026 to 2030 was published in January 2026. This NDP implementation plan includes a strong focus on maximising existing school capacity across the school estate and also ensuring that schools' admissions policies and processes are targeted at meeting local mainstream and special class requirements. Available funding must be prioritised where local capacity across schools in the area is insufficient along with ensuring delivery that is affordable, offers value for money and meets functional needs.

The school's application for interim classroom accommodation is parallel to the delivery of its traditional building project that has been assessed, including in the context of available capacity in the local area. It is the Department's position that the school has sufficient accommodation within the existing school buildings to cater for its local demand through the management of its enrolments, in line with its current capacity. In the Youghal school planning area, where the school referenced is located, there are 23% fewer junior infants than there were in 2020. All 14 primary schools in the school planning area indicate capacity to enrol more pupils. The proposal for interim accommodation in this context is not therefore an effective prioritisation of NDP funding. This position has been explained to the school.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. I am unsure if she is familiar with the history of Kilcredan National School. It has been the central point of three smaller parish schools - Ladysbridge, Kilcredan and Ballyburden - since they merged in the 1970s. Kilcredan is a popular rural school catering for the families of several local parishes. The population of these parishes continues to increase, with recent development of many new housing estates and more planned. Due to the increased enrolment, an extra teacher but not an extra classroom was sanctioned last September. As a result, 14 children were accommodated

in a learning support room which had a knock-on effect on the school's SEN provision. This summer, 31 children finished in the school, with 48 expected to start in September.

An additional school accommodation scheme application was refused on the basis that Kilcredan national school has sufficient accommodation within the existing school buildings to cater for its local demand. The school itself disagrees and has raised serious concerns that children entering the school will likely have to be accommodated in the hall. This would have a negative impact on the well-being and physical activity and the movement breaks of the children in the school's special classes. Therefore, can the Minister and her Department officials liaise with the school to see what can be done to ensure adequate space for Kilcredan pupils?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The Department funded a substantial extension and refurbishment in 2014 of this school. This included six new classrooms, special education rooms, a GP hall, a new basketball court and a new carpark. The existing building was also completely refurbished. The school was subsequently approved for a further extension under the ASA scheme in 2021, to provide a two SEN classroom unit and one additional mainstream classroom. This project is devolved to the school authority for delivery and is at stage 1 of architectural design and planning. As the Deputy knows, the school was also approved for an SEN repurposing project in 2024, to reconfigure an existing room to cater for a second special education class, pending the provision of that new permanent extension. A further application for rental of interim accommodation to cater for a mainstream class was refused in May of this year, on the grounds that there is already sufficient capacity in the area and the responsibility of the school to manage its enrolments to suit its capacity in that context. In the Youghal area, we have to look at the capacity within the planning school area as part of our prioritisation process.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. There have been some positive developments recently with the approval of a safe routes to school programme application. This was good news for the school as it will greatly help its future expansion. However, the problem is the expansion and extra development within the parishes I was speaking about, and the need for local children to go to those schools. The Minister mentioned there is a space in Youghal but, as she knows, people like to attend the school they live close to. However, with legitimate space concerns and a steady increase in enrolment numbers, this case requires the particular attention of the Department in the short term. The school is understandably disappointed at the Department's position on providing additional accommodation as it awaits proposed expansion. I have written directly to the Minister to highlight this. With this in mind, I ask her to provide an update on the progress of the long-term proposal for Kilcredan National School, which would see the construction of one much-needed mainstream classroom and two SEN classes.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The information I have to date is the project is devolved to the school authority for delivery and it is currently at stage 1 of the architectural design and planning. I can give the Deputy more detail if he needs it. Since 2020, the Department has provided more than €796 million in capital funding for Cork schools. Over this period a total of 168 schools have been upgraded, either through the provision of a new school building, a

large-scale extension or the provision of modular accommodation. Some 12 school projects to go to tender or construction this year or next were included in the NDP implementation plan. There are currently 18 school projects in Cork under construction. This summer we have 35 schools which were approved to undergo works as part of the climate action summer works programme. In addition, since 2020, 306 special classes have been sanctioned in Cork, and the Minister of State beside me is very aware of this. Some 66 were sanctioned for September 2026.

Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.

Education Schemes

9. Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú asked the Minister for Education and Youth in relation to grants for assistive technology for students, whether there are plans to increase the funding for this scheme, update or change the criteria for this scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53968/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In relation to grants for assistive technology for students, are there plans to increase the funding for the scheme or to update or change its criteria? The Minister is aware of what brought this to my attention. It is a ten-year-old boy from north County Louth with dyslexia. Following assessment, it was found he would benefit from a computer and assistive technology but who is not eligible for the grant. I have discussed this with the Minister. We need to find a solution and to look at the overall criteria. There are wider issues as regards AAC also.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for his engagement in relation to this issue. The assistive technology scheme supplements the overall funding provided to schools for digital technology and equipment. It supports children who require essential specialised equipment to access the school curriculum.

Assistive technology is a critical enabler for students with special educational needs, allowing them to benefit fully from the modern, technological-focused education system. The Department of Education and Youth recognises the significant benefits of assistive technology in school settings, particularly for students with more complex needs. It supports access to the curriculum and encourages classroom participation and positive educational outcomes. Under the current scheme, schools receive funding towards computers and specialised equipment required for educational purposes. To qualify, a student must have a diagnosis of a physical or commutative disability and a professional assessment confirming the equipment is essential to access the curriculum. The review of the assistive technology scheme is at its final stages and has culminated in a new circular which I expect to announce in September 2026.

A key outcome is a planned move from a diagnosis-based model to a needs-based approach. This will give schools greater autonomy to determine when assistive technology is required, reduce administrative burdens and improve timely access to supports. A streamlined application process is also being developed for implementation. These changes aim to deliver a more responsive, effective and child-centred scheme. The Department will continue to routinely examine the level of grant aid payable under the assistive technology scheme to

ensure that the level remains appropriate and aligned with the needs of children who require assistance. Ultimately, any child who needs assistive technology to access the curriculum will receive it. In line with the policy and funding parameters of the scheme, promoting assistive technologies is a programme for Government commitment and a key ministerial priority.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We will all be very interested to see what the new circular is. The Minister of State said it will be announced in September. A needs-based system is what we need. I would like to think the young boy I talked about would be able to avail of this. I will use him as an example. The correct assessments were carried out. The Wechsler abbreviated scale of intelligence stated that his verbal comprehension was very low, perceptual reasoning was low average and full-scale IQ was very low. The Wechsler individual assessment test ranked his word reading as extremely low. It stated that he was presented with a list of words to read, he should be commended on his hard work and that this task was very difficult for him. His word reading skills were in the extremely low range for his age.

This does not make a lot of sense to me. I would say the Minister of State would agree. It is about ensuring that we have a more fit-for-purpose grant scheme and that the likes of this boy will be sorted by it.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: By way of background, 85% of the applications processed for assistive technology between January and June have been approved. We are always conscious of those who fall outside the scheme. Hence, the drawing up of the new circular to ensure that we are taking into account students and children who are outside of the scheme but who would greatly benefit from it. The Deputy has spoken to me a number of times about the child in question. I understand the challenges that are there as well. The aim of the new circular the Department is creating is to ensure that we will accommodate every child who would benefit greatly from the scheme, that the administrative burden on schools and school communities is reduced and that we make the scheme more streamlined. We expect to issue the circular in September 2026.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We just need to make sure that the circular is fit for purpose and that the young primary school child to whom I refer will be given the supports he requires.

I will just finish reading from the communication to which I referred earlier. It states:

[His] attainments and cognitive profile do not confer eligibility for an application for an Assistive Technology grant. However, he would benefit from availing of a laptop or device in school or indeed at home. [He] should be encouraged to develop his typing skills as this will be of huge support to him when he transitions to secondary school in a few years' time. He should also be encouraged to use the 'dictate' function in Word, and this will also be useful for him when completing school projects.

That is the reality of the assistive technology fund. Assistive technology would be of real benefit. We also know that it must be authorised by the Department in order that it can be availed of for exams and all the rest of it. At this point, he would require that to avail of the curriculum, which is what the assistive technology grant scheme is there for. The Minister of State says the scheme is being updated. Could he outline the level of funding that will be in it?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: We are very conscious of the issue. A huge number of groups that I have met over the past while, particularly on the dyslexia side, have all been discussing assistive technologies. That is also the case for children who are non-communicative and non-verbal. Assistive technologies are extremely important for them.

The Department set out to compile a new curriculum because of the challenges and parameters within the old curriculum to ensure that we are reaching as many students as possible. We fundamentally believe that this is hugely important. Funding right across the Government is subject to discussion not just on Question Time; we have to also discuss it in the context of the forthcoming budget. We are quite well aware of the impact that funding through the assistive technology scheme has on young people. It enables them to go to primary school and then on to post-primary school as well.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will it be in operation from September?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Yes, from September.

Educational Disadvantage

10. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the status of the DEIS plus appeal by a school (details supplied); when this school can expect to be notified of the outcome; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54075/26]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: When DEIS plus schools were announced in May, St. Joseph's and St. Michael's in Longford town were rightly included. However, Sacred Heart school in Granard, despite sharing the same DEIS history and facing significant educational disadvantage, was excluded and is now awaiting the outcome of an appeal. Could the Minister please outline how the appeal is being considered and when Sacred Heart school, Granard can expect a decision?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Addressing educational disadvantage and ensuring that every child and young person can reach their full potential is a key priority for me as Minister for Education and Youth. The introduction of the DEIS plus scheme will provide enhanced supports to a small cohort of schools with the very highest concentration of students at risk of educational disadvantage.

Schools were identified for inclusion in DEIS plus through a nationally consistent, evidence-based identification model which drew on a range of indicators associated with persistent and intergenerational disadvantage. The model was applied uniformly across all eligible schools to ensure a fair and objective process.

Recognising the importance of accuracy and fairness, schools that were not satisfied with the outcome were afforded an opportunity to appeal in line with the arrangements set out by the Department. The appeal process allowed schools to correct inaccuracies in enrolment data or seek verification that the DEIS plus identification model had been correctly applied to their data. All appeals submitted by schools, including the one referred to by the Deputy, are

undergoing a detailed technical review in accordance with the published criteria. The outcomes of the review are independently verified by an appeals panel with expertise in data analysis, education policy and educational disadvantage, providing an additional layer of assurance regarding the integrity and consistency of the process.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment on the result of any individual appeal in advance of the completion of that process. That process will be completed in the coming days and schools will be notified of the outcome of their appeal. I do also recognise however, that some schools are operating in the context of complex local pressures that cannot currently be fully reflected in the DEIS plus identification model. At present, the model must use data from the online enrolment databases and the HP index in order to be based on data that are available nationally and consistently for all schools. I will come back in again.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: This is about fairness and equity. The Minister mentioned the HP deprivation index. In the HP index, Granard scores higher than seven out of the ten areas that have been chosen in Longford. This does not make sense. Sacred Heart has been a DEIS band 1 school for 20 years. Since then, the demand on the school has increased dramatically. There are now 255 pupils, three autism classes, an early intervention class, a large number of pupils learning English as an additional language and many families experiencing significant disadvantage, as reflected in the HP deprivation index. The principal, Francis Gray, and the staff do extraordinary work but they are truly stretched to the limit. The additional supports that would come with DEIS plus, the extra leadership, enhanced family supports and the additional educational resources would make a real and tangible difference to the children that this school educates. Could the Minister confirm that the criteria that are being applied to this appeal includes both the current circumstances of the school alongside the historical data?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The identification model has to be applied consistently right across the country to have fairness and transparency around it. Under the DEIS strategy to 2035, work is under way in my Department, with colleagues in the Central Statistics Office and across other Departments, to utilise other administrative data sources to help improve how we can resource schools in a targeted way to support children and young people at risk of disadvantage.

The appeals process allows schools to correct any inaccuracies in enrolment data or to seek verification that the DEIS plus identification model had been correctly applied. It was limited to the enrolment data. If there is other information that might be relevant to that particular locality, they could not take that on board because it would not have been consistently applied right across the country. We need to make sure that we have a sense of fairness.

I hear concerns, and not just in relation to that particular school. We all know there is educational disadvantage right across the country. My Department is working with the CSO to look at even better ways to capture this data. I would love to be in a position to maybe not call a school a DEIS school but to be able to apply the supports as needed and as intensively as required right across the country.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I agree with the Minister on the issue of consistency. I do not believe anybody in this House would argue against schools with the greatest need having the greatest

level of support. However, the issue in Granard is that this school has faced the same challenges as every other school in Longford that has been chosen as a DEIS school for the past 20 years, yet it is not being considered as part of the scheme. There is a lack of consistency and fairness. This school has been left waiting while the other schools have moved ahead, despite facing the same, if not more and greater challenges than those which have progressed to DEIS plus.

I know the Minister is going to say "No" when I ask her this but I am going to ask her. Will the Minister personally have a look at this file? Are there some learnings the Minister and her Department can take from this situation so that no other school is left in this position? If Sacred Heart meets that threshold for DEIS plus, can the Minister ensure it receives that designation without any further unnecessary delay? This is causing profound concern across not just the town of Granard but across the towns this school in very rural north Longford serves and for the parents of the kids they know need those additional supports and could benefit from those additional supports.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The appeals process is underway at the moment. It will be announced shortly. I am not involved in that. It is independently being assessed. There is an identification model. It has to be done fairly and transparently. For that reason, the appeal process was limited to enrolment data which underpins the model. That is through the primary online database, POD, system and the post-primary online database, P-POD, system. That appeals process does not allow for the submission of contextual information. A rules-based national model has to consider all schools on the same basis. It cannot substitute locally held knowledge for data that are not available or comparable nationwide. Incorporating local level indicators or qualitative submissions where such information is not nationally available could create challenges around consistency, transparency and equality of treatment. The Department is committed to ensuring that all schools are treated equally.

I hear the Deputy's concerns. I will come back to this question. This is the first phase of this DEIS plus programme. We are going to be looking at how this is rolled out from September onwards. I want to make sure - and that is why I set up a pilot as part of this - that certain schools that are not DEIS would access to a home school liaison co-ordinator. I appreciate there are schools that have educational disadvantage. We need to be able to respond to that with the evidence and data.

Question No. 11 taken with Written Answers.

Schools Building Projects

12. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on existing school building projects in Dublin Mid-West which are not yet approved; the current stage of each; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54070/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: The schools I intend to address are St. Thomas Junior National School and Scoil Aíne Naofa in Lucan and Divine Mercy junior and senior national schools and St. Kevin's Community College. What is the current status of the Lucan Community College project and Scoil Chrónáin? I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy. My Department is delivering significant projects in Dublin Mid-West and continues to progress further important projects. There are currently eight projects onsite across Dublin Mid-West, including new school buildings for Coláiste Pobail Fola, Gaelscoil na Camóige, Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcáin and Holy Family Community School. Gaelscoil Lír was substantially completed and handed over to the school at the end of last week. A further four projects are at tender stage, including a new school building for Scoil Chronáin and deep energy retrofit works at Coláiste Bríde, Deansrath Community College and Collinstown Park Community College. In addition, 20 large-scale and additional accommodation projects are progressing through the design pipeline. Ten are at preliminary design, which is stage 1. One is at developed design, which is stage 2a. Nine are at detailed design, which is stage 2b. One of these stage 2b projects - the new school building for Adamstown Castle Educate Together National School - has been included in the priority tranche of projects published in January as part of national development plan, NDP, roll-out.

There are also a further 12 projects being progressed under the modular programme and the climate action summer works scheme. It is important to note that only projects already at tender stage, or close to being tender-ready, were considered and prioritised for the first tranche of projects approved to proceed under the Department's NDP implementation plan. However, priority projects at earlier stages of the pipeline continue to be advanced, with particular emphasis on special schools, schools operating entirely in interim accommodation, projects providing significant special education capacity, additional accommodation to meet demographic growth, and schools with the most pressing building condition issues. The Department is targeting 2027 for the publication of the next tranche of priority projects to proceed to tender. To be considered, projects will have to be at an appropriate stage of readiness. Prioritisation will be informed by departmental analysis, engagement with patrons and schools, available funding, and, where relevant, findings from the Department's school estate energy and condition survey.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive answer. I see first hand the progress that is being made with school buildings across the constituency but there are also buildings that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The Minister mentioned Scoil Chrónáin. In answers she has given me in parliamentary questions, she is aware there is a delay on the tender with that particular school. I would very much welcome any urgency we can apply to make sure we break ground by quarter 4 of this year because that is contingent on the planning permission not having to be extended and for the delivery of the school building for Scoil Chrónáin that is so important.

Similarly, for Lucan Community College, that is being delivered under phase one through a modular framework and there is now an intention to secure planning for the remaining phase, so that does not delay the delivery of phases two and three of Lucan. I also wish to draw attention to Devine Mercy junior and senior national schools. I went Devine Mercy Junior National School. It still the same building that was built in the 1980s. It is not fit for purpose and it is one that should be prioritised. Similarly, with St. Thomas's and Scoil Aíne in Lucan. There are cramped conditions for a rapidly growing part of Lucan. They need to be urgently prioritised. In my supplementary question, I will speak about the pipeline the Minister mentioned.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There has been a lot of correspondence in relation to Scoil Chrónáin in Rathcoole. The Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, along with the Deputy have raised concerns around this. I reassure the Deputy in regard to Scoil Chrónáin, which 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 the permanent site in Rathcoole, County Dublin. That project will be delivered under my Department's employer-led design programme 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 construction. That project progressed to tender on 25 February 2025. The tender returns were received on 2 May 2025. The tenders were evaluated by the design team. Following due diligence being carried out and discussions with the preferred tender, the company withdrew its tender. The Department's design team is now carrying out due diligence in relation to the next placed tender with the view to submitting a tender assessment report for my Department's consideration. The Deputy raised concerns around the planning permission. If necessary, we will prepare the documentation for an application to extend that.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Hopefully, we will not need to extend the planning. That is the intention of all. Similarly for Lucan Community College, we need to get the planning right now for phases two and three. I wish to speak about the pipeline because it is important that the message we get out to parents is that there is a pipeline and that we are not taking a stop-start approach to prioritising schools. I wish to emphasise how important it is that the likes of Devine Mercy Junior National School, which is a very proud school in Balgaddy, gets approved for the building it has been waiting for quite a long time. The standard response I have got back for the past two years is that there will be a meeting of stakeholders in the near future and nothing past that. I am very keen to see progress on that.

Similarly for St. Thomas's and Scoil Aine junior and senior national schools in Lucan, they are immediately adjacent to Adamstown, which is one of the rapidly growing areas in the country right now. They are in the same building they were in when the school was opened. That needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. For St. Kevin's Community School in Clondalkin, the buildings are very much the same as they were when I was there. It was considered an old building then. The prefabs and the building are not in the condition they should be in. That needs to be prioritised for that next list. I am pleased to hear there is a pipeline but I am keen to see we make sure the right schools get on it in terms of their prioritisation.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am conscious if I go into one school I am going to run out of time but I heard the schools the Deputy raised. To be eligible for inclusion in the first tranche of projects to proceed, projects needed to be ready and be at the appropriate stage of readiness. Stage 3 is tender and stage 2b is detailed design and pre-tender. Within this context, priority was afforded to special schools, and we will be having a focus on that for the next tranche, schools that are fully in interim accommodation across the country and with an urgent requirement for permanent accommodation and projects delivering significant special education capacity. We are looking at the existing accommodation when we are looking at expanding schools or the NPD where it is possible we can use the existing school capacity.

Another weighting we give is additional accommodation required to cater for demographic growth in an area and projects dealing with the most significant condition issues. That is our condition and energy survey. For the first time, the Department will have information and good data on the energy and condition of all our school estates across the country. That will feed into the next prioritisation.

10 o'clock

Scoileanna Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta

13. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** den Minister for Education and Youth maidir le ceist 40786/26 ar an 28 Bealtaine 2026, an dtabharfaidh sí an t-eolas is déanaí maidir le hoibreacha atá á ndéanamh ar scoil an Tuairín i mBéal an Daingin; an bhfuil aon athrú ar an stádas don tionscnamh; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [54054/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Céard go díreach atá ag tarlú leis an scoil ar an Tuairín i mBéal an Daingin? Is é an t-eolas is déanaí maidir leis na hoibreacha atá á lorg againn. An bhfuil aon uasdátú ar stádas an tionscnaimh? Is é sin an t-eolas atá de dhíth ar dhaoine. Will the Minister give an update on an Tuairín i mBéal an Daingin?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Tá an síneadh atá le cur leis an scoil, ar thagair an Teachta dó, ceadaithe le dul isteach i bpríblíne thionscadail mo Roinne chun seomra ranga príomhshrutha amháin agus trí sheomra oideachais speisialta a chur ar fáil. Rinneadh é a chineachadh chun seachadta chuig údarás na scoile.

In early June, departmental officials contacted the school to advise that its project remained under review in the context of NDP parameters and the overall prioritisation of capital investment. The project is currently at stage 2b, i.e. detailed design. A stage 2b report was received in August 2025 and is currently under review from a technical and cost perspective. All school building projects, including this one, must undergo the necessary due diligence outlined in the infrastructure guidelines. Managing timing, scope, and cost is crucial to ensuring that the overall school building programme remains within the funding parameters.

As the Deputy knows, enrolment has remained stable at that school at between 77 and 84 pupils from 2022 to 2025, supporting the ongoing viability of the school's four-teacher staffing structure in a mixed Irish medium primary school. Although enrolment has remained relatively stable, the school's accommodation is under significant pressure due to the need to accommodate three special education teachers, SETs, alongside four mainstream teachers. There is no spare classroom space available within the school. Two SET teaching spaces are currently located within the school. The accommodation need is therefore driven by the requirement for appropriate SET space and the restoration of ancillary facilities for their intended use.

Since 2020, the Department of education has provided €264.25 million in capital funding for Galway schools and over this period a total of 89 schools have been upgraded either through the provision of a new school building, a large scale extension or the provision of modular accommodation. Ten schools will tender for construction in 2026 and 2027, that were included in the NDP.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Is í an cheist ná céard go díreach atá chun tarlú anois. Cad iad na chéad céimeanna eile? Thug mé cuairt ar an scoil Dé hAoine seo chaite agus chonaic mé nach bhfuil go leor spáis inti. Tá sé le feiceáil go soiléir go bhfuil na ranganna riachtanais speisialta agus, ar ndóigh, an seomra ranga breise ag teastáil go géar. Tá an cheart ar fad ag an Aire go bhfuil uimhreacha maithe ag an scoil seo, ach tá an spás ag teastáil.

I thank the Minister for that update. I understand what she is saying about the 2b detailed design stage, but the real question is, what happens next? How many more stages will there be in the process? How long will this take? It is my understanding that the funding has been granted but that now the next stage is to go to eTenders. Where is that at? How long will that take?

I visited the school last week. It is a school that is under very clear pressure in terms of space. It has a good level of numbers but it needs the space.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Mar is amhlaidh le gach tionscadal tógála scoile, déantar iad a mheas i gcomhthéacs thosaíocht fhoriomlán an chláir agus paraiméadair mhaoinithe an phlean forbartha náisiúnta, PFN. I bplean infheistíochta earnála PFN mo Roinne, leagtar amach béim mo Roinne ar acmhainn reatha a uasmhéadú agus tús áite a thabhairt d'fheidhmiú céimneach tionscadail chun na riachtanais is práinní a shásamh, go háirithe chun tacú le soláthar riachtanas oideachais speisialta.

The project at scoil an Tuairín i mBéal an Daingin is currently under review from both a technical and cost perspective in accordance with the requirements outlined in the public infrastructure guidelines. In the context of the overall programme management, it is not possible to give a timeline for progression at this point but work is under way.

In moving projects forward, the Department maintains a strong focus on delivering value for money and affordability and including phasing arrangements where necessary to ensure spending remains sustainable. The project in this school will be considered as part of the overall programme management approach.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Ar mhaithe le soiléiriú iomlán, ón méid a thuigim, bhí maoiniú curtha ar fáil don tionscnamh seo. Is léir go bhfuil sé seo ag teastáil. Cuirfidh mé chomhthéacs air seo. Is scoil bheag í seo i mBéal an Daingin, ach is scoil láidir í. Tagann daoine ó cheantair éagsúla chun a gcuid páistí a chur chuig an scoil seo. Faoi láthair, áfach, níl go leor spáis inti. Bhí mé ag an scoil agus chonaic mé na seomraí. Tá siad róbheag. Tá go leor páistí ag freastal ar an scoil ach tá na seomraí breise seo ag teastáil. Faoi láthair, tá cófra á úsáid mar sensory room. Ba chóir go mbeadh i bhfad níos mó spáis ar fáil. Tá páistí ón Úcráin agus páistí atá ag teacht trí sheirbhísí IPAS ag freastal ar an scoil, agus is maith an rud é sin. Tá Gaeilge álainn acu. Teastaíonn an spás sin ón scoil.

Will the Minister be very clear about the funding? I understand that funding has been made available, so is it still there? I visited that school. It is a fantastic school. It needs the space. There are kids from Ukraine and International Protection Accommodation Services, IPAS, centres who speak absolutely fluent Irish because they have attended that school, but the school needs the support.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: It is important to note that only projects that are already at tender stage or close to be tender ready are included in the tranche of the NDP. The Department-led energy and condition survey has been conducted right throughout the country. That is being considered at the moment. We are looking at a new prioritisation list for the next tranche, so priority projects at earlier stages of the pipeline continue to be advanced, with particular emphasis on special schools, schools operating in interim accommodation and projects providing significant special education places. The next tranche of priority projects to proceed to tender and construction will be informed by: my Department's analysis that it is undergoing at the moment; engagement with patrons and schools; available funding where relevant; and findings from the Department's school estate energy and conditions survey, which is due to be completed at the end of this year. Any interim accommodation requirements will continue to be assessed and considered by the Department on a case-by-case basis in order to determine the prioritised needs and approach for addressing them.

Industrial Relations

14. **Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her plans to address outstanding concerns of SNAs in view of rejection by members of a union (details supplied) of the workforce development plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53897/26]

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: SNAs are very dedicated members of our school community who work very hard with our most vulnerable children. However, many have legitimate outstanding concerns following the publication of the new circular and the workforce development plan, WDP. Will the Minister of State tell me his plans to address outstanding concerns of SNAs in view of rejection by members of a union of the workforce development plan, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. By way of background, the number of SNAs working within the education system has grown significantly to support the increasing number of students with special education needs, both in mainstream schools and in special schools and classes. By the end of this year, there will be approximately 26,000 SNAs in our education system.

In recognition of the importance of the SNA role, the Department established the SNA workforce development unit and on 3 June 2026 published the first SNA WDP. Built around five strategic pillars, the plan recognises the vital contribution SNAs make to supporting children and young people with additional educational needs and enabling their full participation in school life. It sets out a clear framework to strengthen and support SNAs through enhanced professional development, greater role clarity, workforce sustainability measures and stronger collaboration across all school communities. The actions set out in the SNA WDP were developed over a period of more than two years through extensive engagement between the Department of Education and Youth, Fórsa and other stakeholders. Direct stakeholder consultation on the plan included: focus groups with SNAs, teachers and school leaders; consultation with children and young people; a survey of SNAs with which more than 13,000 SNAs engaged; and a number of online webinars with SNAs and school leaders.

I note the outcome of the ballot by members of Fórsa to not accept the plan. While I am disappointed by this outcome, the Department remains committed to constructive engagement with Fórsa and available to engage in relation to these matters. The Department continues to work with all stakeholders to achieve sustainable improvements for the SNA workforce in pursuit of an education system that is of the highest quality and where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to achieve his or her full potential.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I am very aware of and appreciate the work that has gone into this in recent years, but the local bargaining agreement being off the table now is a matter of serious concern and insult to SNAs. That pay increase should have been protected and maintained, irrespective of the ballot outcome on the new plan. Will the Minister of State reverse this decision to allow talks to continue in good faith?

SNAs rejected the plan because they felt more and more was being put on them without adequate recognition or compensation. There remains uncertainty around when hours will be completed, the additional time that SNAs will be required to be on site, and the impact this may have on opportunities to supplement their income, such as the bus escorts after school. There are also concerns around redeployment, such as insecurity of fixed-term contracts following redeployment and the loss of seniority. SNAs receive no additional payment for State examinations, no extra personal vacation, EPV, days for the summer programme and no allowances for working in special schools, DEIS schools or Gaelscoileanna. At the same time, they remain excluded from important decision-making processes despite the plan's emphasis on collaborative planning. All of these issues highlight a fundamental lack of respect that remains unaddressed by the plan.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I cannot emphasise enough the respect that the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I have for special needs assistants and the contribution they make to education. In March, we met the SNAs to have further engagement and consultation with them and to understand their roles. The workforce development plan is the first significant piece of work that has been done to plan for SNAs, not just in the here and now, but into the future. Huge consultation and engagement has taken place on this.

However, the Department received official confirmation from Fórsa towards the end of last week, and the Department has written back for further engagement. We are open to continuing dialogue because we fully respect and appreciate the role of the SNA right across the education system in allowing young people to achieve their full potential. The key note here is the Department remains open to discussion with them to engage further.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I do not question the Minister of State or the Minister's respect for the SNAs, but the Department needs to show that respect. The trust of the SNAs has been severely damaged following the scandal last February. It may have played a significant role in the ballot outcome, as well as years of being undervalued in the system. The community of SNAs simply does not have reason to trust the bona fides of the Department. Yes, huge consultation has gone on, but we need to go back to the negotiating table and put together a plan that SNAs can get behind. We need meaningful consultation with them. They need to be heard and their legitimate fears and anxieties need to be addressed. We need to get

this right and we need to truly back our SNAs. They need to be a bigger part of this conversation.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There has been huge engagement by the Department on the development of the workforce development plan over the past two years. A large amount of engagement and meetings were held. It is the first workforce development plan. There was concern regarding redeployment. The circular and all of those documents were worked through and co-designed very carefully with the SNAs in mind. We wanted to ensure that we understood the concerns of the SNAs.

The Department has written back this week to confirm that it remains committed to constructive engagement with Fórsa and is available to engage on these matters. That is the communication we have sent back to Fórsa and that is the commitment we can give the Deputy. We remain committed to constructive engagement with Fórsa, the union representing the SNAs, because we value the role of SNAs across the education system and the commitment and work they provide to allow children with additional needs to avail of a fully functioning education system.

All of us across the House accept and appreciate the role of the SNA, and I am deeply committed to further engagement.

Schools Refurbishment

15. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on this year's climate action summer works scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54102/26]

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Before I ask my final question before the summer recess, I thank the Minister and Minister of State for all of their engagement throughout the year, and I wish them both a very productive summer recess. With my better half being a Galway woman, I had also better wish the Minister the best of luck for Sunday. I hope the Minister of State next to her will soon forgive Galway for what its team did to his in the semi-final.

Will the Minister give me an update on the climate action summer works scheme and make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I am looking forward to Sunday, if I can squeeze that in.

The roll-out of my Department's climate action summer works scheme is a key part of our commitment under the national development plan to support investment in the existing school estate while also delivering on the climate action agenda. Through the scheme, schools can undertake a wide range of improvement projects and targeted climate measures, such as fabric upgrades, LED lighting, roof and window replacements, installation of electric vehicle, EV, chargers and bike racks, and other essential maintenance works.

The scheme is implemented on a devolved basis and, ideally, the work is of a scale that can be carried out during the summer months or at other times that avoid disruption of the operation

of the school. The climate action summer works scheme operates on a multi-annual basis across a number of categories of works.

The scheme was opened for applications from 1 May to 30 June 2025, where over 1,400 applications were received. In November 2025, the Department announced the first tranche of approvals under that scheme. A total of 297 projects were approved to proceed, including 198 under the new climate action summer works scheme and a further 99 that represent the final tranche of projects under the previous summer works scheme. The Department continues to actively engage with these schools to support the delivery of approved projects. It is envisaged that the majority of these projects will be on site this summer.

Given that funding is limited in any particular year, it is necessary to prioritise applications. Applications from schools that were not approved in 2025 will still qualify to be assessed in subsequent years within the context of the available funding envelope. As to the Deputy's question, the next tranche of approvals under the climate action summer works scheme is due in October 2026 for delivery in summer 2027.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I thank the Minister for that. On her final point, I will raise one school to begin with. Presentation Primary School in Thurles originally applied in 2016 for works to its car park and school yard in terms of tarring, relining, safer access and drop-off zones. Cars have to yield going in and out because there is only one space for one car, but it has the land to increase the width of the entrance and reline it. There is also a bus pulling up in the yard every day for the early intervention class. Generally, six teachers have to go out into the yard every day to direct traffic in the morning and evening, which obviously is not acceptable.

The school did not get approval in 2016 but has submitted an application under the current scheme. It has not been approved for this summer, though. I brought this matter to the attention of the Department previously, and I would like to bring it to the attention of the Minister now so that consideration could be given to the Presentation Primary School in Thurles come this autumn when we are looking at the summer 2027 works.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The next tranche of approvals is due this coming October for summer 2027. Drawing on experience from the Department's pathfinder programme, the new summer works scheme includes several climate action measures. Schools applying for the scheme select their preferred project category. There are ten categories of projects supported under this scheme, and all schools that applied for laboratory upgrades under it had their applications approved in the first tranche. This involved a total of 63 projects. Total expenditure under the summer works scheme from 1 January 2020 to 31 May 2026 amounted to €211 million. Some 1,480 summer works projects have been approved since 2020 to date, including 198 under the new climate action summer works scheme.

I hear the points the Deputy has raised, and I am sure he has engaged with the Department. I look forward to announcing the next tranche in October.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The Minister mentioned labs, which is fantastic because that is my next point.

St. Mary's Secondary School in Nenagh has been approved for its science labs. The tender has been done and the proposed contractor is to be appointed.

The school sent its information to the Department on 10 June and followed up on 29 June. Essentially, the school will be somewhat of a building site certainly up until Christmas, but the sooner we can get it started, the better because it has the funding and approval. It just needs to get the approval to appoint the contractor and get going. Although it will have to manage getting the work done on the labs at the start of the academic year, from September to Christmas, the sooner we can get going this summer, the less it will impact on the academic year at the far end of it. It is St. Mary's Secondary School in Nenagh. I have raised it with the Department, but if the Minister could follow it up as well, it would be fantastic. It is great to get the money; we just want to make sure that the project gets going as quickly as possible.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: We listen to schools around further supports that they need. Under the last scheme, any school that applied for laboratory upgrades received them. Some 63 projects were approved. I can follow up with the Department in relation to moving that along. Schools can apply for one of the ten categories. I will outline them because sometimes there is confusion in relation to those categories. They are: climate action works, climate action roof works, climate action and electrical works, climate action and mechanical works, science labs, climate action and toilet facilities, window projects, curricular requirements, fabric defects and external environmental projects. Projects provided under the summer works scheme generally involve improvement works to the building which can include the provision of roof replacements, window replacements and new heating systems, among other measures. The emergency works scheme continues to be available to schools to deal with unforeseen emergencies which could result in school closures.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Seanad Éireann has passed the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 without amendment.

Ceisteanna Eile (Atógáil) - Other Questions (Resumed)

School Transport

16. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the measures being taken to ensure school bus tickets are issued in advance of the commencement of the 2026-27 school year; the steps being taken to avoid a recurrence of the delays and capacity issues experienced last year, which resulted in eligible children being left without transport or unable to access existing routes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53982/26]

Deputy Peter Roche: Like the Minister, I want to wish our gallant Galway hurlers everything that is good on Sunday, but that is not why I stood up to speak.

I am anxious, given the spate of correspondence coming into my office, about the school transport scheme and how some families find themselves ineligible or refused transport for the next year.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The school transport system is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Youth. The scheme is a demand-led scheme based on the number of eligible children who apply and pay on time. Families who require school transport for 2026-27 were asked to apply and pay for their school bus tickets by the closing date of 8 May. The earlier closing date was put in place so that we could give Bus Éireann additional time to put in place transport arrangements for the upcoming school year. Since this date, Bus Éireann has been assessing all applications and planning routes and services for the 2026-27 school year.

The school transport scheme remains heavily subsidised by the State. The approximate cost to the State per mainstream pupil is currently €1,400 annually, while the cost to the family is €100 per pupil. The total cost of the school transport system in 2025 was €537 million, equating to almost €3 million being spent on the provision of school transport per day. It is important to note that the primary school ticket will cost the equivalent of 55 cent per school day and the cost of a post-primary ticket is approximately 60 cent per day, with no family paying more than €1.32 per day regardless of how many children use the services. Tickets are now being issued to families and will continue to be issued throughout the summer. Where pupils are unsuccessful in receiving tickets, they will be notified as early as possible, and refunds will be issued from Bus Éireann.

As part of the operation of the scheme, Bus Éireann manages the procurement, tender process and contract management arrangements to include services provided by contractors under the school transport scheme. There are currently over 8,000 vehicles operating on the scheme and the competitive procurement process is conducted in accordance with the negotiated procedure under the national and EU procurement legislation. In previous school years, Bus Éireann has reported particular issues with the availability of drivers. This included a number of contractors handing back contracts unexpectedly. I will refer to some of the other details later.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I get the whole cost of providing transport, but access to education begins with access to transport. For any parent who finds themselves in receipt of a refusal for a bus ticket for next year, it is the most compelling and difficult thing they have to deal with. It is stressful enough without them being told that do not qualify. In most cases, the people that I am talking about had transport last year. It is almost inconceivable that they had it last year and they are not getting it this year. God knows, there are plenty of examples. There is one example in Galway where St. Brigid's College and St. Raphael's College in Loughrea are maxed out in terms of numbers and the nearest school is St. Killian's College in New Inn. The school could desperately do with transport to ensure that it is sustainable. In this instance, there are six children who require transport to said school. However, I get and appreciate the whole issue of the costs of providing the service.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I know the value of the school bus ticket. I always say that from the middle of August through to 1 October is peak time in terms of this issue. Irrespective of the overall figures that I can give the Deputy here today in relation to the cost to the State and the amount of money that the State has invested, it pales into irrelevance when we are talking about one or two tickets for a family. The Deputy mentioned six tickets on a particular route. We have a lot of concerns in relation to whether every bus ticket on the system is being utilised to the full as well. We are looking at various ways to try to ensure that we get everybody on the school bus. Enabling the children of a family to get on the school bus at primary and post-primary levels is a huge game changer. When free education came out in the 1960s, the school transport scheme was introduced because people did not have transport. Right now it is because there are two parents working or the challenges they have with other children as well. I understand the challenges, and we are working very hard. The team in Bus Éireann and the Department of education have huge engagement to try to resolve issues. Do we have a magic wand for every issue? We probably do not, but we are working to try to resolve issues.

Deputy Peter Roche: As the Minister of State mentioned, there are instances where students and families have benefited from school transport tickets. There are also many instances where they are not utilised. If there was a formula or mechanism to make sure that only those who need them apply, it would help the situation. I do not know if anyone would be in position to say that they do not want it and will give it back, but if we had some kind of mechanism to make sure that only those children who want to avail of public transport would apply for it and it could be left to those who urgently require it. I thank the Minister of State. I want to ensure that no parent has the stress for the summer months of waiting and hoping to see if someone can provide transport for their student for the next school term.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. We are looking at ways to ensure that if there is a ticket issued, it will be used. Anecdotally, the Deputy and other colleagues tell us about school routes the length and breadth of the country that have spare capacity but, when we look at the system, all of the tickets on that particular school route are occupied and accounted for, and it is therefore very difficult to reallocate them. As it is such a huge scheme, and given the amount of money the State has invested in it, we need to try to get the best value for money that we can. We also need to make sure that those who need the tickets most are being allocated the tickets. We are working across Bus Éireann and the Department to ensure that the services are reaching the families that really need the tickets. There is a good bit of work to do on that, but there is a huge commitment across government to make sure that we do that to ensure we can get the tickets out there. The most valued piece is the school bus ticket. I know from past experience and the role that I now have that when the ticket is not available, it can cause huge stress and anxiety for families and children.

Education Policy

17. **Deputy Paula Butterly** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she will consider the introduction of a national programme for post-primary schools aimed at educating students about domestic violence and gender-based violence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52669/26]

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Education about domestic and gender-based violence is addressed in the SPHE curriculum at both junior cycle and senior cycle. An updated junior cycle SPHE specification was rolled out in schools from September 2023, with all schools required to provide the subject for all junior cycle students. An updated senior cycle SPHE specification was published in 2024 and is being introduced on a phased basis, with all schools required to provide the subject at senior cycle by September 2027.

The introduction of these updated SPHE specifications is recognised as a key action within the prevention pillar of Zero Tolerance: The Third National Strategy for Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. It is one of a number of actions in the implementation of the strategy that are led by my Department, reflecting its commitment to the aims of zero tolerance.

Learning in SPHE is designed to be appropriate to the age and stage of development of students. At junior cycle, there are relevant learning outcomes across the various strands of SPHE, including in relation to respectful relationships, identifying the signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships, the importance of consent and of boundaries within relationships, and being able to recognise different kinds of abusive behaviour. The updated senior cycle SPHE specification includes learning about the common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control, understanding the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence and the supports available, and image-based abuse.

Recognising the sensitivity of these and other issues addressed within the SPHE programme, the introduction of these updated specifications continues to be supported by an extensive programme of teacher professional learning offered by Oide. There have been more than 10,000 teacher interactions at these sessions since 2023. In addition, 104 teachers so far have participated in the DCU graduate diploma in SPHE and RSE, which offers post-primary teachers the opportunity to upskill in this very important subject area.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister for the updates. It is important to note that there is going to be more extensive engagement with students. I recently met a group of students from County Louth. We had a lively, truthful and open conversation, particularly with the boys who are attending all-boys schools. They were honest about the fact that they are very much in the dark about what consent means and how they are supposed to behave. Peer pressure also plays a large role in this. They need guidance, and they were very much calling out for guidance from a school perspective.

I would ask the Minister to consider bringing these updates into the junior cycle. As we know, children can live in family situations where there is domestic violence from a very early age. Crimes, including sexual crimes, are happening younger and younger. We see it from the double-digit growth that is happening year on year. I do not think we can get in early enough.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Deputy raises a very important issue. We have seen reports on the news in recent weeks on the impact of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It is important that we raise awareness, as a society. These are also conversations that need to happen at home, with parents.

It is important that we situate the area of learning within the SPHE programme, rather than in a separate programme. SPHE aims to equip young people and students with the knowledge

and understanding of how to navigate the world around them, to make decisions, to understand how to forge healthy relationships, and where to seek help or information when it is needed. These are all crucial skills. Of course, teacher competence and confidence are very important in the SPHE classes. That is why Oide, which deals with professional learning for teachers across the country, has rolled out an extensive programme of teacher professional learning over the past three years to support the introduction of the new SPHE specifications. There have been more than 10,000 teacher interactions, as I said. Resources are also available online to support SPHE teachers in the classroom. They have been developed in close collaboration with the HSE, the NCCA and my Department. I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Military Neutrality

116. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence to outline her proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection; when she intends to bring forward a Bill; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54261/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The triple lock neutrality protection is deeply valued by the Irish people. It was the basis on which the Irish people were encouraged to vote for European referendums, on the basis that the Irish people value their neutrality and an independent foreign policy. The Government proposes to get rid of the triple lock. It is not reform; it is not change - it is getting rid of the triple lock. Ultimately, a Government that commands a majority will be in a position to deploy troops to any international force as it sees fit. There is growing concern about that, including in these Houses. I ask the Minister for an update on the legislation.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Helen McEntee): I appreciate that we have had these discussions on a number of occasions. I look forward to debating this as the legislation comes through the Houses. It is important that we have these discussions, and that we have a debate as to what exactly is in the Bill, what is not in the Bill and what the intention of it is. I appreciate that there are very strongly held views on this matter, so I appreciate this opportunity to discuss it prior to the Bill moving forward.

I want to be clear on what the Bill does not intend to do. It is not to remove Ireland's military neutrality. As a Government, we are very clear that the purpose is to adjust and amend the Defence Act so we can continue to either dispatch our Defence Forces personnel for service outside of the State, or make sure they stay part of the peacekeeping missions they are currently part of. We know that is being impacted at the moment because of the triple lock. This is not to remove our military neutrality or to align us with any other military force. This is to make sure that we can continue to deploy our service personnel, our men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann, overseas for peacekeeping missions.

Government approval for the text of the Defence (Amendment) Bill was received on 9 June. The Bill was published on the Oireachtas website and will be progressed through the Houses

of the Oireachtas as quickly as possible. Obviously, we are on the last sitting day, but my intention is that we would bring it to the House as early as possible in the new term. While the precise timeline will depend on the schedule, my intention remains to see the legislation enacted and commenced at the earliest opportunity. We had said initially it would be by the end of this year, but I intend and hope to move it as quickly as possible.

The principal reform proposed in the Bill is the removal of the requirement for a United Nations Security Council mandate as part of the existing triple lock mechanism. The two other elements are a Government decision and the approval of Dáil Éireann, so it is not just for any Government and would require the approval of Dáil Éireann. That will remain in place. It is the Government's view, and very much my view as well, as I have outlined previously and am again happy to do so today, that the current arrangements allow the permanent members of the UN Security Council - the UK, Russia, China, the US and France - to effectively veto any new mission or potentially close down a mission, as has been the case. I do not believe that any other country should have the ability to constrain Ireland's sovereign decision-making through the use of a veto or the threat of a veto.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: No other country had a vote on the Defence Acts in the 1960s. No other country had a vote on the Defence Acts in 2006. No other country will have a vote on this Defence (Amendment) Bill. It will be decided here. These are the tests that we set sovereignly in this Parliament. That is all about it. All of this craic is neither here nor there. These are our decisions about where we see fit to deploy Irish personnel. That is ultimately what this is about.

All the objects that the Government talks about achieving, such as that the world is changing or we need to invest in our defence, are not prevented by the triple lock. We should invest in our defence. We should be strong on neutrality and strong on defence. I absolutely agree with that. The Minister talks about the need to ensure that Defence Forces personnel have the ability to deploy internationally and are not prevented from participating in rescue missions. I have no problem at all with head No. 7. Actually, most of the legislation is fine. It is just head No. 8 that is a fundamental problem and a fundamental change. That is recognised by the Minister's coalition partners, or at least all apart from two or three at the top of that political party. They are very concerned because they know this will potentially constrain our ability to have an independent foreign policy as it undermines our neutrality. Perhaps the Minister might conclude that it does not end it in the final assessment, but it does undermine it potentially.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I would ask the Deputy a number of questions. First, does he trust Óglaigh na hÉireann? Does he trust our Defence Forces? If he does, then he trusts them to make the decision.

The triple lock, as amended, will ensure-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is not their decision; it is our decision.

Deputy Helen McEntee: No. The Deputy should listen to me. If he trusts the Defence Forces-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I do trust them.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----to make a recommendation, because that will still be included in this, they will make a recommendation to the Government and will assess the type of mission we are talking about in the way they currently do. Does the Deputy trust the people of this country to elect the people they want to be elected?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I do.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Does he trust them to make that decision? That is how we democratically form a Government here.

The triple lock, as amended, would ensure that we have recommendations from Óglaigh na hÉireann, which knows what it is doing and has for decades deployed its troops on peacekeeping missions. These are troops that we respect. We know they are highly trained and well respected across the world. They will continue to make those recommendations under the amended legislation. It would then be put to this House for us to decide, as democratically elected people who form Governments in a democratic way, unlike in certain other countries, including Russia, that currently have a say in how we deploy our troops. We would then make the decision and there would be oversight.

There is nothing here to suggest that we are going to start sending troops off to war. It would be under the exact same status as the current peacekeeping missions. Deployment would have to be recommended by our Defence Forces. It would have to be approved by people who are democratically elected in this country, not the likes of Russia or China or anybody who should not have a say in how we deploy our troops.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister said it would be on the same basis as it is currently, when that is plainly not the case. She is getting rid of the requirement for a UN mandate.

I will tell the Minister who I do not trust. I do not trust the likes of NATO-aligned organisations such as Partnership for Peace. Frankly, given the trajectory of their political positioning on the Middle East, there are many people at the top of the EU that I do not trust in terms of their foreign policy objectives, given the cover they gave to Israel in recent years in the context of the genocide. I do trust the Defence Forces and I do trust the people of this country.

I ask the Minister whether she trusts the people of this country to make the decision. If she does, why does she not put the matter to a referendum, given that this was the basis on which many people were asked to vote in the Nice and Lisbon referendums? This matter was central to those referendums.

The Minister knows quite clearly-----

Deputy Helen McEntee: The triple lock is not in our Constitution.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: -----that the decisions in the Lisbon and Nice referendums were based on things such as the Seville Declaration. I expect that many people changed their minds because they were given reassurances. Those reassurances are now disappearing into dust because of the policy of the Government.

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is why we need this debate. To be quite frank, we are talking about amending legislation. The triple lock is not in our Constitution. Our treaties are in the Constitution. The triple lock was never part of our Constitution. We were a militarily neutral country before we voted for the treaties and before we introduced the triple lock. We will continue to be a neutral country. The attempt to suggest that we need to have a referendum to change our Constitution for something that is not in our Constitution is trying to thwart what the actual debate is here.

We are very clear, and if one looks at the legislation-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It does not have to be in the Constitution to have a referendum.

Deputy Helen McEntee: On what? A referendum is to amend the Constitution.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is not.

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is not in the Constitution.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is a constitutional referendum.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There are other kinds of referendums. Of course there are.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister should continue.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The world has changed. I trust-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Let us invest in our Defence Forces and ensure we deploy on UN missions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is the debate we will have. The Deputy can shout things-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We must move on to the next question.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I do have time and must say that the world has changed. The people I speak to recognise that the world has changed.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: So do we.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The people I speak to do not like the fact that Russia has essentially removed, or will remove in the coming months, all our peacekeeping troops from UNIFIL, where we have been for decades. That is because of the triple lock. That is what we are trying to amend and adjust, not anything else, contrary to what is being suggested here.

Tribunals of Inquiry

117. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Defence if her Department is satisfied with the level of support being provided by the Department to witnesses from the Women of Honour participating in the Defence Forces tribunal, with particular regard to one-to-one support provided before, during and after testifying; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54533/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I look forward to coming back to the topic of the triple lock in a few questions' time.

I have read with extreme concern the reports over the past week on the lack of support provided by the Department of Defence to Women of Honour, whose members are participating in the Defence Forces tribunal. I absolutely understand that it is important to guarantee the independence of the tribunal and I also understand that limited supports are in place, but it is vital that we listen when victims of abuse within our Defence Forces tell us that what is in place is inadequate, especially when, in testifying, they are reliving some of the most difficult moments of their lives. Will the Department commit to providing additional, one-to-one, customised support for those testifying in the tribunal?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I have met a number of the women from the Women of Honour. I have met them in my Department and in different manners or at different meetings. I have nothing but respect and admiration for each and every one of them. I fully appreciate and have no doubt that what they are going through now is retraumatising for many of them. I have no doubt that their having to tell their stories and experiences time and again is very traumatic and difficult for them. That is why, when I met them earlier this year, I did so with the ambition of assisting and providing them with whatever support I could before the tribunal started. The Deputy is right that the tribunal is independent. It is important that we allow the process to take its course. My intention in meeting the women and listening to their concerns was to put in place whatever supports we could. I thank the women because some of what was said to me at the meeting was very difficult for anybody to have to relay again.

We discussed the need to provide counselling supports. Different mechanisms were being put in place but we were asked whether we could do more than that. Following the meeting, I engaged immediately with my colleague Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, the Minister for Health, and asked her whether she could put in place a structure, similar to what we have had under other types of tribunals or inquiries, that would provide a counselling service to members of the group who have been or will be attending the tribunal. This is separate from some of the things that have been put in place.

The HSE has said that the service is now set up if there is anybody who wants to engage, and that it is willing to provide this support. This has been relayed. An engagement mechanism and supports are ready. A specific package of counselling measures has been set up for the tribunal once the information that has been requested from the group is received. If there are individuals who feel they are not getting the support they need, there is a mechanism in place. Once we know who they are, we can identify what support is required. I appreciate that they will not necessarily tell me who they want to work with, or who they are engaging with or supporting, but we do have to get that information to be able to pass it on.

There are a number of other supports available to serving and former members of the Defence Forces, and I can touch on them in the next answer.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I appreciate that the Minister has taken the time to listen to victims and survivors, and I appreciate her respect and admiration. I share her respect and admiration for the very difficult thing these women are doing. I completely understand that the tribunal is beyond the scope of the Minister's remit and this House. However, psychological and pastoral support for those giving testimony has been provided by the Department to a limited degree and it should continue to provide it.

When survivors of abuse are saying the support is not adequate, it is vital that they are listened to and appropriate action is taken. When the supports are not in place, we limit participation in what is an incredibly important process. It is appalling to me that, instead of any active referral or support, many have described receiving a list of numbers and emails for various charities, one of which does not even provide clinical mental health services. That is absolutely unacceptable.

I commend the courage of Women of Honour. I commend the courage of those who are testifying. We know that, for survivors of abuse, recounting what has happened to them can be extremely retraumatising. We need to be able to support survivors throughout that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I fully agree.

What I want is to make sure that people are proactively engaged with and supported and that they are not handed a list requiring them to go off and try to find support themselves. That is exactly why I met with the Minister for Health and asked that there be something specific and tailored to the tribunal. I have already asked my officials to re-engage to make sure that, if there is information needed by the HSE so that what I have described can happen, and if it is not happening, it should be provided immediately.

Like the Deputy, while I am aware that the tribunal is independent, I am very much conscious of what we are seeing in the media every day. We are hearing the testimonies and seeing people having to relive some of the most traumatic times of their lives. I am very conscious of this, so I have asked my Department to reach out and make sure that if there is a gap where information has not been provided or cannot be, it addresses it.

There are other supports. There is Lena support by Inspire, which is a 24-hour external confidential helpline and counselling service. This is a matter of referral or appointment. There is both telephone and face-to-face counselling, so there are a number of different options.

Separately, there is the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel, which is funded through the HSE and includes counselling and a 24-7 service.

If there is a gap here, my intention is to address it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am glad to hear that intention. I request that the Minister keep my office up to date on how her office is dealing with this. I am aware that some of these supports are in place, but, as was reported a few days ago, several people who have gone through this have said that, while giving evidence, the only assistance offered to them if they became distressed was the opportunity to pause proceedings and have a glass of water.

While an employee assistance programme like Inspire, which the Minister referred to, is good to have, it is not an adequate support for someone who is testifying on their abuse. The answer to someone testifying about their abuse for hours and needing support should not be to ring a number and have to retell their entire story. If help is not being made readily available, if it is not easy to access, and if survivors are saying it does not meet their needs, action must be taken.

Those participating in the Defence Forces tribunal are doing so in the interests of justice and truth and to ensure that this level of abuse never happens again. We all benefit from the maximum possible participation. I am concerned, on foot of these reports from participants, that we are allowing a situation where people feel they must stay silent to protect their own mental health. We need to do everything we can to avoid that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I fully agree. For any tribunal or inquiry, particularly where we are talking about such sensitive information and such traumatic experiences, people must be trauma informed. That must absolutely be the case. We have been assured that those who are involved and who are engaged with the tribunal have been trauma informed and trauma trained. The type of training that has been provided was outlined at the public hearing on 16 June. I am committing to ensure that if there are gaps or issues, we will make sure that where the HSE support service that has been set up through the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, following our engagement, is not getting to people and they feel they only have the lines that were made available at the beginning, we will try to rectify that. It is my intention to ensure that people know where the supports are and can access them. Unfortunately, the tribunal is independent in the context of what happens before it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I acknowledge that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is a matter for the judge to progress, but I am assured that people are trauma informed. I will take the Deputy's point and go back to my Department on it specifically to ensure that absolutely everybody has received that training.

Defence Forces

118. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence further to recent Dáil debates, her views on past health and safety measures in the Air Corps; the actions she intends to take to support former aircraft maintenance and ancillary personnel; whether she intends to

ensure that their medical needs are met; and the other supports that can be offered to the category affected as a whole. [54263/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: In the context of the previous question, I submitted another question that was ruled out of order, which is fair enough. I probably did not word my question as precisely as Deputy Gibney worded hers. I record my concern about legal representation in that regard. It is important to say that.

This question relates to another welfare issue. I will keep raising this issue. There is scope for the Department to take action here. It can look after the people affected without in any way conflicting with legal cases. I do not want to hear about legal cases. I know the Minister is going to talk about them anyway. Ultimately, the Department can make health and redress interventions without in any way undermining those court cases. Airport personnel were put at risk by chemicals.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. I know he is committed to this issue; I am too. I have in recent months spent some time travelling to different barracks and Army bases and meeting with personnel. What I see all over the country is their professionalism, dedication and commitment. I am proud of that, and I know they take great pride in the work they do. The health, safety and well-being of our Defence Forces personnel is front and centre in everything that I and the Department do. When we talk about capital investment and investing in equipment, infrastructure and accommodation, and additional finance to improve pay, terms and conditions, it is all with the ambition of ensuring that the health and well-being of our Defence Forces personnel are front and centre.

As the Deputy said, there are ongoing litigation challenges. I will not get into specific detail. It is only a short time since we last had defence questions, so while I do not have a huge number of updates for him, I can say, as I did on the previous occasion, that the courts took a number of cases under active case management. I am advised that the State Claims Agency remains open to engagement. It is important that is known in order that we can try to resolve this issue. More recently, what has happened is that agreements have been reached between a number of parties to engage in formal mediation discussions. It is important that we allow mediation to continue and ensure that nothing we say here will impact that.

A number of individuals have opted to bring their cases through the personal injuries process. It is important that we respect their decision to do so and make every effort not to impede the process. In the other instances I have outlined, efforts are under way to see if mutual agreement can be reached.

Approximately 23 cases have come to the fore. We have different processes and ways in which we can engage with each of those individuals. What I want to do is to ensure that it is as straightforward a process as possible. I appreciate that has not been the case for many people. I appreciate that this has been going on for much longer than anybody would like. The measures to which I refer, the State Claims Agency and the mediation process are there. I encourage people to continue to engage with that process.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: These types of issues of collective harm, collective abuse in some instances and collective injury are things that the State does badly. We can see it. The

Minister previously served as Minister for education. We have seen many examples in that area. The response of the State is always to tell people that they can go through the courts. If people do not go to the courts, there is an issue with that. We set up redress schemes and if people do not make a claim within a certain timeframe, they are excluded. We have the recent example of the women who attended Dunderrow National School. Women who were in the same class as Louise O'Keeffe were prevented from bringing forward redress. The point is that when enough pressure comes on, the State eventually remembers - and it knows, in truth - that it does not have to do everything through the courts. If a category of people have had wrong done to them, the State has other measures available without even accepting legal liability. The Minister knows that. There is nothing to prevent the Minister from looking after the health needs of these men and women. She knows that perfectly well.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I disagree that people are being pushed into the courts. The situation is exactly the opposite. I have said in the Chamber many times since I started taking these questions that the State Claims Agency is there and wants to mediate and work directly with people in order that cases do not go directly to the courts. Steps and procedures have been put in place over years so that people can seek mediation and can go through a process that is not adversarial and does not require them to go to the courts or to take on legal representation. This can be worked through.

The number of cases increased before the most recent mediation outcome. There were 11 or 12 cases and there are now 23. There is a process for all of the people affected. Each case is different. That is what may be different to other places that the Deputy has referenced. Each case is different. There has already been an acknowledgement that at the time, personal protective equipment, PPE, needed to be better. That is why I say now that the investment we are putting into our Defence Forces is not just to provide the best capabilities and types of technology but also means that we are putting in place equipment that is safe and protects our personnel. We have a clear process here and I encourage everybody involved to go through the process. They will be supported. The agency is there to work with them.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister said that she is not pushing anybody to the courts. I am not a doctor and cannot make a clinical decision, but if people suffered negative health outcomes that they believe have a connection to their clinical exposure, and they have never taken a case, how precisely is the Government going to help them? They are not going to be able to engage with the State Claims Agency unless they have made claims and gone to the courts. They are not going to be able to engage with the State Claims Agency unless they have made a claim and gone to the courts. None of this is necessary. We know what happens in Australia and the Netherlands, and in other areas of this State. Of course, every case and category is different, but the same principle applies. The State can assist people with their medical requirements and can provide *ex gratia* payments. It can provide a number of different things without accepting legal liability. The Minister knows that because her previous Department, the Department of education, has done it numerous times. The Department of children has done it numerous times - usually under political pressure, but it has done it. There is nothing to stop the Minister doing it. This is not going away. How is the Minister going to address the needs of those people who were exposed to these chemicals - and this is the key detail - who have not taken cases or made a claim against the State? How is the Minister going to help those people?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Referring to other countries is not helpful in this instance because the situations are not comparable. We have 23 individuals who have brought forward cases, and I fully respect their right to do so. I would prefer it if, through that process, there was mediation in order that the issue could be resolved as quickly as possible. That has been the case for one of the people in question whose case was resolved satisfactorily. If people have issues and concerns, it is important that they come forward and raise their cases. Beyond that, we have a process that people can use. We have a mechanism with which people are already engaging. I ask them and encourage them to continue to engage through that process.

I do not think we can equate this situation with what is happening in the Department of education. What the Minister for education is doing is to ensure that we establish how issues were responded to in our schools at the time. That is exactly what is happening with the tribunal here. The tribunal, which we discussed and which was brought forward through the Women of Honour, will also look at this issue, how it was responded to and how it was dealt with. There is a mechanism there that is similar to what we are doing in education.

11 o'clock

Defence Forces

119. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence to provide an update on recruitment numbers for the Defence Forces as of July 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54380/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: Will the Minister provide an update on recruitment numbers for the Defence Forces as of this month?

Deputy Helen McEntee: We are all committed to strengthening recruitment to and supporting retention in the Permanent Defence Force. The military authorities have advised that the strength of the Permanent Defence Force stood at 7,823 personnel on 31 May, the most recent date for which we have a figure available. Last year saw modest though significant growth of nearly 200 in the overall strength, with a total of 790 inductions achieved. This is the highest number we have had in 20 years. The number of personnel who discharged was at its lowest level in more than five years. I am determined to build on this and have set a target of 850 inductions for 2026. As of 31 May - again these are the most up-to-date figures available - there were a total of 289 inductions, comprising 188 into the Army, 26 into the Air Corps and 75 into the Naval Service. I am pleased that there continues to be very strong interest in careers in the Defence Forces, with a total of 16,510 applications received in 2025 and over 10,000 applications received to end May of this year. The challenge now is to ensure that the target of 850 is achieved.

A draft strategic workforce plan prepared by the Defence Forces has recently been submitted to me for consideration. As the Deputy will be aware, the aim of this process is to provide a pathway to the achievement of a strength of 11,500, inclusive of civilian personnel, commensurate with level of ambition 2. Increases in application numbers and in the overall strength of the Permanent Defence Force over the past three years demonstrate that the key enabling measures the Government has introduced to support and drive Defence Forces

recruitment and retention are yielding results. I appreciate it is slow and we need to maintain that momentum and do even more. These measures include significant progress on pay, increases in the maximum ages of recruitment and retirement respectively, the extension of private secondary healthcare to all personnel, the application of the provisions of the working time directive - which had been sought for some time - subject to certain exemptions, and increases in patrol duty allowance.

Deputy Mark Wall: The Minister is 100% correct that we all want to see recruitment to our Defence Forces continue. However the figures she has given far from the 11,500 sought by the Commission on the Defence Forces by 2028. The Minister mentioned 850 a year. Is that the height of the ambition? It is not going to take us near 11,500.

I will mention a couple of issues. The first is the single public service pension scheme. RACO and PDFORRA have been in contact with the Minister a number of times about this. Has she had any update on that from the Department of Finance or the Department of public expenditure?

On housing, I recently received a reply from the Minister in respect of a parliamentary question on derelict houses in the Curragh and at other barracks around the country. In that reply, she stated that the hope is to bring these houses back into habitable condition. This is what we need to do to improve recruitment to our Defence Forces. We need to look at the pension scheme and we need to provide housing for those who want to enter our Defence Forces, regardless of whether they have families.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree that there are lots of things we need to do. It is not just about pay. We also need to invest in our accommodation and in equipment and technology. Our investment in counter-drone technology and radar equipment is something Defence Forces personnel are excited about. The level of training involved and the ambition there encourages people to want to be part of that, so we need to invest in our infrastructure with the aim of enabling greater levels of recruitment.

I recently opened the university students' accommodation complement, USAC, building in Galway, which is a 69-bed, state-of-the-art accommodation facility that was completed at a cost of €12.3 million, and the block 4 accommodation building at the Naval Service Base, Haulbowline, which will accommodate an additional 74 personnel. I also visited Gormanstown Camp, which is in my constituency. It is an impressive facility and will eventually provide for the training of up to 900 recruits. We want to keep increasing the numbers, but infrastructure is required to allow us to do so. Instructors are also required, and that is something we are working on. The beds are not the only thing; it is also about ensuring that we have the instructors to be able to reach those numbers.

Deputy Mark Wall: There is no single issue here. This is about housing, pensions, pay and conditions. Has the Minister dealt though with the representative organisations on the single public service pension scheme? She might confirm that and let us know whether there is any update.

The Minister mentioned all the other barracks, and that is very welcome and everyone who supports the Defence Forces will welcome that. However, the Curragh has been neglected

when it comes to housing. On the basis of the Minister's reply to my previous parliamentary question, there are 63 derelict houses there. Can I get a commitment that she will expedite work on those houses?

I cannot let this opportunity go without mentioning the Curragh of Kildare and what is happening there. I am in contact with the Department, but I ask the Minister to come back as quickly as possible to all the public representatives in Kildare South. This is a huge issue for everybody from the area, and it cannot continue. It has been a month since the scoping meeting was held, and we still do not have an update on what is going to happen next.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I acknowledge our representative bodies. It is my intention to meet them late in summer. I will be writing to them to that effect. I have already spoken to some of them in respect of this matter. Obviously, whether it is public service pensions or anything else relating to the public service pay agreement, we are working and, where we can, engaging directly with the Department of public expenditure and reform. I have made very clear my views to the representative bodies on the progress I would like to make, but we have to work very closely with the Department. The moves towards the next public sector pay agreement are already starting. We need to make sure we can square off what was agreed in the previous one but also start to look forward to the next one. The Defence Forces representative bodies have representation now they are part of the umbrella body as well.

On infrastructure, A body of work to look at all the infrastructure, etc., that we will in the future is in the process of being concluded. This will feed into the next capital plan. I have no doubt that as part of that the ambition is for the Curragh to be transformed and that there is further investment there. That will require another budget and, obviously, I will be seeking as much as possible in that. I want to be as ambitious as I possibly can.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: If I could address the final issue, I am very conscious this has been going on for some time. We are engaging extensively with a number of different stakeholders, but I will come back to the Deputy on that.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister.

Defence Forces

120. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Defence if she will examine extending the EU victims directive (details supplied) to cases that are prosecuted by the military police or the Director of Military Prosecutions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54260/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: When is the victims of crime Act 2017 going to apply the Army? The Women of Honour have pushed for change so that if there is abuse within the Army there will, we hope, be mechanisms to deal with that, but what about women who are abused by Army personnel who are not in the Army? The Minister knows of this case and I am not going

to go into any names or details but it shines a light on how we have a situation where a woman who was abused by an Army officer - and potentially another woman as well - has not been able since 2022 to get information on her case. Nothing is being done by the secretive military tribunals that are operating in the Army.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I am aware that she has been engaging on this matter and has been trying to make progress. That is certainly something I want to see happen as well.

This was looked at before, so there had been engagement previously when the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 was brought forward. At that time, a decision was taken for various reasons that it did not extend to offences under military law and so it would not be possible to include in the legislation at the time. While it may not be the same, since then the Defence Forces, though they are excluded from this, have been very clear that where appropriate they adhere to the principles of the Act within the military justice system and this is reflected in the Defence Forces victim's handbook. In saying that, because of a number of different meetings and engagement I have had, I have asked my officials to look at this again, so there are deliberations taking place. As part of this process, the military authorities have recently provided advice on the matter. That advice is under consideration. I would like to see them included in this, quite frankly, so while a decision was taken for different legal reasons previously, I have asked for that to be looked at again. In particular, there are a number of different things. There needs to be not a greater level of oversight but a greater ability to hold certain structures accountable and to ensure that where our Defence Forces and military personnel are independent, at the same time there is very clear process where I as the Minister, together with the Department, have a role or function in ensuring there is that significant level of accountability. The work of the external oversight body is also really important here.

We spoke about the Women of Honour earlier. We have heard some of the absolutely atrocious accounts from women who have been abused doing their duty and in their job and it is absolutely essential the workplace is one where women feel safe and all personnel feel safe. That is why the work of the external oversight body is important. It is important also that the Defence Forces are working with that body, as I know they are.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have very little time left, but I want to put on record that the woman in question was abused by an Army officer using military equipment and surveillance technology, which is extremely scary.

She made a complaint, which has never been pursued. She found out that a court martial was taking place but it was about smaller charges that were nothing to do with the woman or the other woman either. The feeling of the victim was that this was being facilitated, like an organised pay off of this predator. This may not be true but that was her feeling. Is this officer retired? Is he eligible to retire? Does he have a clean record? Does he have a pension? Will we end up seeing him working in Leinster House? The victim's belief is that the military prosecutor has evidence of a very dangerous man but for some reason, the Army does not seem to be concerned because it has not prosecuted him on those charges. Why would the Army not want to prosecute somebody?

Are we at war or something? Why is it so secretive? Why does the Minister have no jurisdiction over what is going on in the Army? I see a letter arrived a day before this question was due in which the Minister says she has no role here. This is just outrageous.

Deputy Helen McEntee: From my previous answer, what I want to ensure is that there is a level of oversight and jurisdiction, where there needs to be. At the moment, I am not satisfied that is the case. I will not go into details on the individual in question or any individuals. I have relayed that there are certain things I cannot do at the moment because of how things stand. I am keen to make changes so that there is an appropriate level of oversight. I would again stress that a lot of people in the Defence Forces are very keen to make sure that it is an environment in which people feel safe. I believe it is but where issues arise there are mechanisms in place to support and assist people. The Value Our People survey that was done recently highlights a number of significant challenges that still exist but importantly also where improvements have been made and where there is more work to do. This Value Our People survey will be carried out on a continuous basis so that we can assess what is changing within the Defence Forces, how people are feeling, what challenges are still there and how we can improve. With Patricia King and others through the external oversight body and the work of the Defence Forces themselves, a lot can and will be done in the time ahead.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This man said of one woman that he would attach her to a concrete block. He said of another that he would set fire to her. Should this person be getting a pay off from the Army? No, of course, he should not. He should have been put on trial. We have to end a situation where these military prosecutions are secret and where the Minister for Defence does not even have the right to intervene. In a letter to the victim, the Minister said that such matters were internal to the Defence Forces and that she had no statutory role and she was considering what options she had. I trust the Minister will look into this, because I know she has an interest in gender-based violence from her previous role. She is the Minister who can do this and can apply the victims' directive. This officer was involved in a GoFundMe campaign, where rapists' names were used as a joke by the various men who contributed to it. I do not think rape is funny and the Army should not either. That GoFundMe campaign was left up for a long time. Why is the Army a law unto itself in relation to gender-based violence? We know it will deal with soldiers but when women are abused the Army has authority over people. It has uniforms, power, weaponry and surveillance to abuse women. Women outside the Army should be protected from people in the Army and should have the same rights as any other woman.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Once the GoFundMe campaign the Deputy mentioned was brought to the Army's attention it was taken down immediately. However, the very fact that it was up, or as the Deputy said, the content in it, was completely inappropriate. We need to continue to focus on a number of things. Legislative change is required so that there is oversight where it is needed. I am looking at that at the moment, not just in terms of the victims' charter but also in other ways. The external oversight body, which was only established in April 2023, is working with the Defence Forces to make changes where needed. I regularly meet the chair, the chief of the Defence Forces and others specifically on their work.

As we know, the tribunal is under way at the moment. While I anticipate there will be recommendations from the tribunal, we are already starting to work on some of those in terms of complaints' procedures and in terms of mechanisms that had not been functioning appropriately in the past and how we improve them. I am trying to move ahead and not just wait for any recommendation. We are actually working on them now. I appreciate that it is a very difficult time for a lot of people. At the same time, we need to make sure we are responding to this and putting in place the appropriate mechanisms.

Defence Forces

121. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence the role she envisages for the Defence Forces in international peacekeeping and peace support operations over the next decade; the likely contribution of Ireland to future United Nations and European Union missions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54553/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: As a former UN peacekeeper, I am keenly aware of the proud role Ireland has played in international peacekeeping for almost 70 years. With the nature of conflict and traditional UN missions evolving, what does the Minister envisage Ireland's role in international peacekeeping will look like over the next decade?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for the role she has played and for her service to the State. I acknowledge all of those who have served on UN missions and who are currently abroad on missions. We recognise that overseas service is a core task of the Defence Forces. Many men and women join the Defence Forces because they want to take part in international peacekeeping and peace support operations. I envisage we will continue to play a significant role in this area in the decades ahead. We have to. We have to make sure we have the ability to deploy our troops overseas and partake in significant missions, focused on peacekeeping, prevention and training, which they do at the moment. It remains an important element of military life. The opportunity to participate in meaningful overseas missions with unique operational experience, professional development opportunities and the ability to contribute directly to international peace and security is essential. The one thing members of the Defence Forces say to me when they come back is how they can feed back the experience they gain to our troops here. There is also what they bring to the table. When I am abroad I meet regularly with my colleagues, whether the Polish, French, Spanish, UK or Italian minister. They always say Irish peacekeeping troops are well respected and what they contribute and bring to the individual missions is essential. We want to maintain that.

Looking ahead, I expect that we will continue to contribute to various types of missions, namely, peacekeeping, peace support, conflict prevention and crisis management operations, where they are in accordance with Irish law and international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter. The focus and debate now is on the triple lock and how we amend it to make sure those vital missions, whether it be peacekeeping, conflict prevention or crisis management, can continue and that we can continue to send greater numbers of troops abroad, particularly at time when over 300 of our troops will be returning from the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon after this year. That will not be renewed and we still do not know what that might look like. I can touch on what that might be in my next answer.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I welcome the Minister's response. As someone who has served overseas, I recognise, as the Minister mentioned, that the future of peace support operations may look very different to those that have shaped previous peacekeepers, like me. Looking ahead, does the Minister see Ireland's overseas contribution remaining focused? She has already said that it will always be in accordance with Irish law and international law and the principles of the UN Charter. Does the Minister see that these will be on UN missions, particularly in Africa where many peacekeeping and stabilisation challenges are likely to arise or does she envisage a greater role for Ireland in EU-led peace support operations, or maybe a combination of both? With that in mind, what capabilities does Government believe the Defence Forces will require over the next decade to fulfil those missions effectively? Are we likely to see a greater emphasis on areas such as intelligence, cyber capabilities, drones, force protection, medical support and specialist training, alongside our traditional peacekeeping roles?

Deputy Helen McEntee: There are a number of things here. What I would like to see - unfortunately, it is not happening at the moment - is that we would have further UN Security Council missions. We have not had any new ones since 2014. That is because the Security Council is not operating as it should. We have other missions that our troops are currently on. A number of personnel are serving in Entebbe in Uganda and in the Middle East. At the moment, my concern for those troops is that those missions could come to an end in the same way that Operation IRINI and the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon have because of the lack of support from individual members of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. It is my ambition that we could see future UN peacekeeping missions. Beyond that, where that is not possible, we are working with the CSDP missions through the EU. This means much smaller missions. If we look at the overall number of peacekeeping missions we are involved in and the number of troops abroad of just under 400, about 70 of them are not in UNIFIL. All of the various missions are quite small. What we bring to the table, however, is a high level of training. There is a big focus on some of the missions on cyber security, maritime security and bomb disposal, where we have a high level of training from our history. There are different options. As we develop our capabilities, we will be able to do more.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister and fully support that. Ireland's reputation overseas has been built not only on the professionalism of our peacekeepers but also on the confidence serving personnel and their families have had in the supports and protections associated with overseas UN service. Whether future deployments are UN-led missions in Africa, EU-led peace support operations or other international stabilisation missions, can the Minister assure the serving members of the Defence Forces and, critically, their families that they will continue to receive the same high standards of welfare, support, operational protection, medical care, post-deployment support and recognition that generations of Irish UN peacekeepers have rightly expected?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot commend our Defence Forces enough on the level of training our personnel get. That is evolving and changing all the time. I was recently in a barracks where there was new technology that enables our Defence Force personnel to train in tanks in a simulated fashion. It allows as many as possible of them to train where there is not the capacity in actual tanks. So, we are now using new equipment. It is Irish companies

devising these types of technologies. It means they have the most up-to-date level of training and importantly when they then travel overseas that they have the equipment and the resources they need.

I cannot stress enough the regard in which Irish troops are held. Quite a number of personnel from other battalions have been killed in Lebanon in recent months where there has been crossfire between Israeli Defense Forces and Hezbollah. In many instances where there have been casualties, Irish troops have come to their aid and through their own resources and own capabilities have been able to support others as well as themselves. It is really important we continue that emphasis on working with each other, supporting each other and also supporting other troops on the ground.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Callaghan is taking Question No. 122 on behalf of Deputy Barry Ward.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

EU Presidency

122. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Defence the position regarding any formal agreements in place with any other EU country and the UK to ensure that there are sufficient defence and security mechanisms in place during Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52705/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: As Ireland holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, can the Minister outline what formal defence and security arrangements are currently in place with EU member states and the UK to ensure the appropriate security resilience and defence mechanisms are available throughout the Presidency?

Deputy Helen McEntee: As the Deputy knows, Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union began on 1 July. It is a major national undertaking for many different reasons. In preparation for the Presidency, including in relation to security, there has been significant and intense work for some time across Government.

An Garda Síochána, under the auspices of the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, has primary responsibility for security for the Presidency. The Deputy may also be aware that An Garda Síochána has established a dedicated European Union Presidency co-ordination office to oversee all aspects of operational planning, logistics and inter-agency engagement because it is not just the Garda leading on this but it is obviously working very closely with a number of different bodies.

Among the roles assigned to the Defence Forces by Government is the provision of aid of the civil power which, in practice, means to assist An Garda Síochána when requested to do so. On each occasion that the support of the Defence Forces is required, An Garda Síochána requests their assistance and accordingly any security assessments and consequent decisions to

seek support from the Defence Forces in terms of security provision are a matter for An Garda Síochána in the first instance and then they work closely together.

The Deputy will appreciate that I cannot comment on specific security arrangements that may be put in place and the Defence Forces cannot comment on any specific arrangements due to operational security. I can confirm, however, that the Defence Forces has stood up a joint task force to co-ordinate any Defence Forces supports to operations conducted during the EU Presidency period.

The Defence Forces have an excellent working relationship with An Garda Síochána and will continue to liaise with it in order to ensure the best supports that can be provided are provided when needed.

Separately, the Department of Defence maintains a number of bilateral and multilateral defence co-operation arrangements with partner countries, including memorandums of understanding with the United Kingdom and France. These arrangements provide frameworks for developing and furthering bilateral co-operation across a range of areas which include joint procurement, maritime security and cyber security. The maritime security strategy, launched earlier this year, particularly looks at how we can work more closely together. This is really where the Defence Forces' role comes to the fore in the maritime space where we need to make sure we have a complete picture on land and below sea as to what exactly is happening.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I agree that the maritime security strategy is a great document. One of the lessons of recent years is that threats to national security no longer come solely in conventional military forms. We have seen increasing concerns around cyberattacks, disinformation, threats to subsea cables, as referenced, attacks on critical infrastructure and vulnerabilities in our energy and communication networks.

The Presidency places Ireland at the centre of European decision-making and naturally raises our international profile. Against that backdrop, is the Minister satisfied the arrangements currently in place with our European partners and the UK are sufficient to ensure sufficient deterrence, situational awareness and resilience? Furthermore, has the experience of holding the Presidency highlighted any capability gaps that may require deeper co-operation in areas such as maritime security, cyber defence or intelligence sharing?

Deputy Helen McEntee: As the Deputy rightly said, over the past number of years, we have seen changing types of threats or challenges that we had not faced previously. Maritime security is to the fore in that regard. As a country, our maritime domain is seven times the size of our landmass. It is really important that where we have such a large number of critical subsea cables, energy infrastructure, and gas infrastructure quite literally on our seabed, we have the equipment to identify where there are risks and where there are threats and if issues emerge, how we can respond to them. That is where the Deputy will see a huge amount of our focus lie during our Presidency.

The strategy sets out how we will ensure there is a greater situational awareness of what is happening in our maritime domain. That requires investing in our capability - in our own ships, helicopters and technology and equipment - to be able to identify what is happening above and below the sea. It is about making sure we strengthen our partnerships. Of course, we will be

looking to our neighbours in that regard, namely, the UK and France, but beyond that as well. There is a number of different programmes, the Joint Expeditionary Force, JEF, being one of them, which is a programme looking at maritime security for a lot of the north Atlantic countries.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is something we said we are very interested in joining.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Callaghan.

Deputy Helen McEntee: All of this helps to build that sense of security but also helps us share our experience and mitigate some of the risks now coming to the fore.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Quite rightly, as the Minister pointed out, the Presidency has highlighted both the importance of international co-operation and the reality that Ireland cannot currently provide every aspect of its own defence and security requirements. However, let us be fair about that. There is probably no European country that can completely defend itself alone against every conceivable major threat. We are not an outlier in that regard and that is really important to note. Most European states rely on alliances for collective defence. As we look towards the next decade, does the Minister foresee a greater resilience on that structured partnership with the EU member states and with the UK in areas such as airspace security, maritime surveillance, cyber defence and critical infrastructure protection? While the Minister has outlined some specific capability gaps there in terms of increasing the number of ships and helicopters, technology, etc., does she believe that will help us become less dependent on others and more resilient in our own right? Does the Minister have a timeline for when those capability gaps can be closed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: When we talk about our security and our defence, we are talking about keeping people safe. We are also talking about protecting critical infrastructure, which could be subsea cables, the HSE and our national infrastructure, and it is then about working together to be able to respond to those threats as they emerge. That will require us working closely with other countries. That is already happening. If we even look at NATO, we are in part of 12 Partnerships for Peace, which focus on maritime security, focus on training and focus on cyber security. So, we have a lot to contribute and a lot we can do there.

When it comes to certain types of technology and certain types of equipment, there is a lot Irish companies are doing and small and medium sizes are investing in. This is something I am trying to highlight to other countries because, while we might be small and have a smaller army, we do have a lot to contribute to those spaces as well.

During our Presidency, but in particular when I came into the Department, we are bringing forward our capabilities in radar. This has come to the fore of our capital plan so we have a complete radar picture. The intention is that will be in place by 2028. That is about making sure we can see completely what is happening in our skies, on land and at sea as well. Part of that is a sonar programme that is already out to tender and is being developed. So there are a

lot of capabilities we are progressing but the Deputy is right that no country can respond to threats on its own. That is why it is really important we are working closely with our nearest neighbours and also with our colleagues in the EU and beyond.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to keep an eye on the time.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am sorry.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am trying to get in as many questions as I can. I do not want to be setting a bad example by allowing people to go over their time slots. That is why I had to ring the bell. I thought the Minister was completely ignoring me.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Apologies.

United Nations

123. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence to list the current UN peacekeeping missions around the world for which a request for Irish participation was made by the UN authorities and the reason Ireland is not participating in them, given that the ending of Ireland's role in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, means that the Defence Forces have once again capacity to consider other UN missions that are in line with our neutrality. [53650/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 123 is in the name of Deputy Ó Snodaigh. I understand Deputy Ó Laoghaire is taking it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We have all probably been guilty of the offence of going over time at different stages, I am sure.

Despite our disagreements in relation to the triple lock, I think the Minister and I agree that peacekeeping missions are important. They matter to the world, the communities in which they are located and the regions but they also matter to the development and progression of Defence Forces personnel. It is part of what people sign up for. There are currently 11 direct UN peacekeeping missions, with more under Chapter VIII, but this question primarily relates to the direct missions. There is now, with the ending of UNIFIL, greater capacity to consider additional UN missions in different locations across Europe, western Asia and southern Asia. Have we responded to requests from the UN?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. At the outset, I thank the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann for the outstanding professionalism and commitment with which they deploy, and have deployed, on UN peacekeeping missions. It is important to stress that there have been no new peacekeeping missions through the UN Security Council since 2014. That is a source of great regret for all of us. It is not operating as it should and I think we would all like to see the issues there being addressed. At the same time, though, we know exactly why there are issues and why the five permanent members, in the role they have, are contributing to this. This is the context in which any request for additional or enhanced participation by

Ireland from the UN has to be understood. There is a limited number of missions. There are no new missions, so there is only so much we can partake in.

In regard to UN requests over the past ten years, in September 2019, we had 14 Defence Forces personnel deployed to a UN mission in Mali as part of a joint operation with the German armed forces. This arose from a proposal made by Ireland rather than a request from the UN. Our participation in that concluded in 2022. In December 2021, we received a request from the UN to provide members of the Defence Forces to support the United Nations Mine Action Service in Entebbe, Uganda. One Defence Forces expert is currently serving with this training initiative under this arrangement.

As of 30 June 2026, Ireland is contributing 394 Defence Forces personnel to overseas peacekeeping missions and commitments. As I mentioned earlier, 320 of those personnel are currently in UNIFIL. This will conclude in December 2026, which leaves just 74 of our personnel on other missions. We have 12 personnel deployed in an observer force in Golan in Syria. We have a number of missions in the Middle East, where we have personnel deployed. We have three personnel in the Syrian mission and 12 in the Middle East. We also have observers and staff deployed to various United Nations and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, missions. I can touch on what the opportunities may or may not be in my next answer.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is important and the Minister and I share that view, much as we disagree on how it is not right to get rid of the triple lock. We have made that very clear and we think there is scope to deploy on peacekeeping missions elsewhere. We would like to see the UN and the manner in which it works reformed significantly, not just in relation to peacekeeping. There is significant scope for reform there.

I hope that there is going to be a list in the written response I receive to this question. The Minister gave a few examples. It is important that we understand the picture that is out there right across the world. There are five or six missions in Africa. Have we explored deploying to those? A lot of them are very long-standing missions, with some going back several decades and most looking as if they are there for the long term. Unfortunately, the conflict situations around those remain tense and require a peacekeeping presence. There is potential scope in those missions as well as in some of the other western and southern Asian locations.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Unfortunately, at this present time, there are no requests for us to participate in any other UN peacekeeping missions. I know that if you are not part of a mission at the outset, the scope for you to join afterwards is significantly impacted in terms of the number of personnel and the types of role you can take on.

In regard to the mission in the Middle East that I mentioned, I would be concerned about the possibility of what happened with Operation Irini and UNIFIL, where the UN mandates were not renewed, happening there. We would suddenly have 12 personnel - it is quite a small number, but still 12 personnel - who were not able to partake in the mission. There is a smaller number in Syria.

What we have at the moment are a number of posts that are filled in the UN, the EU and NATO as part of Partnership for Peace, and in the OSCE headquarters as well. There are also

various training missions that we are part of, many of which are through the Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, so they are not UN-mandated through Security Council meetings.

At the moment, there are no requests or plans to participate in missions. The most significant mission we have is UNIFIL. That work is under way and those conversations are happening at the moment.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: As I probably will not get more questions and it is my last contribution before the recess, I wish to take the opportunity to thank the staff of this institution and the Ceann Comhairle's office, who serve us so well. To be fair, I will also thank the officials of the Department of Defence for their co-operation over the course of the past year. They are not necessarily listening but I thank the officials of the Department of foreign affairs and the Minister's team on that side as well. I thank the Minister, who should be acknowledged for her co-operation at various stages.

Returning to the question, we raised this in committee with the Minister a number of weeks ago. I am concerned that all of our eggs are in the one basket but if we remove the triple lock, then we will have more options. It seems to me as if there does not seem to be a desire on the part of the Minister or her Department to explore the existing peacekeeping missions, even though there are multiples of them. I know we have small representations on some of them but there are several that we have no relationship with at this moment in time. I think there is capacity and it would be to the benefit of those locations to have experienced peacekeeping personnel, given our track record and the esteem in which we are held, and also to the benefit of our Defence Forces.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is the case that no mission is the same, so it is also a matter for the Defence Forces to assess and scope out the mission and then to decide whether it is a mission we can partake in. A question keeps being asked about what it is we would not be able to be a part of if we were to keep the triple lock. I am concerned that the troops we have on the ground currently are going to be removed from the missions they are on, and that is what is happening. UNIFIL is now closing. It is finishing up and we have 320 troops who will have to come home. Operation Irini is still operating but because the mandated mission fell, our troops have to come home. We have 12 who are in the Middle East but that mission could very well end because it is not renewed. Those troops would have to come home, as would the three who are in Syria. For every future mission, it will depend on the type of mission, so I cannot say exactly what missions we might be able to join if we remove the triple lock. I know that our hands are tied completely at the moment by the fact that others can decide whether we stay in missions, never mind whether we go to others.

Finally, I have no doubt that my officials are listening but if they are not, I will pass on the Deputy's thanks to them as well.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The foreign affairs side as well. I am sure the Department of Defence officials are there.

Defence Forces

124. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Defence to report on any progress made in the investigations into the death of a Defence Forces member (details supplied) who was killed on duty in Lebanon (details supplied); when the independent post-incident inquiry will be supplied to the member's mother; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53962/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Has there been any progress in relation to the investigations into the death of Private Seán Rooney? He is still missed in Dundalk and Donegal by family, friends and comrades. I know the Minister's legal representative in Lebanon has engaged with the military tribunal. My question is also about Mr. Michael Delaney's post-incident inquiry, whether all the due diligence has been done on that, whether we can see its publication, and if it can be provided to the family.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for his continued engagement on this matter. It is appreciated and I reaffirm our shared commitment to truth and justice, not least for Private Rooney, but in particular for his family.

Unfortunately, I can confirm that there has been no change in the status of the appeal that was taken since I last addressed the matter in the Dáil. My Department's Lebanese legal representative continues to actively engage with the president of the military cassation tribunal to seek updates on its progress. We remain advised that the tribunal has not yet reached a determination. This, as the Deputy will understand, is due to judicial decisions to delay procedures because of the current conflict in Lebanon. Despite the fact that there should be a ceasefire, we know that conflict is ongoing and, unfortunately, escalating in the region. However, my officials continue to remain in close and ongoing contact with our legal representatives as we await these further developments.

I am absolutely committed to ensuring that Private Rooney's family is kept informed on developments and it remains my intention to travel to Lebanon, where I will raise Private Rooney's case directly with the Lebanese Government. I have spoken to officials on the phone and to my colleagues in Brussels in person but I want to meet them on the ground as well, as the Taoiseach and Tánaiste have previously done in this role.

Regarding the coroner's inquest into the death of Private Rooney, hearings have been ongoing. To date, they have focused primarily on procedural matters. The next hearing is scheduled to take place on 22 July, and my Department and the Defence Forces are co-operating with this process in full. The coroner has scheduled the opening of the substantive inquest from 17 November.

The independent inquiry carried out by Mr. Michael Delaney SC has been completed. I thank Mr. Delaney for his work on the report. As mentioned previously, the report examined the internal tactics, techniques, processes and procedures of the Defence Forces with a view to identifying lessons arising from the circumstances surrounding Private Rooney's death. I reviewed the report and referred it to the Office of the Attorney General for advice regarding its publication. This advice has been received and the next step essentially is that I want it to be able to be presented to the family on a limited basis so that its confidential contents can be provided in a restricted release.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome that. I have spoken previously to the Minister about the necessity of providing Mr. Delaney's report on the incident to Natasha and the wider family. Whatever part of it can be published should be because it is all about learnings to ensure the safety of our peacekeepers when they operate abroad, while also providing necessary information to the family and others as regards the tragic death of Seán Rooney.

We all understand that Lebanon is going through a nightmare. The madness of the American regime and genocidal Israel needs to be called out and we need to take whatever action we can. Hopefully, we can see some movement from European partners, but we have to maintain that contact and ensure that the Lebanese authorities do not step away from the necessity of providing justice to the family of Seán Rooney.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have reviewed the report and referred it to the Office of the Attorney General for advice regarding its publication. The advice has been received and officials in my Department are examining it. I want to ensure that we facilitate, albeit in a limited way, the release of the report to certain individuals with a material interest in its contents on a confidential basis. This, of course, includes Private Rooney's family. I hope to meet the family again in the next couple of weeks. We will work towards that. I want to be clear that I want the family to receive it, but there is a legal side to it as well.

The Deputy is right. Irrespective of what is happening in Lebanon, we need to make sure that we continue to engage. Under Lebanese law, an appeal can be made on the grounds of an omission, an essential formality or a fault in the application, and this is the ground under which the appeal has been taken. Our Lebanese legal representative will continue to engage with the newly appointed military cassation president and is maintaining direct contact with my Department. Despite the fact that conflict is ongoing, we are in constant engagement so that we receive any further update immediately.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We need to ensure that the engagement with Lebanon is ongoing. Are we happy with the interaction with the UN? There had been some issues relating to the coroner's court. Everyone needs to do everything that can be done to ensure truth and justice for the family of Private Seán Rooney.

Does the Minister have any idea of the timeline for the family to see Mr. Delaney's report? I am working on the basis that it will be provided to a number of stakeholders beyond them but will not be published.

I take this opportunity to thank the Ceann Comhairle, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the staff of Leinster House for those occasional periods when we actually get things done for people. More of it should happen. At this time, I usually also make apologies for any nuisance that I have caused. I know that the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will not believe that is true in any way.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A welcome apology.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I would like to think that we get a lot of things done, but I acknowledge the Deputy's work as well.

I appreciate that the outcome of the criminal trial was somewhat disappointing for the family. Given that we now have the appeal and it is dragging on as well is very difficult for the family. This has been exacerbated by the fact that the conflict is making it very difficult for authorities and other elements to function in an appropriate and normal way throughout what has been an appalling attack on innocent civilians who have been caught up again in the wider conflict in the Middle East. From a wider perspective, our focus is on trying to bring the ongoing conflict to an end. In this case, our focus remains steadfast on finding peace and justice for Private Rooney and his family. There will be a limited release of the report but, importantly, the family will have it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What is the timeline?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot give the Deputy an exact timeline but it has gone to the Attorney General and has come back, so I should be able to engage with the family soon.

Military Neutrality

125. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Defence when legislation to amend the triple lock mechanism for the deployment of the Defence Forces overseas will be introduced, the expected timeline for its passage and implementation and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53891/26]

140. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Defence if she will withdraw legislation to abolish the triple lock until a referendum on military neutrality to let the people decide and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53909/26]

157. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Defence the status of her plans to abolish the triple lock and if she will make a statement on the matter. [54106/26]

185. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Defence if changes to the triple lock mechanism will include a provision that troops can be sent abroad in accordance with the articles of the UN charter and military neutrality and if she will make a statement on the matter. [53908/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will build on the Minister's conversations with Deputy Ó Laoghaire and ask about the status of her plans to abolish the triple lock, the timelines and so forth as regards the legislation that is intended to be discussed later this year.

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I propose to take Questions Nos. 125, 140, 157 and 185 together.

I am taking this question on behalf of the Minister. A commitment to reform what is known as the triple lock was set out in the programme for Government. The rationale for this reform is that the current requirement for a UN Security Council constrains Ireland's ability to participate in peacekeeping and crisis management operations because of the use, or threat of use, of a veto by any permanent member of the UN Security Council. The Government

considers that decisions regarding the deployment of Irish personnel should be taken in this Dáil and by this Government under our Constitution and legislation rather than being dependent on factors outside the State's control.

The purpose of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 is to consolidate, with amendments, the existing provisions of the Defence Acts relating to the despatch of members of the Defence Forces for service outside the State. The Government approved the text of the Bill on 9 June 2026. The Bill has been published and will be progressed through the Houses of the Oireachtas in the autumn term.

The principal change is the removal of the requirement for a UN mandate as a condition for the deployment of members of the Defence Forces overseas, but the Bill retains existing requirements for both Government approval and Dáil approval before such a deployment can take place. Crucially, the legislation also continues to ensure and require that deployments take place as part of an international force, which could be the UN, the EU or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe or another regional organisations-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Could it be NATO?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----in accordance with UN principles and, of course, in accordance with our own Constitution, which commits us to peace and friendly relations among nations.

The triple lock is a statutory mechanism. The reforms are designed to ensure that Ireland can continue to make an effective contribution to international peace support and crisis management missions while preserving our policy of military neutrality and maintaining robust democratic oversight of overseas deployments.

The Bill contains clear safeguards. Overseas deployments will continue to be limited to missions conducted for the purposes of peacekeeping, conflict prevention and the strengthening of international security consistent with the UN Charter and international law. The Bill ensures that Ireland's participation in overseas missions will continue to be grounded in our Constitution; in international law, to which the Constitution subjects itself; and the principles of the UN Charter. Any deployment will remain subject to democratic oversight through the approval of the Government and the Dáil.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am curious as to why the Minister has chosen not to take this question. In her earlier exchange with Deputy Ó Laoghaire, she said that she welcomed debate. For continuity, I intended to pick up on some of the things the Minister said, so it is a shame that we are chopping and changing.

The triple lock and the UN constitute international law in action. That it is what we are looking at. It is not, as the Minister of State has reduced it to, a veto. That is not what is happening here. Throughout this debate, the Department and the Government have displayed a lack of appetite to reform the Security Council or to get General Assembly approval. They have tried nothing and yet they are all out of ideas.

The uniting for peace resolution has been used in the past. Any time we raise these as suggestions, they are batted off as being too hard or too complex but the Government has not made the effort. At a time when international law is so precarious and the United Nations is

under so much pressure, this is not the approach we need. What we need is collaboration, co-operation and an upholding of the global order.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I, too, want to ask about the senior Minister. This came up at the Dáil reform committee last week. It is very peculiar that a senior Minister is here and has answered previous questions on the triple lock today and then – no offence meant – we have the junior Minister answering these questions, which precisely prevents the continuation of the debate. The same thing happened previously.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We are all on the same page.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: If you are, why are you not answering?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Deputy Byrne is at the Department of Defence as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Hopefully the junior Minister will be able to clarify. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, said earlier to Deputy Ó Laoghaire, "The people I speak to do not like the fact that Russia has essentially removed, or will remove in the coming months, all our peacekeeping troops from UNIFIL". I ask the junior Minister to clarify on the Minister's behalf that presumably she did not mean Russia but, rather, the US and Israel, and that is misinformation she read into the record. I also ask him to clarify why the draft Bill refers to principles of the UN Charter rather than articles of the UN Charter. Is it because the Government does not want to be bound by international law, which is very clear in its conditions, but, rather, by general principles of the UN Charter?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We are bound by international law. We are bound by international law since our Constitution came into force and we continue to be bound by international law and always will be, no matter what happens to this legislation. International law governs what we do as a Government. Article 29 of the Constitution constrains us and we have to operate in accordance with its principles. Article 29 requires us to promote international law, friendly relations among the nations and peace, essentially. Those are legal requirements, not simply objectives. To be clear, any deployment by the Irish Government and the Dáil of troops abroad has to be as part of an international force. That can mean the UN, the EU, the OSCE or other regional organisations.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can the Minister of State confirm it can mean NATO?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That can mean those.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes. Is that a "Yes", then? Thank you.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Switzerland, the classical neutral country that is not even a member of the European Union and will never join the European Union, it is so neutral and independent, accepts UN, EU and OSCE mandates. I understand the situation is similar in Austria, which is another neutral country. By the way, it is also similar in Germany. I cannot find any other

country in the world where the government has to go to the UN. There have been problems at the UN Security Council.

The truth is that if the triple lock continues, Irish peacekeeping comes to an end. The facts bear that out. We have already seen it this year with Operation Irini, which the Deputy has now started to criticise. Our people left on that day and the mission continues. Frankly, we are the big losers in that because our people, our Defence Forces members who are ultimately there to protect this State and its people, are losing the experience and superb training they were getting because of the veto at the UN Security Council and the actions of one member. UNIFIL is coming to an end of the year. We will have more members of the Defence Forces working in office roles in Brussels than we will on peacekeeping missions at the end of the year because of the triple lock and the fact that the United Nations is not mandating any more peacekeeping missions. That is what this legislation is addressing and what we need to do to ensure we continue to play our role internationally but also, crucially, to ensure that incredible experience that members of our Defence Forces get abroad can be transferred and translated into an Irish experience. I saw them in action recently, protecting senior-level guests coming to the opening ceremony of the European Presidency. I thank our troops for all they are doing at home and abroad.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: When the Minister of State referred to office roles in Brussels, was he describing roles in NATO headquarters?

The international forces the Minister of State is describing are exactly like the coalition that invaded Iraq. It was clarified at the defence committee that, should the triple lock not have been in place, we would have been in a position to deploy troops to Iraq.

I again go back to the point that the Government's whole argument on this is dependent on the fact that it continues to maintain it supports neutrality. Once we cut that out from underneath its argument, everything else collapses. I maintain that is indeed the position. What the Minister of State is describing about the triple lock being this big bad beast that is preventing the Government from doing everything is just not true. What is true is that the Government wishes to pivot from peacekeeping towards the deployment of troops for regional interests. That is the actual truth. Once we start to pick that apart, it is clear the public does not agree with the Government. In poll after poll, members of the public do not agree with it. Councils throughout the country do not agree and have voted to protect the triple lock. The Government's backbenchers are revolting; they too do not agree.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister of State assured us we are bound by international law but then went on to talk about the fact that he wants to deploy troops outside the framework of international law. That is why the Government is getting rid of the triple lock. All the triple lock does is ensure that we only can send troops in line with international law. The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, stated, "Ireland's position on the use of force where there is no UN mandate or authorisation is well established and known. For fear that anyone is in any doubt, let me be clear: it is wrong and it is illegal." The UN Charter is really clear. A country can use its troops when it is being attacked - which the triple lock does not apply to - or when it is for a UN-authorised peacekeeping mission. The Government wants to send troops abroad outside of that framework. Its defence is that we should not worry because the Government is only going to send them as part of an international force. I do not think anyone here thinks the

Government is going to invade a country all by itself. Can the Minister of State confirm that NATO would be a designated international force under the draft legislation to get rid of the triple lock?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: To be clear on what our troops will be doing, they will be doing peacekeeping, peace enforcement and conflict prevention. That is what the law says; not what the Deputy imagines it to be. We are bound by our Constitution and international law. The legislation changes nothing in that regard. Ireland has been a member of Partnership for Peace for more than 25 years. We heard the same scare stories more than 25 years ago about Ireland joining Partnership for Peace but people do not seem to realise we are in it. Some Members who sit on the benches opposite visited our troops in Kosovo where they are engaged in incredibly important peacekeeping work. That is a NATO operation operating under a UN mandate. Our troops have been there for more than 20 years and are doing an excellent job. We are very proud of the work they do in what are often very dangerous circumstances.

Let us be 100% clear: our troops will only ever do peacekeeping, peace enforcement or conflict prevention in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter and, of course, as with every action of this Government, in accordance with the Constitution. We cannot go beyond our Constitution and Article 29. We want to continue the role we have played. That role is unfortunately coming to an end for the vast majority of our troops. The number of Irish peacekeepers will reduce by approximately 90% because of the triple lock requirements and the inaction of the United Nations. Deputy Murphy said he does not believe Irish troops will be sent out to war, etc., and he is absolutely correct in saying that-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Just by yourself.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputy is absolutely correct. I do not know whether his colleagues in Sinn Féin are left or right at this stage. I am not sure they know themselves where they sit in the pecking order but they keep saying-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Come on. Zero out of ten for originality.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----that we are sending our sons and daughters out to war. People now see that type of language is completely exposed. Sinn Féin members do not believe it themselves; they know it is not true. They are making it up.

As for our people who are working in Brussels, they are doing incredibly important roles in terms of cybersecurity and all of the additions, such as looking after the maritime domain. We are very proud of our people who work in the EU institutions and other international institutions. Some work-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: In the NATO building?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We are not a member of NATO. I hate to break the news that we are not a member of NATO.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Not yet.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We are not a member of NATO. We are part of-----

A Deputy: Are they working in NATO headquarters?

12 o'clock

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, does not mind - would Members please allow the Minister of State to finish and stop cutting in on him so that we can do our business properly? I am going to conclude.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Some Members did accept the invitation to go to visit some of our peacekeeping missions. I am very glad they did. I invite Members opposite to meet some of our military personnel abroad in the various institutions that they work with - the EU, the UN or indeed the Partnership for Peace. They can meet them and see the work they do and they will come out of that room extremely proud of what our Irish Defence Forces personnel are doing, not just in peacekeeping roles but also in international organisations.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is someone the Tánaiste knows very well in the Public Gallery. She is the unstoppable and heroic Cara Darmody. Cara has just completed her third 50-hour protest outside the Dáil, calling for real action for children and young people waiting for an assessment of need. It is high time that the Government did the right thing, as Cara has asked for. In fact, the Tánaiste might take the opportunity to meet with her before she leaves Dublin.

People in wheelchairs gathered outside Leinster House on Tuesday. They are people living with Friedreich's ataxia. This is a progressive degenerative neurological disease. They were here at the Dáil because they have been waiting two years for access to Skyclarys, a drug that can slow down the relentless progression of their condition. Their hopes were very high that the HSE drugs committee would finally approve Skyclarys, but those hopes were to be dashed. The committee decided against approving the drug. Instead, it referred it to a rare disease review group. In other words, one committee passing the buck to another committee. That means more delay and more time wasting - time that these people simply do not have because this condition does not slow down. It does not pause. It does not stop for the summer holidays or recess, it just gets worse. It robs people of their ability to stand, walk and swallow. It can rob them of their sight and their speech. When Friedreich's ataxia strikes a person's body, it invades every facet of them. Time just changes for a person. Time moves far more quickly, and time is running out from many of these people. This cruel condition moves relentlessly, ravaging their bodies and their lives, yet the system stands still, putting up obstacle after obstacle, forcing them to wait and wait as time slips by.

This drug was approved by the EU Commission back in 2024. Two years on, it is available in France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Spain and Czechia. It is available in Britain, Canada and the United States of America, but not here. The people who gathered on Tuesday outside Leinster House see people in other countries getting help while they are left to deteriorate. Emily Felix is one of these people. She is now 28. She has been living with Friedreich's ataxia since she was 12. She says the system is telling her that her life is not worth saving. Craig Coady from Cork lost 13-year old Rory to this condition last September. Now he watches as Paudie, his other son, aged 16, deteriorates with the same disease. He says Paudie does not have weeks to wait. He says, "I can't lose him [too]. He is all I have left." That is what is at stake here. This is urgent. Caithfidh an Rialtas an rud ceart a dhéanamh dóibh siúd a bhfuil Friedreich's ataxia orthu. Ní tráth moille é.

Of course medications have to be properly assessed, but it has been going on for two years. Decisions have to be taken and time is running out. The Tánaiste can fix this. He can bring the pace and urgency that is necessary. The Taoiseach says he will not bring that. Right now, today, people living with Friedreich's ataxia are watching this exchange. They want the Tánaiste to intervene. They do not have weeks or months. They are now counting on him to do something to make this right. What is the Tánaiste going to do?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta McDonald. I thank her for the question. First, I join with her in welcoming Cara Darmody back to Dáil Éireann. It is good to see her again. While she continues her campaign in relation to improvements around assessments of need and disability services in general, it is also worth noting that she has already changed Ireland for the better with the creation of the fund that has made a real difference in terms of more children getting assessments. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, who is here, along with the Minister, Deputy Foley, are committed to bringing forward legislation on the assessment of need process. We look forward to engaging with her on that soon. She is very welcome back. I look forward to seeing her soon.

I thank Deputy McDonald for raising what is genuinely an important issue. I do take the point that when we talk about this in the abstract or from a process point of view in here, that for people watching this is their real lived experience. I know there are people across this House, including Deputy McDonald, who have engaged with patients and families on this drug. I fully understand that it is a worrying and anxious time for them. Today, my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, met with Muscular Dystrophy Ireland. As the Deputy can imagine, this was an issue it quite rightly highlighted as well. I think there might have been officials from the Department there as well.

I accept that this is frustrating for people at home, but I still need to say it: there is an ongoing process under way. That is a process guided by science. It is a clinically led process. The HSE is currently assessing this medication. Deputy McDonald is right: there was consideration by the HSE's drugs group on 14 July and it made the decision to seek additional advice from the rare diseases technology review committee. Where I somewhat disagree with her emphasis is that I do not see that as passing a file from one committee to the other; I actually see it as an opportunity to bring together the experts. The purpose of this is to bring in national clinical experts in this condition, crucially with patient representatives, so as to have their voices as

well, ensuring that their lived experience plus specialist expertise informs the assessment. There is a deadline given to this work of four weeks as well. Referral to a rare disease committee is intended to ensure that every possible opportunity is given to a medicine to demonstrate its effectiveness for patients.

I take the Deputy's point in relation to 2024. I would just make the point - this does not matter a huge amount to patients, but it is the truth - that the commercial proposal was actually received from the company in Ireland on 27 May 2026, so it is not a question of the Government or indeed our representatives through the HSE or clinicians have been in any way dilly-dallying on this. The application actually came in-----

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: That was there on the 21st.

The Tánaiste: I do not know who said that-----

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: It was the 21st.

The Tánaiste: -----but I am just relaying in good faith the information.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Newsome Drennan should allow the Tánaiste to speak.

The Tánaiste: The 27 May 2026 is when the information came in versus 2024, but I accept the seriousness of this matter. Again, this is also just the truth: there are mixed views on the science in relation to this. A number of European countries have said "No". Some have said "Yes". We would not have a situation where the HSE drugs group was deciding to set up a rare diseases expert panel to look at this, to bring together the national experts and the patient advocates, to hear their voices and views, if they did not want to give this every possible chance.

I take the point about timelines. That is why it is important that there is a four-week period now to hear those voices, to hear that lived experience and, crucially, to hear from the doctors. I am not one. We must hear from the clinical experts who specialise in this condition in Ireland about the effectiveness of this drug. We will continue to monitor the outcome of that very closely.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So we are clear, it is not that all of this is frustrating for those living with Friedreich's ataxia; it is actually terrifying for them. I met Emily three or four weeks ago and I was speaking to her again on Tuesday. Even in that short time span, she told me that her swallow and speech had disimproved. We are on the clock here. Time is of the essence. Of course the science is important. We have to lead with clinicians and science, but it has been two years since this was cleared by the European Commission. This therefore is a process not so much guided by science as stalled and delayed by bureaucracy and indecision. I am appealing to the Tánaiste. I never take Leaders' Questions on a Thursday. I never have. I am standing before him for one sole reason. I am terrified for these people. I do not think it is acceptable that we would rise for our summer recess and leave terrified people. In Emily's case

she is 28. In another case, Oisín is 27. Paudie is 16. They are terrified. They want their clinicians to have access to this drug.

It can levitate their deterioration in some cases by as much as 50%. I am appealing to the Tánaiste. I am actually begging him to intervene and to do it now. I ask him not to stall or not to delay because these young people, others and their families are now relying on you, Simon Harris, to do the right thing.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: It is always good to see the Deputy on a Thursday. I take the fact that she is here as a sign of her seriousness on this issue. I mean that genuinely. I thank her for that. I also take the seriousness of the issue. There is no disagreeing. We can use different words to describe this situation but there is no disagreement that it is a very worrying and stressful time for these families. That is a statement of fact. It is also a statement of fact that the process - and the Deputy knows it very well - is clear in law as how this goes. It is not a question of the Government stalling, or me, anybody over here or over there stalling. The process is very clear. The HSE drugs group looks at this. If the HSE drugs group feels it can benefit from the expertise of people in rare diseases - the people who treat the very patients the referenced - they bring in those experts and the patient voices in a short time of four weeks and they get the best available evidence in terms of the effectiveness of the drug. That is an appropriate thing to do. The Deputy referenced summer recess. I do not want anyone at home to think that there is any effect, with the Dáil not being in session. This is a HSE drugs group led by clinicians.

I wish to make a broader point because we-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Tánaiste intervene?

The Tánaiste: I will make sure the process is carried in the expeditious timeline that has been set out in terms of that-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When they will know?

The Tánaiste: It has said it will do that within four weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald, allow the Tánaiste to answer.

The Tánaiste: I wish to make one point because I am conscious that we are on the clock. The Deputy made another point around delays and bureaucracy. I have to make the point back that sometimes those delays are not on the side of the State. We need to have full root and branch review of how medicines are assessed in this country. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is entirely committed to that. Even in the House today, debating when the application came in or when the full business came in, there has to be a better way and more efficient way of assessing drugs applications more generally. We can return to that. On this-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In the meantime, these people are deteriorating in real time.

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

The Tánaiste: -----specific issue, the rare diseases group, which is made up of not politicians-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I know what it is made up of.

The Tánaiste: -----and not of bureaucrats but of doctors who treat these patients.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am aware of that.

The Tánaiste: As am I. The group and the patient representatives will meet through this structure to assess this drug.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Are the doctors in Germany, England and France all different then?

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

Deputy Thomas Gould: Are the all doctors-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, Deputy O'Callaghan is next.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Now we know, the Government's report into Aughinish Alumina will be a classic fudge. On the one hand it will say, it cannot rule out the possibility that Irish alumina is ending up in the Russian military supply chain. On the other hand, it will fall short of making any concrete conclusions. This is despite that exports of alumina to Russia have more than doubled since the war broke out. The Tánaiste does not need a report to figure out that alumina from Auginish is ending up in Russian patents. Irish alumina exports to Russia rose from under 400,000 tonnes in 2020 to over 800,000 tonnes in 2024. The latest figures published today showed that these exports are continuing to soar. We know from the investigation carried out by *The Irish Times* and the organised crime and corruption reporting project that alumina from Ireland is ending up in Russian owned smelters in Krasnoyarsk. Krasnoyarsk is Russia's only smelter producing high purity aluminium. This high purity aluminium is essential for the production of fighter jets and missiles. Krasnoyarsk is a major supplier to the Russian arms industry.

Exports of alumina to Russia has skyrocketed since the invasion of Ukraine. We know it is being sent to a smelter that supplies the Russian war machine. The Government should not be waiting for a report to lay out what has been staring it in the face for years. Alumina from Ireland is being used to make Russian weapons.

The Government's inaction is putting jobs at risk. These are highly skilled jobs with union representation and apprenticeship programmes. They are of fundamental importance to the local economy and community. They should never have been left exposed in this way. The

Tánaiste's Government had the power to step in years ago to ban the sale of alumina to Russia and help the plant to find alternative markets. This would have been much easier to do in 2022 when exports to Russia were much lower. We saw this happen in Australia as soon as Ukraine was invaded. Alternative markets were found. Exports stayed stable and are now forecast to grow. They acted decisively to protect their industry and jobs. In contrast, this Government's inaction and indecision has led to this crisis and existential threat to jobs.

Hiding behind the unpublished report is not good enough. There is huge concern in the region about jobs. Will the report be published? When will there be engagement with workers at the plant? Given that the Government has ruled out nationalisation, what measures are being considered to protect jobs? Is the Government seeking EU help in sourcing alternative markets for alumina that is currently being exported to Russia?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy very much. The most important thing - and we should never lose sight of this in any discussion in relation to Ukraine or Russia - is Ireland's absolute clear position in relation to this. Ireland absolutely, fully and resolutely supports Ukraine and the people of Ukraine. We had President Volodymyr Zelenskyy here on the first day of our Presidency of the Council of the European Union to highlight that level of support and solidarity. We deplore the actions of Russia. This is a country that has enthusiastically supported all sanction measures that have come from the European Commission. We are a country that wants to see more sanctions against Russia. We will work at a European level, and indeed, we will lead that work now as President of the Council of the European Union to pursue that agenda.

It is also important to be clear, as the Deputy knows, that sanctions are a matter decided on collectively an EU level. The Deputy referenced Australia. Australia obviously is not in the European Union. If the Deputy's position is that Ireland would now decide at a national level in relation to a sanctions regime, that would tear up every rulebook that we have followed in relation to how at a European level we have worked with solidarity regarding Ukraine. It has always been the situation that we worked at an EU level. That has had a positive effect. The EU has already adopted 20 packages of sanctions since the start of Russia's brutal illegal full-scale invasion. Discussions are now at a very advanced stage on the 21st package of sanctions aimed to deprive Russia of money, goods and technology used to wage its illegal aggression and restrictions on the shadow fleet, payment channels and individuals and entities supporting Russia are intended to close loopholes and tighten enforcement. As I said, we are leading those proposals during our Presidency.

Regarding Aughinish Alumina, what we need to do here is follow the evidence. We need to follow the facts. I have been consistently clear and used the phrase that this country will never cherry-pick when it comes to sanctions. We support sanctions packages that come from the Commission. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is undertaking an investigation to establish the facts. It is important to await the conclusion of that investigation. It is analysing data. It has been in contact with the plant. It is trying to establish the veracity of information that is in the media about the supply chain for alumina from the company. It has received information from our Ukrainian counterparts, the Ukrainian Government and a number of member states that are involved. All of this will be examined. I expect that the investigation will be finalised very shortly. When the investigation is completed, we will discuss the results, and we will work in lockstep with the European Commission in providing

any and all relevant information to it and our European colleagues, too. This work is ongoing. We take this extraordinarily seriously.

It was a very fair question in relation to workers and jobs. I appreciate the Deputy raising that. Of course, should we arrive at a position - and I cannot prejudge this at all - where the European Commission makes a recommendation in relation to sanctions, we will want to and need to have conversations about two things. The first is about workers. The second is about crucial supply chains of alumina to the European Union, which is of importance too. As I have consistently said, governments need to be able to do more than one thing. We are very clear that one cannot cherry-pick when it comes to sanctions. We have to follow the facts and evidence. Ultimately, it is for the European Commission to make a recommendation.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Tánaiste must surely know that these exports are feeding Putin's war machine. Does he not think it is unusual that Ireland is one of the very few European countries where our exports to Russia have increased since Russia invaded Ukraine? That has been driven by the exports of alumina that have more than doubled. Where does the Tánaiste honestly think that alumina is going? It is going into the smelter that is feeding the companies in Russia that are supplying the Russian military. The Tánaiste knows that. He has slept walked into this crisis. He has had ample time to deal with it with more than four years. Has he done anything proactive at all over the past four years or in recent months or weeks to work with the company to find alternative markets for alumina to protect the jobs at the plant? Has he done anything proactive or is he just waiting while the facts are staring him in the face?

The Tánaiste: I am now bamboozled by the Deputy's position. I am trying to be constructive and engage but he wants to use political rhetoric. That is fine. On one hand, he is saying to go ahead and impose national sanctions on a company that he is accusing of funding the Russian war machine and fuelling in terms of Ukraine. On the other hand, he saying to sit down and have a chat with them. Let us take this step by step. The first step is to establish the facts and provide those facts to the European Commission. The second step is to see what the European Commission wishes to do because it is the European Commission that proposes sanctions. Ireland has never blocked. In fact, we enthusiastically support all sanctions proposals that come to the Commission and we currently trying to get the 21st sanctions package over the line.

Absolutely, if there are any implications, and we should not prejudge this, we should work at European and national levels to make sure we can support workers and make sure the supply chain of alumina, a significant amount of which is being supplied to the European market from the mid-west, can continue as well. There is a complexity to all of this. This is not straightforward. We cannot just read a newspaper headline, and say, "That is grand. Slap a sanction on it". That is now how European Union membership works. We have been asked by the Commission - and the Ukrainian Government has welcomed what we are doing - to provide the most up-to-date information. I expect that process to conclude very shortly and I am absolutely crystal clear, as is all of the Government, there can be no cherry picking - and there will not be - when it comes to Ireland supporting Ukraine and taking action against Russia.

Deputy Ged Nash: The spectre of Michael Shine has hung over the town of Drogheda and the wider region for decades. Today is an important day for the hundreds of victims and

survivors of this disgraced, convicted sex offender and former doctor. There is now a way forward through the recommendations of the scoping report published an hour ago. This is a day when we can say we are a step further along the road of truth and accountability and that we are a little closer to laying this ghost to rest.

Over 15 years ago, I made my very first contribution in the Dail on this issue. I chose my maiden speech in here to draw attention to the crimes of a man who abused hundreds, possibly thousands, of young men in my community. I made that contribution at a time when help and the hope that justice would ever be done was in very short supply. Over 15 years on and over 30 years since the courageous nurse and founder of Dignity4Patients, Bernadette Sullivan, put her neck on the line by reporting the mishandling of the first complaint against Shine, we now have a pledge to move towards a six phase commission of investigation, chaired by one person and to be run concurrently.

I wish to formally thank the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, her staff, Lorcan Staines and Gemma McLoughlin Burke who developed the report, the expert involvement of Maeve Lewis and Phil Scraton, Adrienne Reilly and her team at Dignity4Patients, but most of all the men who never let go and fought day and night with real dignity to be heard. As the Minister of Health said in her press statement alongside the report, "... their experiences have shaped the report and its recommendations ...".

The overwhelming emotion this morning among the men is one of relief; relief that they are being listened to. They are so used to having doors slammed in their faces. A door to truth and recovery and real restorative justice is now being opened by the State through the Government.

In the words of Dignity4Patients:

... [We are] very pleased that this has happened today. It is a historic moment in that ... finally there is something on the record going towards full vindication of all of the victims and survivors of convicted sex offender Michael Shine.

Many of these men, the victims and survivors, are friends of mine. They are people who I went to school with, played football with and hung around with. Deputy Joanna Byrne would be very familiar with many of them as would Deputy Butterly. I have said time and again that a spell in jail does not justice make.

The Tánaiste: Yes.

Deputy Ged Nash: A light must be shone into the environment that allowed a prolific paedophile to operate within our public health service, with impunity and unchallenged for over 30 years. Questions have to be asked of the former North Eastern Health Board, the order that ran the Lourdes hospital, the Garda, the Medical Council, the DPP and other agencies which knew very well what was going on. The dogs in the street in Drogheda knew what Shine was doing to young boys and men and that is why a statutory inquiry is of critical importance.

I have two questions. Will the men, the Dignity4Patients group, be involved centrally in having the terms of reference with the Attorney General agreed?

The Tánaiste: Yes.

Deputy Ged Nash: Will the Tánaiste commit providing stable and predictable core funding to the Dignity4Patients group to ensure it can continue to support men through this process?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Let me say "Yes" and "Yes" to two very clear questions. Let me acknowledge the Deputy's own advocacy, leadership and involvement in this issue for a long number of years and that of other Deputies from the area, including the Ministers, Deputies Byrne and McEntee, Deputy Butterly and many people across the political divide trying to desperately get a hearing for people who were being ignored, obstructed and, as Deputy Nash said, were having doors slammed in their faces. This is the second time this week in this House we have talked about the actions of vile, despicable paedophiles who were allowed to prey on innocent children and young men in this country.

I read the scoping inquiry report and before I came in today, I read the comments of the victim's group, of the survivor's group. The most powerful thing they said was that they feel "listened to" after decades of being ignored. Being ignored does not capture how despicably cruelly they were treated in terms of this. In fact, it is not that long ago I remember people making the point, not in this House, that there was no need at all for an inquiry in relation to this. I am really pleased we have gotten to this point.

I join the Deputy in thanking my colleague, the Minister for Health, for publishing the report of the scoping exercise into former surgeon Michael Shine. I also thank her for the engagement she has had with the group. I have been a very strong believer that there was a need for some form of inquiry. Michael Shine is a convicted sexual abuser. He carried out vile, despicable acts against boys and young men. He was described by the Court of Appeal as a "prolific sexual offender". I remember when I was Taoiseach engaging on this with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and others and we asked for options to be prepared as to how we could take an inquiry forward. I am really pleased the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, moved forward on this as well.

I want to praise Lorcan Staines, the senior counsel, who conducted the scoping exercise. Quite frankly, in my experience in this House and in government, getting that chair right matters a hell of a lot. We appointed the right person and Lorcan Staines has been exemplary in how he has carried out this work. He met almost 75 victims and survivors as part of the process and he noted that they were middle-aged to elderly men from all walks of life in Drogheda and the surrounding areas. I acknowledge their bravery. The courage of the individuals who came forward to share their lived experience with the facilitator during that process cannot be easy. He detailed how allegations of abuse reported to him involved a broad range of ages, including reports of abuse when victims were children, teenagers or young adults. Allegations are reported as having occurred at the hospital, in Shine's private practice in Fair Street and in Shine's home, with the earliest allegation said to have occurred in 1964 and the latest in 1990. Victims were of the view that Shine's conduct throughout this, as the Deputy said, was a matter of public knowledge.

Clearly, there is a need to investigate this fully and we now have a model and a way forward, thanks to the work of Lorcan Staines and to the bravery and courage of the men, the neighbours and the friends of the Deputy's, for all they have done to get us to this point.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Tánaiste for his personal interest in this over the years and that of the Taoiseach as well. I acknowledge the work the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has done in representing her constituents over the years who have been affected by the actions of this despicable man, who was convicted a number of years ago of a number of criminal offences but, as I have repeatedly said, a spell in jail does not justice make.

The Tánaiste: No.

Deputy Ged Nash: We need to shine a light into the dark recesses of our society and into the agencies and organisations that allowed the actions of this prolific paedophile to continue unchallenged for over 30 years.

I was very moved when I read the report this morning and the initial passage where Lorcan Staines said that "a further State response is required." That line is the line for which we have all been waiting for 30 years after a number of failed attempts and State-backed initiatives to address many of these issues. There is a novel way forward here that is being proposed. It is interesting and I hope it will work. I repeat that I want to see, as I know the Tánaiste does, the victims, survivors and the Dignity4Patients group centrally involved in helping to craft the terms of reference, based on the truism that nothing should be done for and with victims without them.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Nash and agree with everything he says. I thank Dignity4Patients as well for the very structured and really constructive and helpful way it went about its engagement as well. The Deputy is right that Shine being sent to a prison cell, where he belongs, is justice in one part but it is nowhere near enough. We saw this again the other day in relation to Waterford. There is a case of who knew what, when and how could this abuse have been stopped. It went from 1964 to 1990, which is an extraordinarily long period of time.

I really think Lorcan Staines has done a very good job in trying to come up with what the Deputy correctly called a novel approach. Nobody wants a commission of investigation that goes on forever and ever. We want to try to get a structured way forward. I think what he is suggesting - I have not seen it before because it is novel - of six phases is a clever idea. Three of the phases should be independent document-based reviews, examining criminal complaints resulting in convictions, the response of the Medical Council and the circumstances in which Shine retired from the hospital. Phase 4 should be short and focused on current patient protection policies in Irish healthcare. Phase 5, really crucially, should be an independent truth and recovery process that should be victim-centered and non-adversarial and should run alongside that work.

Phase 6 should amount to a comprehensive investigation into the actions and events surrounding the abuse committed by Shine, followed by a report setting out, so far as the evidence permits, what was known, by whom and at what stage. It should examine the full extent to which relevant bodies receive complaints, information, warning signs, indications of

risk, what actions they took, whether their actions were adequate and timely. He recommends that the publication of the Smith report be revisited only after full completion. We will now engage, as the Deputy suggests, and move forward.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: A few weeks ago, I brought to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, a problem regarding apprenticeships. In fairness, she rang me last Sunday evening. Over the past few weeks, she has resolved this issue, which had given rise to problems for many apprentices. I thank her for resolving it. It is good that mother who never previously engaged with politicians was able to ring me and say that she was grateful that someone had picked up the phone, talked to her and resolved the matter.

I hope the Tánaiste will listen to what I have to say about another issue. In the eighties, when many people had to leave Ireland because there was no work for them as a result of the recession, old yellow school buses used to go around the country picking up people. They picked up students and brought them to national schools and secondary schools. Those buses were owned by the State. Ireland had, on average, a population of 3.5 million during the eighties. At that time, we were transporting between 135,000 and 140,000 children to school. There is a saying down the country about a pot that is used to describe situations where people do not have a lot of money.

The Tánaiste: What was the saying?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Basically, there was no Exchequer money at that time but we were still able to keep the bus service going. Unfortunately, there have been reviews, public consultations and various documents since then. I have spoken to Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, about this matter - I want to make it very clear that I am not directing any blame at him - but, despite everything, it is the same old story every year. People apply in February for bus tickets for kids who might have been attending a school for two years already - and this is on a discretionary basis - and are informed that will be no tickets for them for their third year in that school. There are 15 or 16 schools in my area. In January or February, parents in Williamstown, County Galway, compiled a list of all the children in the area who need access to a school bus. I handed that list to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and he sent it on to the relevant Department. You can go from Boyle to Taghmaconnell in Roscommon, right through Fuerty, Athleague and other areas all the way into Galway and you will encounter the same problem.

We can give out about what is happening, but we need to solve it. Will somebody please contact the civil servants in the section of the Department of education that deals with Bus Éireann about this matter? The same thing happens every year. We have gone from a stage where we had State-owned buses to one where there are a lot of public buses now. I accept that there are more children involved, namely 175,000 or 180,000, but the Tánaiste should look at the figures I have provided. The population in the eighties was 3.5 million; it has increased by two thirds to 5.5 million. However, the number of children who need to access school transport has only increased by 30,000.

The end of August is not that far away. Parents have to keep working. Their kids will not have bus tickets.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Over the summer, will the Tánaiste crack the whip in order to get someone to try to resolve this matter once and for all, please?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice for his kind words in respect of Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, particularly in the context of her working on a Sunday evening and getting back to people. It is good to hear that there has been progress on that apprenticeship issue.

I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Let us be honest, the issue of school bus tickets and places is a perennial one. There have been lots of efforts by successive Governments, Oireachtais and Ministers to try to make progress on this. Some progress has been made, but, clearly, it is a system that is still in need of further reform and improvement and in the context of which a degree of common sense is sometimes needed.

There number of children who have been supported by means of the school transport scheme, as Deputy Fitzmaurice knows and has alluded to, has grown significantly in recent years. Since 2018, the number increased from 120,000 in 2018 to more than 181,000 now. Included in that figure are 24,000 pupils with special educational needs. I am very happy that is the case, but sometimes there is an additional complexity around staffing, the size of the buses, etc, in that regard. From a funding point of view, the scale of the scheme has more than doubled. There was a budget of about €200 million in 2018. We are now spending €537 million on it. There are 181,000 people transported to school daily, more than 8,600 vehicles are used and there are around 11,100 routes involved. I make that point to show that the scale of the operation is significant. There are more than 10,000 routes and thousands of buses involved and the number of students using the services is not a million miles away from 200,000.

The current terms of the scheme are going to continue to apply for the 2026-27 school year. Under those terms, primary school children are eligible for the service if they live 3.2 km or more from their nearest national school and post-primary students are eligible if they live 4.8 km from their nearest school. The Department's priority is to provide transport for all those students who are eligible for the scheme. Children who are not eligible under those criteria but who have completed the application process on time sometimes get seats as they become available. That happens after eligible children have been assessed. That is my understanding of how this quite complicated system works.

There is a broader need here. We have published the way forward in terms of a broader reform of the system. I take the point in that regard, but the priority for this school year has to be to get tickets out as quickly as possible. Bus Éireann has begun to issue tickets for the school transport service for the upcoming school year. That process will continue throughout the summer as routes are finalised. Where a family has a specific query about their child's eligibility status, they should contact the school transport section. I will speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, on foot of the Deputy raising this matter today, and ask that he continues to engage with the Deputy and, I am sure, other Members right across the House.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Tánaiste for that. The number was 120,000 in 2018. Think back, however, and you will see that it was 135,000 or 140,000 in the eighties. That was the base figure at a time when Ireland was awash with money.

To be blunt, parents who are engaging on this matter would say that they would be as well trying to talk to someone in the White House as they would be trying to talk to someone in Bus Éireann or in the depots. There is a problem. Today, the Dáil will rise. Children will be returning to school on 26, 27 or 28 August. As the Tánaiste knows, many parents are working. We keep talking about public transport. As I always say, if you are involved in hurling or football and you get children in when they are young, they should become pretty good at it. The position is the same when it comes to public transport. If you can supply public transport, people will get used to it and will tend to use it. In the coming weeks, will the Government try to resolve these issues in order to alleviate parents' nightmares and uncertainty? One thing should be borne in mind.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: An awful lot of the children I am talking about have had concessionary tickets for the past two years. When the contracts are being drawn up, I just do not know why they do not reference 23-, 33- or 50-seaters. If this is done and if the population increases, all involved would under the procurement rules, be able to adapt.

The Tánaiste: I knew the Deputy would have to mention the GAA, especially with Galway and Limerick playing at the weekend. I wish everybody involved the best of luck.

We are very committed to the school transport scheme. If the Deputy wants to see our commitment, he should look to our budget. The fact that we have more than doubled the amount spent on school transport between 2018 and now is a sign of real commitment. That said, I know the Deputy is a very practical and common-sense person in how he approaches these issues in looking for solutions, when you are spending such a large amount of money, there is an onus on you to consider whether the system is working well. I could not put my hand on my heart and fail to suggest that there are improvements that could and that need to be made. The Government is fully committed to making those improvements.

Our first job was to try to stabilise the situation, being frank. Some good changes have been made. I thank Minister of State, Deputy Canney, for his work in respect of the issue relating to drivers over 70 years of age. I hope that we can see if this can be expanded further, but it was an ageist provision.

I take the point the Deputy made about the Dáil going into summer recess but obviously he will not be going away nor will we in the sense that we will all be working on these issues in our constituencies and keeping in close contact with them. Let us try to get through this September and then to build on the report that was published in terms of what the school transport needs to look like into the future, and I am happy to continue to work with Deputy on that.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Carol Nolan: The schools are out, summer is well and truly upon us, and for most families this will be an opportunity to enjoy spending time with their children or grandchildren. Others will watch the kids being able to spend more time with their friends.

For some families, however, this summer will be a continuous nightmare, and it will be spent trying to keep their teenage children from ending their own lives before they can access vital services. One of those families is in my constituency of Offaly. It involves a teenage girl who has been diagnosed with autism, ADHD, PTSD, depression and bipolar disorder. This young girl is self-harming, and her situation is now unfortunately at crisis level. Despite this, her mother - who is utterly heartbroken and distressed as we can all imagine - is fiercely protective of her child and determined to protect her at all costs. However, she has been informed by the Offaly child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, that her child will be waiting until at least the end of September or early October when she "could be offered an appointment". Offaly CAMHS has been told a number of times by this mother about the situation. I saw a copy of the letter and to say I was appalled is an understatement. I am appalled at the lack of urgency and empathy in this situation.

This girl cannot enjoy the sun or the holidays and her mother watches her continuously, utterly helpless as she is effectively abandoned by the State services that her daughter may not live to access. It is a form of cruelty beyond all description to force families to endure circumstances such as these. Many of us in this House are parents. What would we not do to help our teenage children?

What is happening in Offaly is not an isolated case. I know there are cases around the country as well. I have previously established that the midlands CAMHS area has the second highest waiting list in the State, with 1,006 children waiting for mental health treatment. The Government can speak about investment but until those funds translate into fully staffed multidisciplinary teams, families in Offaly will continue to experience a service that is overwhelmed, inaccessible and life-threateningly inadequate. As I said, I am appalled by the response of Offaly CAMHS in relation to this situation.

The Tánaiste: Go raibh maith agat, Teachta Nolan, for raising this important issue. I can see her genuine concern for the family that she is advocating for while also highlighting a broader issue. I also acknowledge her concern in relation to the response that family received from CAMHS. I want to address the broader issue but I suggest she provide that information to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I know she will do so. I will ask that the Minister of State engages with the HSE specifically in relation to that situation.

The Government is committed to this area. Nobody wants to hear of anyone experiencing the story the Deputy told in terms of a teenage girl with multiple diagnoses self-harming and in a difficult situation. I take the point that this does not help with the case the Deputy referenced but we are investing a lot in CAMHS and our mental health services. As of February of this year, we have seen around 72% of new or re-referred cases seen within 12 weeks. That is an increase of 6% over the same period last year. I am not saying there is not a lot more to do, as there is, but the number of young people being seen in a more efficient manner by CAMHS is thankfully increasing.

They reckon there are only around 2% of children and young people in the country who should require the support of CAMHS and 97% of urgent referrals are responded to within three days. That is an important point too. It may well not be the experience of what the Deputy said but that is the information I have available.

I do not think this case has been brought to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. It sounds as if it is particularly complex, and I do not say that in any way to pass the buck, but sometimes there can be clinical complexities. However, I ask the Deputy to link with the Minister of State, who is a compassionate and hard-working Minister of State as well.

Specifically, in relation to the CAMHS team in Offaly, there is a clinical whole-time equivalent of 8.6 on the team. It is a little bit below the national average of 8.9, so let us see what can be done in relation to that. I am told, however, that 100% of urgent referrals in Offaly are responded to within three working days. The team does have the second-highest open caseload in the region. I am told that is evidence of the complexities of the challenges. In other words, when CAMHS sees a young person, the file often remains open for a long period of time because of that ongoing need for care as well, and there are 96 children waiting for their first appointment with that team.

Will Deputy Nolan link with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler? I will speak to her today about it, and I know that she will highlight this specific issue with the HSE. On the broader issue, we will continue to resource CAMHS. We will spend over €190 million on it this year, which is an increase of 40% since 2022, but I accept that there is a lot more to do in this area.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Tánaiste for his response and assistance. I directly informed the HSE about this situation, and I received an acknowledgement, but I will reach out to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and, with the consent of the parent, will pass on all details.

My concern is that this is an emergency situation, and it was not treated as such in Offaly CAMHS. For any parent to be told that they may, or they could, get an appointment at the end of September-early October when their child is clearly in distress is not an emergency response, and it has not been treated as an urgent case.

The Tánaiste made the point that the staffing levels are not up at the national average of 8.9 but I ask that Offaly is prioritised in the upcoming budget in terms of staffing in Offaly CAMHS because I am sure we are going to have more cases like this if we do not act in time and are not proactive. I appreciate the Tánaiste's constructive response and his empathy in relation to this situation.

The Tánaiste: We are seeing more real complexity when it comes to our younger people and more and more of them with more than one clinical diagnosis. I am certainly no doctor or expert but from my engagement with many young people and parents this provides a real challenge, and it is one that needs to be met, in terms of how we meet the multiple needs across the multiple diagnoses. I do not know what happened in this situation, and I do not want to comment without knowing all of the details, although I take the Deputy at her word. However, it is clear that the system needs to know the difference between urgent and non-urgent referrals. According to the statistics, which were given to me, and I read out, urgent referrals are

responded to within three days. However, what is classified as an urgent referral is an interesting question.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will work with the Deputy in relation to this complex individual case. More broadly, in the run-up to the budget on 6 October, the Government will work closely with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on the issue of the resourcing CAMHS. I will ask them to take a look at the point the Deputy made in relation to Offaly, and come back to her directly.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Children's Health Ireland, CHI, report on e-scooter related injuries for children is shocking. It reported that between January 2021 and August 2025, there were 1,130 attendances at CHI emergency departments due to e-scooter related injuries, and that over the past 12 months, there has been a 50% increase in the number of children and young people being admitted for traumatic brain injuries. We know that many have been injured and some killed, due to scramblers. Earlier this week, we had Grace Lynch's parents in the Oireachtas. We recalled her horrific death. I also raised the horrific injuries suffered by a young boy, Jayden Deans, as a result of scramblers.

We know that both scramblers and e-scooters are being used by gangs to distribute drugs, to openly and actively intimidate, and to evade the gardaí and, yet, we heard the Garda Commissioner say that there would be no chance of pursuit training until next year because of the EU Presidency.

I found that really shocking. We have laws that are not enforced. We have communities left to their own devices. We have a situation that is literally out of control. The question in relation to e-scooters and scramblers is what is going to happen. We have laws that are not being enforced. We have gardaí who will not actively pursue. Then, in the case of e-scooters, we literally have the wild west. It is putting people, particularly young people, in danger. Communities are actively intimidated, terrorised, injured and far worse.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I have a big, long note here, which I have no intention of reading out because I think this issue is at a really critical stage. I met Grace Lynch's parents, two incredible people who are really trying to make society safer after the loss of their daughter, Grace.

On the e-scooter issue, from memory, I heard somebody say it was the number one reason that children were now ending up in ICU. It is quite an incredible thing to say: the number one reason children end up in ICU in Ireland is because of e-scooter accidents. I have heard a lot of comments in recent days. Do we ban them? Do we very quickly move to put in place a more robust regulatory system because there is not one in place today? I have an open mind. This is now at a tipping point where we need to move, and move quickly. Certain members of the Government, including the Taoiseach and I, are meeting on this early next week. I would like to see a swift set of proposals come from the Government on this. I am happy to keep the Deputy updated on that.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: In the past year, the number of children admitted to Temple Street with brain injuries from accidents on e-scooters has increased by 50%. I think we have agreement across the House that this is an ever-worsening public health crisis at this point. It is clear that the ban on under-16s using e-scooters has been a monumental failure. We need a new approach. As the Tánaiste has just said, instead of a ban, we need regulation that is workable and enforceable. We have some proposals today that the Tánaiste might consider ahead of his meeting next week. It is crucial that we have a mandatory vehicle registration system where we register not only every e-scooter, but every rider. We also need to ban the sale or supply of e-scooters to children or young people under the age of 16. Crucially, gardaí must be given the resources and the appropriate training to be able to pursue and enforce what is current legislation.

The fourth piece, the bike-to-work scheme, has been an incredible success. What we know is that a significant portion of the parents who have bought these e-scooters for children and young people did not know they were doing anything wrong. Instead of a ban, what I am asking is that the Government consider a scheme that will allow parents and children to hand back these e-scooters and be given a bike in return. It is a healthy alternative. It is not punitive, and it gives the Government something of an opportunity to show that we are taking this seriously, alongside the regulation.

The Tánaiste: What a constructive contribution. This is the sort of thinking we need. I thank the Deputy for that. I do not 100% know what the right thing to do here is, but what I 100% know is that the current situation is extraordinarily dangerous and needs to change. I do not say this to blame parents, but there is an issue here. It may be awareness, as the Deputy says, but there is a real issue here. Kids are not saving up their small sums of pocket money, going into toy stores and buying these scooters. Parents are buying these scooters for their children, perhaps out of ignorance, perhaps out of whatever else, but we need to look at that issue. I am not saying that to blame anybody, but it is a fact. What happens at the point of purchase definitely has a role.

I am somewhat sympathetic to rank and file gardaí, who are asked by this House to enforce laws that are often very challenging for them to enforce in terms of their own safety. We have all seen tragic situations where gardaí in the line of duty put themselves at risk in roads policing, and there have been fatalities as well. With scramblers and e-scooters, is there a way of helping with technology or registration systems?

The Deputy has made very good, constructive suggestions, and I thank him for those. If he is happy to send them to me, I would be happy to put them into the mix. This is something where, if we are unified as a House in saying the current system is wrong and not sustainable, and that we are going to take swift action, I really hope we can move on together very quickly.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I too must raise the report from Children's Health Ireland, CHI, today. There are one to two e-scooter-related incidents presenting to emergency departments every single day, with a 50% increase in traumatic brain injuries over the past 12 months. As we rise today, I have to ask how in all conscience we can walk away from here, knowing that every day for the next eight weeks, a child is going to be injured due to an e-scooter. I listened to the Garda Commissioner yesterday calling for a full ban, and the Taoiseach said something similar during the week. I believe that is a cop-out. The reality is that e-scooters are a

legitimate form of transport for many people out there, but they are also used as a form of intimidation, particularly in the communities that I represent in Dublin Central.

We know that enforcement is the issue, but I am fed up because I do not think there is a sense of urgency. I hear what the Tánaiste is saying today, and I welcome that meeting next week. However, I stood here for a Topical Issue last week when the Minister for justice effectively said that there were powers and they just needed to be enforced. That is not good enough. The reality from a public health perspective - I do not say this lightly - is that we need to impose a temporary ban on e-scooter use over the next six weeks to give the Minister for justice, the Minister for Transport and An Garda Síochána the time to get their act together so we have the special pursuit, so we have the registration, so we have the ban and so we have the right policy in place.

Will the Government rule out a permanent ban on e-scooters? Will it introduce a temporary ban to give time to make sure we can get our act together and take seriously what is a public health crisis in this country?

The Tánaiste: There is certainly an urgency across this House. I do not say this to be provocative on an issue where I hope we can all work together, but nobody on any side of the House has brought forward legislation to try to make progress. We have had multiple Private Members' measures, but let us all work on this together. It is not a question of nobody being urgent, and I am going to push back very firmly on that. We are all alarmed at this. We have all heard the doctors in Temple Street. We all want to take action on this. While this House might be in recess next week, I will be at a meeting about what we can try to do in relation to this issue. I do not think anybody meant a ban as a cop-out - I genuinely do not. I think people are so horrified by what is happening that everyone is trying to grapple with what the right thing to do is.

There is also a legitimacy to the point the Deputy made about how it is a legitimate form of transport for some people. We see this working in other European countries. We see it in our nearest neighbours. I do not want to get the regime wrong, but I think they have registration at the point of purchase that allows people to track this. There are things that can be done that can perhaps achieve the same aim. The aim is to stop children ending up in ICU and to improve our road safety. I am very happy to work on a cross-party basis and with relevant Ministers.

I am not sure. I say this only to be helpful because I do not know the truth, but I know that we live in the European Union. I am not even sure of the legality of a ban. The honest answer is that I am not sure, but I am absolutely certain that the current situation cannot continue.

I am happy to keep in touch, even over the summer months. If the Deputy wishes to correspond with me, I am happy to come back to her.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We are going through an epidemic of domestic abuse and violence. In 2025, the Garda had over 67,000 calls in relation to domestic abuse. Seven women were murdered last year, and in many of those cases, it was by a family member, a partner or somebody known closely to the victim. This year, in the first six months, matters have got even worse. Eight women have been murdered to date. Two were killed within a few short

days of each other just over a week ago: Jamey Carney in Kerry and Adina Constantin in Portlaoise, who was killed literally on the same street as my office.

The absence of a domestic abuse refuge in nine counties, including Laois, is a problem. The Tánaiste will recall me raising this a number of times in the House over the years. The Laois domestic abuse services have been raising the importance of this issue. Having a safe place for victims to go, including when children have to flee the family home, is essential. Victims in Laois often have to leave the county to seek refuge, and they are away from all services and family supports.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I will finish on this point. The council bought a site nearly three years ago for an eight-unit refuge. There was a lack of progress, but an approved housing body, AHB, Tuath Housing, has been secured to put that in place.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask the Minister for justice, the wider Government and Cuan to treat this with a sense of urgency, allocate the capital assistance scheme, CAS, money for it and get the scheme up and running as quickly as possible. I think the Tánaiste will agree it is an important issue.

The Tánaiste: I very much do. I thank Deputy Stanley for raising this issue. Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is an epidemic in Irish society. In fact, there are certain people in certain positions of power and influence in certain parts of the world who are trying to make sure we talk about these issues less. There has been an effort at times to shut down debate on these issues, and to use phrases like “woke” and the like. Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is something that needs the full attention and focus of all of us who hold positions of influence.

I o'clock

We have major issues in relation to young men and how they are getting sex education and being introduced to people who put themselves forward as role models who are despicable, vile, disgusting individuals, some prominently known and some less prominently known, all having a corrosive effect on our society. We have a huge amount of work to do and men cannot recuse themselves from this conversation. Men need to show leadership in this conversation, too.

On the issue of the roll-out of refuges, the Deputy is entirely right. Cuan, a statutory agency, has been set up and the Minister for justice is working closely with it. I will specifically ask him to determine what can be done on the project in Laois that the Deputy has mentioned to see if we can take that forward.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to raise the case of a children's online safety company whose management is accused of defrauding at least 15 victims, across seven different countries, of

more than €500,000. This is an Irish company and is based in Limerick. My constituent Aisling Waldron, a dedicated advocate of child safety, was hired to oversee child safety. She is owed over €72,000 in unpaid wages. She was recruited on the back of fabricated user numbers and, indeed, fabricated and falsified contracts from the Vatican Bank and the Portuguese Government. Most seriously, the company was allowed to use the emblem of An Garda Síochána. That endorsement gave the company credibility and that credibility helped to defraud the victims. A number of complaints have been made to the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau, the Corporate Enforcement Authority, Fiosrú and the Department of Justice. Will the Government investigate this? I appreciate that the Tánaiste may not know all the details, but it is a major issue that my constituent Aisling Waldron has been fighting, often alone. I ask the Government to investigate why the Garda logo was allowed to be used. The company is widely reported on in mainstream media as Cybersmarties Limited.

The Tánaiste: The House rules may somewhat preclude me from over-commenting in relation to matters that may be before An Garda Síochána and a number of other issues as well. I appreciate the Deputy's bona fides and the reasons he raised this matter, but the organisation that carries out investigations in relation to alleged crime in this country is An Garda Síochána. From what the Deputy has told me, it sounds like there is a Garda investigation under way, and I do not think I can comment further in the interests of that investigation.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I want to read an excerpt from an email I got today in relation to Skyclarys for people with Friedreich's ataxia:

At 19 years old, I should be excited about my future. I should be looking forward to building a career, travelling, making memories with friends and planning the life I want to live. Instead, I wake up every day wondering what ability I will lose next. My future is overshadowed by fear, knowing that my condition will continue to deteriorate while a treatment exists that could slow the decline.

The Friedreich's ataxia community in Ireland has been fighting for reimbursement of Skyclarys for a long time. We have shared our stories, met with politicians, engaged with decision makers and done everything asked of us.

The postponement of a decision this week while expert opinion was requested by the committee was incredibly disappointing. I do not know, after hundreds and hundreds of days of people waiting for a medication that they desperately need, how a committee that is paid to do a job still has not made a decision. If expert advice was needed before now, why was it not sought before now?

In a country where we are so educated and have so much money, and in the EU, where other countries are already reimbursing for this drug, why does it take so long, and why do we have such an inhumane system for the reimbursement of these drugs in this country? That is what it is when you stand face to face with people and families experiencing this. What is the Government going to do to speed up the process and help the people who need help the most?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Meara very much for that contribution and also for reading out that correspondence from his constituent. There are two points to be made. First, there needs to be a broader review of how the drugs process works. I say that without any comment

on the specific drug. My colleague the Minister for Health is fully committed to that and has work under way in that regard.

Second, on the specific drug, I actually think the actions being taken are being taken to ensure that the full opportunity is given to examine the effectiveness of the medicine by hearing directly from the clinicians in Ireland who treat the patients, and also hearing from the lived experience and the patient voice. I am pleased that they have put a timeline of four weeks, or a month, on that. I really hope that process can be used robustly and thoroughly to scrutinise the effectiveness of the drug.

Deputy William Aird: Middle-income working families continue to shoulder the greatest burden of rising living costs. Many are earning too much to qualify for targeted supports and they are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the costs of childcare and housing, and also to meet everyday expenses. At the same time, wage increases intended to keep pace with inflation are pushing more workers into the higher rate of income tax.

As the Government prepares for budget 2027, I am asking the Tánaiste to prioritise middle-income families through adjustments to the standard rate tax band and tax credits, together with targeted supports to help with childcare and housing costs. Will he set out the principles that will guide decisions to ensure work continues to pay and that middle-income families receive meaningful support?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Aird very much. I agree with him that there are many good means-tested supports in place in this country. That is important. There are people who find that they do everything right and play by the rules but do not qualify for any of them. They ask us to hang on a second and ask whether they can have a little bit of assistance and keep some of their own money, and whether work can actually pay in this country. There are far too many people who get up very early - earlier by the day - and find themselves at the end of the month just about getting by, let alone getting ahead. Therefore, a priority for the budget will be to see how we can help those people, namely, the squeezed middle or middle Ireland – call them what you will – or people who are working hard and want to get by in life.

We will make decisions as a Government on the overall package, but there will be a personal income tax package. The summer economic statement next week will set out the parameters in terms of how much the tax package and spending package will be. That will give us an opportunity to scrutinise how best to use them.

I am of the view, and the Government has shown this on a number of occasions, that the tax band is a helpful mechanism. As people's incomes rise, as they are doing, thankfully, or as people do a bit of overtime, get a promotion or work a few more hours, the tax man should not be taking a greater percentage of their money at such an entry point. We are below where other countries are, so I am sympathetic to that argument. On the issue of childcare, we have to fulfil the programme for Government commitment of getting to €200 per month per child over the next four years.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Online platforms that promote and facilitate suicide need to be stopped. I commend the team of *The Journal Investigates* for its work in exposing these sinister forums, which are banned in other jurisdictions but accessible here. They prey on vulnerable

people and they encourage them into irreversible decisions. The problem is not a lack of legal or regulatory powers. We have the Digital Services Act, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, and the Criminal Law (Suicide) Act. What is missing here is co-ordinated enforcement and urgency.

Will the Tánaiste outline what immediate action the Government will take alongside Coimisiún na Meán, An Garda Síochána and the Internet service providers to block access to these sites? It is the Government's responsibility to ensure that every State body with a role is acting with urgency. Passing responsibility from one organisation to another is simply not acceptable in this regard. These delays are having real consequences. People have lost their lives after engaging with these forums. I implore the Tánaiste to intervene in this regard. The forums should not be accessible in this State, as they are not accessible in others.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right. They should not. I thank the Deputy for raising this. I truthfully do not know enough about the issue, other than that what the Deputy said is quite concerning. On foot of her raising this, I will talk to the Minister for media and Coimisiún na Meán and determine what co-ordinated action can be taken. We will come back to the Deputy on this issue.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: And the Departments of justice and health.

The Tánaiste: I will work out who needs to be spoken to and come back to the Deputy. It is an important issue.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I am a grown woman and I would be really embarrassed if I had to ask the Tánaiste, as my superior, for a tampon. Luckily, here in Leinster House they are freely available in some of the bathrooms, although not all. Although I do not have to ask, many teenage girls must go to their teacher and ask for a tampon or period product, if they are lucky enough that their school supplies period products. In some cases, they are resorting to using newspaper or toilet roll. It is hard enough to concentrate in school without bleeding, bloating or cramping, never mind worrying about leaking. Unfortunately, this is still the case for some teenage girls across the country.

On average, a woman uses 15 to 30 tampons or period products per week, at a cost of €3 to €5 per box. It is an average of €100 per year, which is around the cost of junior GAA membership.

I welcome improvements in some public places. We now have period products in libraries and hospitals.

I know there are two programme for Government commitments under education and health. There is a plan for all DEIS plus schools to have it by 2026 and for all schools to have it by 2027. Can we please put in that they would not have to ask a superior for a period product? They must just be freely available in bathrooms.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. She is right about the availability and accessibility, and not having to ask somebody else, particularly somebody who is perhaps

in a position of authority, to allow someone to access such an important health product. On foot of her raising the issue, I will engage further with the Minister for education and the Minister for Health.

There are also commitments in the women's health action plan in this area. As the Deputy rightly said, we, as a country, have made good progress on period poverty. We have seen the expansion and roll-out of period products. However, there is more to do in this area.

The DEIS plus plan announced last May included a commitment to fund and provide period products to all DEIS plus schools in the next school year to ensure dignity and that no student is held back due to period poverty. It is intended to expand that provision to all upper primary, post-primary and special schools during the lifetime of this Government. I know from my time as the Minister for higher education that some good work on the issue has been done in our universities and education and training boards, ETBs. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will stock take on exactly where we are with the roll-out. I am fully in agreement that this is something we need to deliver and try to make progress on in the time ahead.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Minister for justice recently brought in reforms for the criminal justice legal aid system. While we all recognise that there is a need for reform within the system, the reforms that the Minister has brought in are ill-considered, not backed up by data or evidence and have led to absolute chaos in the courts system. Solicitors have removed themselves from free legal aid work.

The Wicklow courts system has essentially ground to a halt. No Wicklow solicitors are participating or providing free legal aid advice. It means that in recent weeks, cases involving assault, domestic violence, theft, drugs and possession of child pornography have not gone ahead in Wicklow. There are victims in Wicklow who are not able to access justice at the moment because these new changes have brought chaos. Hundreds of jurors were recently told that their services were no longer required. Many vulnerable people in the legal system are falling through gaps.

I know this decision went through the Cabinet and was signed off but in light of the impact that this is happening on our courts system, will the Tánaiste push for the process to be stalled? We need it stopped. We need there to be proper consultation. We need a clear, coherent and properly working policy to be developed.

The Tánaiste: We also need to recognise that the Minister for justice has increased criminal legal aid fees by 8% in the Circuit Court and higher courts from 1 July 2026. Not too many of our constituents are receiving an increase of 8%. This represents a total restoration of----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: None of them are getting legal justice.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please allow the Tánaiste to reply.

The Tánaiste: Reforms are sometimes difficult. 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 a further 8% on

top of that. I note that the Social Democrats have used colourful language about the Minister, including comparisons with Margaret Thatcher and all of that. It makes for great headlines. This is an important-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I have never used that language.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy's colleague who is sitting beside her has done. The party spokesperson has.

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

The Tánaiste: The Deputy did say that. I read his comments.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I said I did.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste to conclude.

The Tánaiste: The Deputies comprise a party. The party has chosen to call the Minister for justice names.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you. We will move to the next question in the name of Deputy Conway-Walsh.

The Tánaiste: I am disappointed that Deputy Whitmore-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Is the Minister okay that-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Whitmore, please address your remarks through the Chair.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Whitmore is trying to play all sides here. We are increasing the amount being paid in criminal legal aid. We are trying to speed up the delivery of justice in the District Court system. We are also trying to bring about reforms. Many of our constituents believe there is significant room for reform to the free legal aid system.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We agree about the need for reform. Do it properly.

The Tánaiste: The Minister for justice has been engaging and will continue to engage.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This morning, workers at Aer Lingus woke up to the devastating news that up to 500 jobs will be cut at the airline, impacting both staff at head office and flight crews. By all measures, Aer Lingus is a profitable company, reporting operating profits of €282 million in 2025. Its parent company, IAG, has operating profits of €5 billion. Yet, 500 families in north Dublin, Cork, Shannon and across the country now face the

possibility of losing their livelihoods. We urgently need firm guarantees that workers' rights will be protected. What engagement has the Minister for enterprise had with Aer Lingus to minimise the number of jobs that are going to be lost? Will the Government meet representatives of the unions, the Irish Air Line Pilots Association, IALPA, Fórsa and other unions, to ensure that impacted workers receive full and fair redundancy packages and that we have full transparency, while also committing to wider statutory redundancy reforms? We need the number of jobs lost to be minimised. We need urgent engagement by the Government.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. The Government is aware of the recent announcement by Aer Lingus that it is to undertake some network and organisational changes as a result of what it describes as a sustained and challenging operational environment. It has stated that it will begin consultation with employees and their representatives, which is important and urgent. It has said that it expects the impact could potentially see approximately 500 employees leave the company.

I also note that the network changes include the cessation of a number of long-haul routes and some short-haul routes, commencing towards the end of the summer. The company has said that any customers impacted will be contacted directly.

This is a commercial matter for the company but some of the issues that the Deputy has raised are relevant matters for the Government. On foot of her raising them, I will ask the Minister to come back to her.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Does the Tánaiste recognise the scale of the chaos in our criminal justice system at the moment? Thousandsof cases have been adjourned. Victims will await justice. Backlogs are building. We now have *habeas corpus* cases taking place in the High Court. The Minister referenced my flowery language. I am surprised that Fine Gael is giving the Minister for justice such free rein in relation to the chaos he has caused. Prior to taking up the position, the Minister was critical of Fine Gael's handling of the justice system for the preceding 14 years. We now have criminal courts coming to a standstill and all the Government offers is soundbites. I am not talking about the Tánaiste's soundbites.

The Tánaiste: You did the Margaret Thatcher line.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Government offered no analysis by which the decision was made. In recognition of the chaos in our courts, can the Tánaiste, as Minister for Finance and leader of Fine Gael, simply say he is willing to engage in a manner that the Minister is not?

The Tánaiste: It was unhelpful to refer to the Minister for justice as Margaret Thatcher. That was the flowery and colourful language-----

Deputy Gary Gannon: He said he was not for turning.

The Tánaiste: -----that was unhelpful. Reforms are difficult and tough. The Social Democrats show a great appetite for reform in some areas. They were squarely behind the

Minister for Health in her reforms for consultants. When it comes to the lawyers, the party is adopting a different approach. That is an interesting insight.

The Minister for justice is increasing the flat rate fee that is being paid. It is going to result in the current fee being paid for five appearances in the District Court, plus an 8% increase. How many times does someone need to go in front of the District Court? It is paying for five appearances, plus an 8% increase. Reforms are hard but if this is an insight into how the Social Democrats would govern the country, through cherry-picking and giving in to every campaign-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It would be based on evidence.

The Tánaiste: -----well, *quelle surprise*.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Next Wednesday, the trial continues of the Ulm five, including the Irish citizen, Daniel Tatlow-Devally. A delegation of TDs and Senators, including me, will attend the trial in Stuttgart next week. The Government was asked to monitor the trial and on 21 May 2026, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, said, "We will ensure that there is fair oversight of this trial." A senior counsel who attended the trial wrote to the Minister and other Ministers on 22 June to state that there is no official record being taken at the trial. There is no stenographer at the trial. There is no audio recording of the trial. Defendants cannot bring their own stenographers or note-takers. The accused rely on court-appointed translators but the lawyers cannot hear what these translators are saying. They cannot confer with their clients. No record is available afterwards to check what was said. This is not a trial that would take place in Ireland. Any of these issues would possibly be enough to set aside a conviction.

A representative of the Irish Government should be there. Will the Tánaiste request a stenographer at this trial in Stuttgart next Wednesday, in defence of an Irish citizen and others, and due process, as was promised?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am not aware of all those details that the Deputy has put on the record of the House but on foot of her doing so, I will make inquiries today and ask that the relevant Minister reverts to her.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I, too, welcome the scoping exercise in relation to the allegations of sexual abuse made against Michael Shine. Like the Tánaiste, I was struck by the words of the victims and survivors in noting that finally, they had been heard. I was also struck by their saying that finally, they had been believed.

Imagine, after 20, 30, 40 or even 50 years, coming out with words like "I now finally have been believed". That is quite incredible. I thank Dignity4Patients and praise the courage of the victims and survivors. They have never given in and have refused to lie down and allow their history and allow their abuses to be washed away. This is really important but the next steps are equally important if not more important,. Will there be any barriers to cost or funding? Will there be any barriers to the terms and conditions and the participation of the victims and survivors?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank Deputy Butterly. I thank Dignity4Patients and thank the men - overwhelmingly it is men - who collaborated with us and worked with us on this process. I thank Lorcan Staines who, I think the Deputy will see from the report, has adopted a most empathetic approach that is different from any language that has been used about this and about these men in the past. I thank him for his kindness and the way in which he has embraced that. Dignity4Patients was with us as a partner and the men were with us as partners at every stage. That will be the case the next time. Of course it is for Government to sign off on the terms of reference and that is always the case but we will take the same collaborative approach to the next phase as we have this phase.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Tánaiste will share my profound horror at the recent brutal murder of Jamey Carney, the absconding of her so-called partner to Jordan and the wider pattern of escalating violence against women that was raised earlier. Will the Tánaiste also agree that no aspect or provision of the International Protection Act should ever inadvertently give cover to someone or hamper An Garda Síochána in the effective discharge of its duties in terms of releasing information on those suspected of such crimes, regardless of whether they are international protection applicants? Will the Tánaiste accept that absolute clarity is required so that operational decisions by An Garda Síochána are never influenced by any perceived legal constraint? Will he therefore commit to a review of the relevant legislative and operational frameworks to ensure that, regardless of current statutory provisions, no chilling effect is being caused or created that might discourage or inhibit the reporting or public identification of suspects who are also international protection applicants, where such reporting is necessary for public safety or investigation purposes?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Nolan for raising the issue and I join her and all Members of the House in extending our absolute sympathy to the family of Jamey Carney and our repulsion, horror and deep sadness at what has occurred. This Government, through our law enforcement authorities, through An Garda Síochána, will go to the ends of the earth to ensure justice is served. There is already a very significant active Garda investigation under way, as the Deputy is aware, with pan-jurisdiction elements too, as you would expect. On the broader point I would follow the advice and views of An Garda Síochána on that. The immediate priority is obviously the ongoing criminal investigation but if there is a moment of reflection or review the Garda thinks would assist it from a public safety point of view, of course the Government would take that most seriously.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Imagine being the father of two boys who have Friedreich's ataxia and one of them passing away. I know the Tánaiste is familiar with the case of Craig Coady. I normally do not personalise stories in here but he spoke about this quite openly on Red FM in Cork on Tuesday. He went home that evening and his son asked him if they had got the drug. Imagine telling your son that unfortunately the answer was "Not yet", only for him to turn around and say "Dad, it's okay if we don't get the drug because at least if I die I'll meet Rory". It is extremely upsetting for many people and, as I said, I do not normally personalise things, but this has been referred to a rare diseases technology review committee which is due to meet in the next few weeks. I am pleading for that to be done as expeditiously as possible. I am not asking anybody to comment on the process itself as I know we have to respect it, but is it possible that the review committee can be brought forward and convened as

quickly as possible to see this through one way or another because of the mental trauma, anguish and emotion? Many people travelled up on Tuesday. One girl made a ten-hour round trip from Bantry in hope and expectation. Unfortunately, we have created these campaigns because the system is broken. The Tánaiste said that himself back in 2017. It is going to be Groundhog Day. I have hope that with the review the Minister has commenced this will become a relic of the past. I sincerely hope so. In the here and now I am begging for that review committee to be brought forward as urgently as possible.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for his continued advocacy for all people with rare diseases. We are trying to change the system specifically to get better access for rare diseases and we are partnering with other countries to try to do that as quickly as possible.

It is wrong that we are negotiating against each other as member states, in some cases, with pharmaceutical companies. We have not reached the best solution on a European basis. There is work there to be done and as president of the Council of the European Union on health I will be taking this forward on that basis. Also, within Ireland we are trying to improve the system. Nevertheless, the process is, as the Deputy knows, science-led and because it was not approved by the drugs group it has to go to this rare diseases technical review group. The difference between those groups is the first group is a standing group. It exists every month, whether it is oncology drugs or rare disease drugs, and this other one is an extra opportunity where, if the first group does not approve it based on scientific grounds, there is an extra opportunity for those clinicians who are actively working with patients with Friedreich's ataxia or the relevant rare disease to have their say, to make their case and give the best explanation of how they think it might work. It is about the HSE giving every opportunity to make the case for a particular drug, particularly where the science is more mixed than is the case for other drugs. I commit to the Deputy – I have already asked that it be brought forward as quickly as possible - but I recognise that we are dependent on individual clinicians who may be here or may be there who are not routinely on this and I would rather have the right people in the room to give this the best opportunity than to do it a week earlier and have missed the opportunity to have the correct people. We really are trying to make it happen as quickly as possible.

Deputy Rory Hearn: I thank you, a Leas Cheann-Comhairle, for your work and support during the year and thank all the staff here. I wish my colleagues in government the best of luck over the summer and respite from our robust engagement. We look forward to going at it again in the autumn.

I want to raise an issue related to Dublin Fire Brigade and the emergency response framework that exists. I have been very concerned by the ongoing threat to that service. I have met fire brigade staff. I ask the Tánaiste to engage with the Minister for housing and for the Government to engage on this issue. Dublin Fire Brigade staff and SIPTU have expressed their deep concern that this excellent service is now in the process of being downgraded and split across two services. The Dublin public will be very upset when they realise their fire fighters and emergency response service are at risk of being split and downgraded. Two systems are going to be introduced which will fragment the system and undermine the existing incident command structures and place elements of the Dublin Fire Brigade emergency response outside the current single operating system, which is a gold standard emergency response system. Will

the Minister for housing meet the Dublin Fire Brigade in his local government capacity and also get Dublin City Council management to engage and ensure the current excellent Dublin emergency response service continues to exist?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Hearne and wish him and his party the very best for the recess as well. I will miss him over the next few weeks but I look forward to these robust exchanges again in September. I will be in training for them between now and then.

On the issue he raised, I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to engage with the bodies the Deputy suggested and also with Dublin City Council on this matter. I will ask that he comes back to the Deputy directly as well.

A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, can I acknowledge our colleague here who often sits here in front of us, Ms Noreen Banim? I am conscious of the passing of her mother, Maura, whose funeral is taking place today. On behalf of all Members, the Banim family are in our thoughts and prayers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thanks, Tánaiste. Deputy O’Gorman is next.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: Fingal County Council is currently doing a consultation on a plan to build a new suburb for Dublin at Dunsink. The proposal is for up to 18,000 new homes, most of which will be built on State-owned land, which will I hope will mean more affordable prices.

Fingal County Council plans to build the first 2,500 by 2029. Central to the success of this project is new public transport, with an extension of the Luas green line from Broombridge out as far as Tyrrelstown, which would see three new stops across the Dunsink lands. Right now, under the Dublin transport plan, the Luas green line extension is not due until after 2042, which is far too late. The new community will not work without high-quality public transport being delivered. I ask the Tánaiste to ask the Minister for Transport to bring forward the plan for the Luas green line extension to Tyrrelstown to complement the delivery of these new homes. I am sure Deputy Currie will support my proposal.

The Tánaiste: I hear whispers of "I concur" behind me as well from Deputy Currie. I thank Deputy O’Gorman for raising the issue of the extension of the Luas green line. I have heard this case be made pretty compellingly over the last while. In fairness to the Minister for Transport, I am conscious that he has a capital envelope to live within. I am also conscious there is a medium-term fiscal framework that allows for the allocation of additional capital over the lifetime of the Government. Perhaps that may be an avenue. I will certainly talk to the Minister, Deputy O’Brien, and ask him to keep in touch with the Deputy on the matter.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I join with the Tánaiste in his expression of condolences to the Banim family and to Noreen, whom we all know here, on the death of her mother, Maura.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for saying that. I extend our condolences on behalf of the Labour Party.

Electoral (Postal Voting) (Carers) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Mark Wall: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to entitle certain persons caring for others to be entered in the register of postal voters, for that purpose to amend the Electoral Act 1992, and to provide for related matters.

I am very happy to introduce the Electoral (Postal Voting) (Carers) Bill 2026 for family carers throughout this country. For too long, family carers have been made to feel invisible due to the lack of recognition of their extraordinary value in Irish society. The facts are very simple. There are over 620,000 of these family carers, saving the State €20 billion a year and providing 19 million unpaid hours each week. They are, in themselves, a second HSE, doing quite extraordinary work. They cannot engage in the democratic process like every other ordinary citizen because they work 24-7, 365 days a year, with no break.

This Bill is a small but necessary step to ensure that family carers feel that they can use their voice by voting. Quite often, the family carers I meet daily tell me they simply do not have time to get to the ballot box. They are disappointed because, while the person they care for has a postal vote, the carer does not. That simply does not make sense to them. There are number of major issues impacting family carers, like accessing vital supports for themselves and their loved ones, navigating the administrative nightmare of social welfare and juggling their caring role with work and other family commitments. They are under a huge amount of stress and getting to a ballot box is always going to be at the bottom of their list. The Government needs to recognise the huge amount of work that family carers do day in, day out and try to make their lives that bit easier by ensuring they have access to a postal vote. It will be a very small change that could help hundreds of thousands of carers feel like they have a voice and will be able use their vote for the first time in a very long time. That is true democracy.

Overall, many believe the Government has been very slow to extend postal voting to many citizens in this country and that is something that needs to be progressed. I understand that the Electoral Commission is undertaking research on this, but we really need to see changes in our voting system to ensure that everyone can take part on voting day. I know that during the general election, and more recently in the presidential election and by-elections, postal voting was discussed for a number of other situations, such as people being away on voting day. This is a very valid point and I hope that over the course of this Government we will see postal voting extended to all eligible citizens.

In countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and even the US, postal voting is available. In Europe there are examples in Luxembourg, the UK, Switzerland, Iceland, Poland, Greece and Germany. I believe that Ireland needs to follow these examples and ensure that postal voting is extended much wider. We are seeing lower turnouts in our elections and extending postal votes to a wider range of people would be one measure that could help us all address this issue.

I appreciate that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage may be waiting on the research to be received from the Electoral Commission on postal voting. However, I hope he will see the need here today and take the first step towards ensuring that at least family carers will have a right to a postal vote alongside the person they are caring for.

I hope the Minister will support this Bill to progress through the House. The Government must recognise the need not just for postal voting but to allow family carers the right to engage in politics by using a postal vote. It is a small but necessary change that will give family carers more of a voice.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes our business for this morning. I thank all the Members, the staff, the press and everyone involved in the House for their co-operation during the term. I want to acknowledge the fact that we had Cara Darmody in the Public Gallery this morning. I omitted to mention that. I wish her well in the campaign and in her efforts.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.36 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.17 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.36 p.m. and resumed at 2.17 p.m.

Fiscal Implications of a United Ireland: Statements

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I sincerely welcome the fact we are having this debate. Colleagues will recall that the matter to which it relates arose during questions to me in my role as Minister for Finance a number of months ago. A view was expressed to the effect that it would be worth having a debate on the matter. I am very pleased that we have been able to facilitate that debate in Government time today. I apologise that I will not be able to stay for the duration of the debate, but a number of Government colleagues will be here to participate. I was eager that we should have this discussion kicked-off before the summer recess. I am pleased that we have managed, as an Oireachtas, to facilitate that.

I am obviously committed, as I know everybody in this House is, to realising the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement for all the people of this island. At the core of that agreement is the principle of consent and the recognition that the future constitutional status of Northern Ireland rests in the hands of the people. That principle was democratically endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South, and remains the foundation upon which progress is and should be built.

Guided by Article 3 of the Constitution as amended by the people in 1998, the Government's approach is to foster reconciliation, deepen relationships and prepare for the future through

respectful dialogue and engagement. Thus, in the event of a referendum delivered within the consent provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, the Government will make all necessary preparations in accordance with the terms of the Constitution and the principles and procedures of the agreement.

One of the reasons we are having this debate is that when we had the parliamentary questions on finance to which I refer a number of months ago, there was a recognition that if and when - I believe it is when - there is a referendum, the big issues of debate are going to be the economy, the all-island economy, the cost involved and, I hope, the benefit that will accrue. While I doubt that we, collectively, will manage to answer every question during this debate, I hope we will certainly put on the record of the Dáil the information, insights and data that we have. I hope people will also refer to the further data that are required or the further work that we believe needs to be done.

Before getting into that, I will say the Government has maintained a sustained focus on reconciliation and trying to strengthen the three relationships at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement - relationships between communities in the North, between North and South and relationships east and west, between Ireland and Britain. By strengthening these relationships and fostering greater partnership and understanding, we can unlock the full potential of our island and create lasting opportunities for future generations. In Government, we have made this commitment real and tangible through the shared island initiative. Here, we prioritise the essential work of building co-operation and reconciliation and have brought about an ambitious agenda to deliver meaningful progress, while remaining steadfast in fully implementing the Good Friday Agreement and its potential.

To date, the Government has advanced the largest ever programme of all-island investment to build a more connected island through the shared island initiative, backed by a €2 billion fund. In April 2025, we launched a new phase of a joint research programme with the ESRI focusing on strategic policy and co-operation possibilities for the island. In December 2025, I launched the first report on what will now be a new annual ESRI series to analyse economic trends across the island. I think those comparative data, year on year, will be helpful. Overall, this Government continues and wants to continue to deepen our partnership with the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government in its role as coguarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. We are working to fully harness the agreement to foster reconciliation between the different communities of this island.

The topic of today's debate, the fiscal implications of a united Ireland, is one of the most important questions in any discussion about Ireland's future. I occupy a number of roles within Government and politics, including my role as leader of the Fine Gael Party, in which I have outlined my view and that of my party on the next steps we intend to take. I am speaking today in my role as Ireland's Minister for Finance.

The debate we need to have from a fiscal point of view needs to be informed by evidence and analysis on the opportunities and challenges that constitutional change may bring. Let me clear, and I think we have got to be clear and honest. If she does not mind me saying so, I heard Deputy McDonald asked about this on radio recently. People look for very clear and straightforward answers in relation to fiscal costs. We have got to be truthful about this, as the Deputy was. It remains highly uncertain because it is a very dynamic situation. That is the first point I wanted to make as Minister for Finance.

Recent studies on the impacts reach widely different conclusions. It is also important to acknowledge that. That is largely because they rely on a different set of assumptions. All of this is based on a set of assumptions and there is a whole variety of those assumptions. Which public spending obligations will transfer to the new Ireland? How would the tax code be applied? How might Northern Ireland's economy develop over the long term as part of a unified island? What will be the extent, if any, of ongoing UK fiscal commitments? I note the debate and discussion around that.

For example, to give some sense of the range of data we have heard, a study by Dublin City University, DCU, and Ulster University estimated last year that reunification could carry an initial net fiscal cost of around €3 billion per annum for the Irish State, which I am calling Ireland. The same study also suggested, however, that a unified economy could reach a fiscal break-even within five to nine years, assuming Northern Ireland's reintegration into the EU and considerable productivity improvements in the North.

On the other hand, and perhaps at the other end of the spectrum, research published by the Institute of International European Affairs in 2024 presents, from a purely fiscal point of view, a much more pessimistic outlook. It projects annual costs of up to €20 billion for the Irish State for up to two decades. Its assumptions are driven by the need to align welfare, pensions and public service pay across the island, as well as the loss of funding from the UK's central government. My own Department published a report called *Shared Island, Shared Economy* in 2024. It found that the Northern Ireland-specific fiscal deficit - that is to say, total expenditure in the North less total tax revenue raised in the North - was in the region of around £7 billion sterling in 2020.

However, too often the debate begins and ends with estimates of simple fiscal transfers or of headline costs of transition to a unified island. These are, of course, important considerations and they must be honestly addressed. They should be put out there and scrutinised but they are only part of a much larger economic picture. The question is not simply what a united Ireland could cost but what it could create. One of the most significant opportunities, I believe, lies in services. Services account for the overwhelming majority of economic activity across these islands, yet Northern Ireland currently sits outside the EU Single Market for services. Constitutional change would provide businesses across the island with seamless access to one of the world's largest integrated markets for services.

It could be assumed that labour mobility would also become a powerful driver of economic growth. While people already move freely across the Border, employers, education providers and workers continue to navigate different regulatory systems, qualifications, tax arrangements and employment frameworks. We have a porous Border where people move, quite rightly, across the island but they do not do it with absolute ease and there is a number of regulatory, taxation and employment challenges that are faced. It would also support more coherent investment in education, apprenticeships and lifelong skills across the entire island.

The transition to the euro, which I presume would be part of the discussion, would represent another important structural advantage. Operating within a single currency would eliminate exchange rate risk, reduce transaction costs for businesses and consumers, and would simplify cross-Border trade and investment.

Perhaps nowhere would the economic dividend be more visible than in the north east and north west of the island. For too long, counties such as Donegal, Derry and Tyrone have found themselves at the edge of two separate jurisdictions rather than at the centre of one coherent economic region. Equally important would be the ability for State bodies to operate across the entire island. Agencies responsible for enterprise, industrial development, research, innovation and infrastructure would be able to plan and deliver on an all-island basis rather than duplicating effort or working within jurisdictional constraints.

I make these points because I think it is an important debate but it is sometimes reduced to a lazy debate that says, "Please produce one singular figure that answers all of these complex fiscal questions". I can tell Deputies that as the finance Minister of this country, and based on what I have put on the record of the House, that is not possible but it is also not intelligent. This is a much more dynamic situation. There are serious economic and fiscal issues to be considered but any discussion about a unified Ireland, a united Ireland or a new Ireland, or the island of Ireland operating as one, that simply reduces the economic conversation to one headline cost, misses the point. That is really one of the points I wanted to make today.

Having said that, none of this suggests the transition would be without significant cost - of course, it would not - nor would it be without significant complexity. It would require careful planning and sustained development. It would require responsible fiscal management. However, fiscal analysis must capture both sides of the ledger. That is why the fiscal debate should not be framed solely about what we inherit; it should be framed about what we are capable of building North and South and purely today, from an economic point of view, the benefits of that over time.

Overall, research consistently highlights that the ultimate fiscal outcome will depend heavily on the terms of any reunification settlement and the extent to which economic convergence is achieved across the island in the years following reunification. The fiscal position in year one would, of course, not remain static. Over time, costs and revenues would evolve as both economies adapt, grow and become integrated. How these opportunities are managed, and the extent to which these benefits are realised, will be the key determinant of the long-term fiscal impact. In other words, these outcomes are not predetermined. They will be shaped by the policy choices we make, the policies we pursue and the decisions we make.

On the one hand, these future fiscal trends come with considerable uncertainty. On the other, they point to one fact: that the fiscal deficit in year one would be significant, regardless of how we wish to cost it. We cannot expect reunification to come at no fiscal cost. It is vital, therefore, to bear in mind the current fiscal situation. In 2025, total net tax receipts in our jurisdiction amount to €106.5 billion. However, we can all recognise that exceptionally strong corporation tax receipts masks the underlying position of the public finances. When these transitory revenues are excluded, the underlying general Government balance in 2025 was a deficit of €7.1 billion. In that context, the scale of any reunification-related cost, at least at the start, would be significant. An annual cost of €3 billion would amount to less than 3% of total tax revenue while an annual cost of €20 billion would be equivalent to almost one fifth of all tax revenue receipts. I make that point to show the range of assumptions that are out there. Either figure would clearly have a material impact on the public finances affecting not only the headline budget position but also the underlying fiscal balance. This illustrates why the range of estimates matters. They are not simply academic differences. Each figure would have a

significant implication in terms of spending tax and resilience. Any assessment of reunification must, therefore, be firmly rooted in the context of our fiscal position and indeed the level of taxation borne by citizens and businesses.

It is very much a mixed picture. It is much more dynamic than suggested by people who want to reduce conversations to, "Tell me the figure right now". There will certainly be a significant cost, a broad range in terms of what that cost could be, and a significant difference in terms of the impact of that cost, depending on where it ends in the range. That is year one and perhaps the years ahead. It is not a static number and the decisions that a new Ireland would make would very much depend on the fiscal journey our country is on. That is my best assessment of the points I am trying to make here.

Over the longer term, my Department's Future Forty research also examines how both domestic developments and global megatrends could shape the Irish economy and public finances over the next four decades. This also serves as a useful context for the debate.

Future Forty's message is clear: Ireland's future will be shaped by powerful forces such as demographic change, digitalisation, the climate transition and an increasingly uncertain global economic environment. As policymakers, the task will be to anticipate these challenges, invest wisely and ensure that our economy and our public finances are sufficiently resilient to meet the challenges of the decades ahead. Vitally, we must acknowledge that these pressures will exist regardless of our future constitutional arrangements. These are pressures that we know we will face. An ageing population, increasing healthcare needs, the transition to net zero and the need for continued investment in housing, energy and infrastructure will place a significant demand on public resources. Future Forty serves as an important reminder that our fiscal capacity is not unlimited and that, as a result choices will inevitably arise as to how best to deploy finite resources.

It is important that we begin examining these issues now. Preparing for the future means understanding the economic, fiscal and societal implications of all possible futures, including the prospect of a united Ireland. Any future constitutional change must be underpinned, from an economic point of view, by rigorous analysis, responsible financial and policy planning and a clear understanding of how that will impact the lives of people across this island. Questions of public services, healthcare outcomes, pensions, taxation, infrastructure, housing, education and economic competitiveness are not simply secondary considerations. I am not suggesting anyone believes they are. They have to be at the centre of any informed discussion about Ireland's future.

The research undertaken to date has clearly demonstrated that the range of potential fiscal outcomes is wide and uncertain. This uncertainty must encourage more debate on the topic. That is why we are having this debate today. We should not run from this conversation. In fact, we should run towards and embrace it. This is an important conversation. It is only through evidence-based research, open discussion and rigorous scrutiny, including putting all the information at the table even that we might find challenging that we can ultimately reduce uncertainty and crucially deliver what people will need in this debate, namely, transparency and clarity.

Today's debate is not meant to advocate for one particular outcome, although we probably share a view of what we would like that outcome to be over time. For the first time in Dáil

Éireann that I remember in a long time if ever - I certainly do not recall it - we aim to try and put as many facts and as much data and information on the record of this House to ensure that citizens and policymakers alike are equipped with the information needed to make informed choices. It is also to try and push back, as I have tried to do in this contribution, against the headline figure. It is a much more dynamic environment than that. Getting the right answers is built on the meticulous work of asking the right questions. During the course of the debate today, let us put on the record the questions that people believe need to be answered. The economic and fiscal consequences of constitutional change are too important to be left to assumptions. They require evidence and scrutiny.

As we have seen in academic research, in many ways, the conversation about Ireland's future is under way. Our responsibility now is to ensure that the debate is respectful, inclusive and, crucially, grounded in evidence. It is in that spirit that we have tabled this time today on a cross-party basis. I look forward to a productive discussion this afternoon and to this, perhaps, being a jumping-off point for more debate and scrutiny in the time ahead.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I warmly welcome this initiative on the part of the Tánaiste. This is certainly not the first time that Irish unity has been raised on the floor of House, but, generally speaking, it is those of us of this political stripe and on this side of the House who have been pressing for it, so I sincerely thank the Tánaiste for his commentary, which I find constructive. Actually, I find it very refreshing that, as Tánaiste and leader of Fine Gael, he advocates that we embrace this conversation. That is exactly where we need to be. I commend the Tánaiste on that.

This is a significant moment for all of us because the 30th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement is approaching. Let us review how far we have come. Our peace is secure and the next chapter of our national journey is without doubt the peaceful democratic achievement of Irish reunification. We all have a stake in that. Ten years on from Brexit, our constitutional and economic landscapes have fundamentally changed. The North has been taken out of the EU against the wishes of its people, yet we still maintain an open Border and free movement across the island. Cross-Border trade has grown from €4.5 billion to more than €17 billion, which is significant.

Irish unity represents the greatest economic opportunity in the history of this island. That opportunity cannot be missed; it must be grasped. For too long we have been constrained by partition, with two jurisdictions, two tax systems, two sets of regulation, duplication of public services, fragmented and incomplete infrastructure and artificial barriers to trade, investment, higher education and skills. The Tánaiste referred to that. No economy, of its own volition, would choose to organise itself in this way. We have the opportunity to build one robust economy that will work in the interests of our people.

When one enlarges a market, one creates opportunity. Businesses gain more customers, invest with confidence, create jobs and drive productivity and prosperity grows. Partition creates barriers; unity can remove them. For people in the Border counties, the economic cost of partition was never an abstract concept, but the rest of us can miss that there was actually a price tag for all of us, not just for people in the Six Counties or those who live along the Border. Businesses faced unnecessary barriers and investment and infrastructure became fragmented.

Both often stopped at the Border. We can change all of that. We can create opportunity and allow business to flourish.

I agree with the Tánaiste that, far too often, economic debate and fiscal consideration have hinged on the subvention from the British Government. In other words, on a singular figure and a debate around what that figure is. Very often, £14 billion is quoted as the figure. Of course, that does not take account of issues around pensions, British national debt, defence spending, diplomatic services, etc. All of these are extant matters which, in my strong view, need to be discounted from that figure, notwithstanding the fact that as and when unity comes about, there will naturally be a discussion and a negotiation with the British state around the terms of disengagement and transition. We should take listen carefully to Professor Seamus McGuinness of the ESRI, who says that the subvention is no longer of a scale that can be considered a major barrier to reunification. Professor John Doyle argues that if the Northern economy performed at the level of the economies of Cork or Kerry, there could likely be no underlying fiscal deficit at all.

The question is not whether we can afford Irish unity; it is whether we can afford partition any longer. I completely agree with the Tánaiste that preparation is key. He spoke about rigorous analysis, planning and an open and inclusive discussion. To that I say, yes, yes, and yes again. I agree entirely with him on that but the real question is this. The preparation needs to be led not alone by a singular figure in Government - by the Tánaiste or his political party Fine Gael. It needs to be led collectively by all of them. The Tánaiste's initiative makes the position of his coalition partners in Fianna Fáil all the more striking, all the more extraordinary and, frankly, all the more inexplicable. I thank the Tánaiste for this opportunity and discussion. Like him, I hope this will be the beginning of a really deep engagement that will involve sharing data, perspectives, politics, ideas and debate.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I really welcome the decision by the Tánaiste and the Government to have these statements on the fiscal implications of a united Ireland. It is crucial that we continue with debates of this type. These are really important and interesting debates and they are about future planning and seeing that we are prepared in the event of a united Ireland. As the Tánaiste and my party leader outlined, the debate around the economics of united Ireland often does hinge on particular figures, namely the big figures that are being thrown around. It involves talk about the so-called cost of Irish unity. Within this debate, it is often assumed that the North is just going to be subsumed into the South without looking at what that would mean economically. It almost seems like the economic *status quo* will simply continue. That needs to change in the context of this debate because we are talking about a new and united Ireland that will include a new and different perspective on the opportunities that we see for us all from an economic perspective when it comes to a united Ireland

When we are planning for this, we need to look at that in terms of the economic perspective. That needs to be based on it being fair, equal and prosperous for everyone - one where we have strong public services and, most importantly, one that actually works in the interests of all the people who live in Ireland.

Partition has left people in the North without control of their economy. They have been made spectators as major economic decisions are made in Westminster. Working people, whether unionist, nationalist or other, have been failed by partition because at the end of the

day, a Westminster Parliament is making decisions on behalf of their communities. Irish unity has really got the potential to deliver for all of our communities, including those communities. It allows us to improve our quality of life and, crucially, gives us as a people ownership and a real stake in our economy.

Irish unity and economic change can go hand in hand. The success of Irish unity demands that. It demands a better Ireland for everybody and that the interests of working people are put first and are front footed. It demands that our resources are harnessed to deliver public infrastructure projects and that every single person has equal opportunity in a new and a united Ireland and that their basic needs are met.

Without proper planning and preparation for Irish unity, we completely and utterly risk missing this seismic opportunity we have to create a new economy and seize this historic opportunity. It is absolutely essential that we begin preparations now.

We need to plan for an all-Ireland universal health service, an all-Ireland transport network - imagine easily accessing Donegal from Dublin on a train? - and an all-Ireland education system. We need to prepare for an informed and inclusive process of transition. To effectively make these preparations for a new economy of a united Ireland, it is necessary that we all work together. I welcome this and I think we should continue it. The Government can and must lead that change.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank Deputy Farrell for allowing me some of her time.

I think Michael Collins would be pleased with the Tánaiste today. I thank him for allowing us Government time to discuss such an important issue. I also acknowledge the work Deputy Currie has consistently done in this space.

Deputy Simon Harris: Hear, hear.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I would need much longer than three minutes to discuss the fiscal implications of a united Ireland, such is the depth and breadth of the work already done. I commend all of those who have done it.

Leaving all politics aside, the economic benefits of reunification present unprecedented opportunities for sustainable growth. As we prepare for the constitutional future of this island, one of the key priorities must be creating an all-island competitive and conducive environment for foreign direct investment and indigenous businesses. The future prosperity of Ireland is dependent on Government policies which address and invest in the key drivers of FDI; human capital, infrastructure, political stability, tax certainty, digitisation and decarbonisation. The very open nature of the Irish economy and over-reliance on FDI and a small number of large US firms exposes an economic vulnerability that covers an underlying deficit of €13 billion. With an all-island approach, we can tackle that properly.

This vulnerability should be tackled by taking an all-island approach to investing in different levels of education and mitigating the socioeconomic barriers to education. A culture of lifelong learning must be encouraged by removing financial barriers and investing in childcare and public services across the island. Fulfilling investment commitments, as outlined in the national development plan and ensuring timely delivery of infrastructure such as all-island

transport, telecommunications, utilities, housing and energy, are fundamental to the whole island's prosperity in the future. An all-island development agency is critical to this prosperity. Competing for investment from multinational companies, based on five interlinked pillars of growth, transformational regions, sustainability and impact as promoted by the IDA is necessary to compete on a global stage. One of the key benefits of reunification would be the access to human capital across the island, with both jurisdictions combined. We spoke about this with IBEC this morning. I commend IBEC and the ESRI on the work they have done on the macroeconomic model. That is hugely important and can solve that issue. I ask the Tánaiste to focus in the interim on what needs to be done.

I ask the Government, through the shared-island unit, to provide funding for student places for students from the jurisdiction here. I refer to the legislation. We need to encourage student mobility across the island. I ask the shared island unit to intervene to provide funding for students from here going to Queen's University and Ulster University.

Regarding the data, the NI Executive should work with the ONS, HMRC and the NISRA to improve the data on tax receipts in the North. This would help to provide more reliable estimates and forecasting. It is about us having the data to be able to do the accurate forecasting we need to do.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The opportunity to progress towards a united Ireland is incredibly exciting. It is an opportunity to reimagine our island and its potential. David McWilliams wrote in recent years about the impact of partition on the North of Ireland. Some 100 years ago, Belfast was larger than Dublin. Some 80% of the island's industrial output was in the area around Belfast. It was an industrial powerhouse. If we compare that to Dublin today, Dublin is way beyond that in population and economic productivity. The economic impact of partition has been devastating, particularly on the North of Ireland.

I can speak with some positivity about the north west. In recent times, we have had positive partnerships in the region standing up and showing the potential if we can break down the impact of the Border and work together.

In recent days, First Minister Michelle O'Neill visited Letterkenny Chamber of Commerce. Present were the heads of Donegal County Council, Atlantic Technological University, Donegal ETB and a range of employers and businesses from across the county. It has been working together with Derry Chamber of Commerce to market one region: the north west city region. They have worked together as councils - Donegal, Derry and Strabane - and as universities - the University of Ulster and Northwest College. We can see, for example, in the City of Derry Airport, 40% of the passengers who use that airport come from County Donegal. We are one region and one people and we have to break it down to achieve our economic potential.

There are many challenges in the Green Paper and the citizens' assembly, which will inevitably come. There are many challenges and issues but the easiest one is going to be the economic benefits of a united Ireland. They will be immense, particularly for the northern half of the island. As an eminent economist said, if the North of Ireland can perform at the level of counties Cork and Kerry alone, there will be no issues. It will do a lot better than that. The model of the north west is the model and vision of a way forward for a united Ireland. It is an exciting debate; let us have it and let us get on with it.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on statements on the fiscal implications of Irish unity. We hear people tell us Irish unity is a cost we cannot afford but the truth of the matter is partition is the cost we have already paid for for a century and more, and it is a price that is too high. Others have mentioned subvention and how it reduces when we strip away pensions and Westminster debt to an initial annual deficit of approximately €1.75 billion. I say “initial”. In the context of a budget of over €125 billion for 2027, this is manageable. That deficit will disappear when the benefits of unity are realised.

If we are to consider the fiscal implications of Irish unity - of course, we should - then we must consider the cost of partition because the real economic failure is partition itself. It has created duplication, inefficiency and a barrier to our natural prosperity. It has left the North underfunded by Westminster's austerity and battered by the chaos of Brexit while the South has suffered from a fractured market and a divided island. We are both less than we could be.

Irish unity is not a burden; it is an investment.

It is an investment in ending the historic necessity for emigration, which has forced so many to leave our shores. It is also an investment in creating a single, dynamic all-island economy and in building the critical infrastructure our people deserve. The cost of not uniting - stagnation, two health systems, two tax regimes, a Border region and a wider economy that is held back - is far greater. We have the fiscal capacity and the moral imperative to make this work. We need the political will.

The British Government will still pay pensions, just as it does for retired citizens in Spain, France or Ireland. This debate, following on from last week's debate, and welcome plans in the months ahead from those in politics and elsewhere should be the catalyst for ambitious planning. Irish unity is not a cost to be feared; it is an opportunity to be seized. Let us build a new Ireland - economically vibrant, socially just and united in every way.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome this debate on the financial implications of a united Ireland. I acknowledge that the Tánaiste and so many other Members in this House see its merits in the future. I would have hoped that in this House we would at least have moved past the time of framing this without casting a value judgment. Any discussion on the financial implications of a united Ireland today that is based upon credible analysis would show that Irish unity is a clear economic opportunity for the entire island, and one that we should seize with both hands. Today such arguments serve only as a tool for those who would frustrate efforts to realise what is our national ambition. Far more relevant is the economic underperformance of the North, as outlined by Professor John Doyle. As a person from a Border county, the North should never have been treated any differently from Cork, Kerry or Dublin. Irish unity is an opportunity to move beyond very real consequences that were inflicted upon the North, by a dysfunctional British State, and one that is totally disinterested in the needs of our people.

This is an opportunity for the people in their ordinary lives and business, to move beyond artificial divergences, which at different times may have negative impacts on either side of the Border. This is an opportunity to seek not just co-operation, but holistic, integrated planning in terms of healthcare, transport, education, tourism and so much more. It is important that we

are having this discussion but that we will have many more discussions that must be had if we want to achieve a united Ireland in a planned and structured way.

I recall to all Deputies, these words of Charles Stewart Parnell, spoken 141 years ago, and inscribed on a monument at the top of O'Connell Street, less than 1 mile from here: "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.'"

I would invite them, as demand for Irish unity grows, as its moment presents in front of us, to eagerly take a leading part in these conversations, and not to be a source of frustration. At the very least, they should never be contrarian to those sacred words.

I will finish today with a reference to the Tánaiste's words about what a united Ireland could create. We in Sinn Féin believe that we need a plan and to benefit from the economic benefits to be had.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu.

Many myths exist about a united Ireland. I believe the biggest one is the alleged cost it will be to the Twenty-six Counties. Increasing amounts of research show that Irish unity would strengthen an all-island economy, creating more jobs, attracting investment and increasing tax revenue in addition to goodwill.

Let us imagine every county on this island working towards the same economic future. At present, the economy of six counties of our country is controlled by the British Government. The people making decisions about investment and opportunity answer to voters in London, Manchester and Brighton, not Belfast, Derry or Newry. Why would Tory, Labour or Reform MPs prioritise communities to which they have no electoral responsibility? A united Ireland will change that and unlock an all-island economy that would work for everyone who lives on this island. Every Irish county would finally have a government whose only priority is Ireland.

We only need look to German reunification as an example of how planned economic integration and investment within the EU can substantially improve economic conditions in the smaller jurisdiction involved in unification. While the economic output and living standards of the former East Germany have not caught up with the former West German development, by any standards they have improved dramatically.

The role of the EU would be even more central in the case of Irish reunification. It should be to the fore of the Irish Presidency in this term. We must remember that the Good Friday Agreement is an EU-endorsed treaty. It has already been made clear that a reunited Ireland would see the North automatically return to EU membership, creating enormous opportunities for growth across the entire island. This simple but important guarantee means, in economic terms, the potential difficulty faced by Scotland when planning its independence, which had to negotiate membership of the EU in the context of independence, does not apply to the Six Counties.

The subvention is also incessantly cited as a reason we in the South would not be able to "afford" the North. However, a recent study showed that the deficit transferred to the Six Counties is closer to £1.5 billion per year. Pensions have also been mentioned. I always

wonder why this was even cited as an issue because it is exactly what already happens to pension recipients in Spain, France, Ireland and wherever a retired British worker resides.

The truth is that even if the economic case was more challenging than it is, Irish unity would still be the right thing to do. It is said: *tír gan teanga, is tír gan anam*, but a country without a soul is only a vacuous place, and while partition was indeed a failure of our national soul, a failure of our spirit, and a failure to believe that all the people of this island deserve to share one future together, we can change that. A united Ireland is about more than balance sheets. It is about ending the injustice of partition, and finally allowing our country to become whole again. In doing the right thing, we also create a stronger economy and a better future for generations to come. Then it is not simply good economics, it is the fulfilment of our national potential.

When I came across to the Chamber today I walked through the hall and I looked at the Proclamation again. I was reminded of the aspiration of our heroes in 1916 to the unashamed "happiness and prosperity of the whole nation". We have that within our grasp now and we have to move forward.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I welcome this important discussion on the topic of Irish unity and its fiscal implications. It deserves analysis and fundamentally respect for the people, who will ultimately decide the future of this island. There are real challenges in any transition to unity but there are also very significant opportunities. The future of this island should not be reduced to a balance sheet. Fiscal implications are important and must be planned for. However, any future Border poll should focus primarily on the people of this island and the opportunity to build a shared home that works for everybody.

It is essential that we begin to plan and prepare now for transition. A great deal of excellent work has already been done. I want to mention some of the academic research that has been done. The ESRI has already been mentioned. In particular, I want to mention the work done by Fintan O'Toole and Sam McBride in their book, *For and Against A United Ireland*. It is a very accessible format which sets out some of the complexities and the opportunities of unification.

There is also very valuable work being done by the Analysing and Researching Ireland North and South, ARINS, project, led by the Royal Irish Academy and the University of Notre Dame. I also acknowledge the work done by Professor John Doyle and his colleagues in DCU and Ulster University who have provided detailed economic modelling that has made the fiscal implications tangible.

3 o'clock

For years, we have heard that Northern Ireland receives a subvention of between £10 billion and £14 billion. Any suggestion that this bill would just be transferred to a united Ireland is reductive and fails to account for the economic opportunities of unification. Professor John Doyle's research provides a much clearer picture of the potential initial costs. It shows that when we strip out the UK-specific costs, such as national debt interest, defence spending, including on nuclear weapons, and the cost of a global diplomatic service and when we properly count Northern Ireland's tax take, the real figure that would transfer to a united Ireland is about £1.5 billion or roughly €1.75 billion. That is a very different starting point. Professor Doyle

and his colleagues' model then adds the costs of levelling up public services. It includes €1 billion per year in extra spending for at least a decade to improve health, education, welfare and infrastructure. It includes a gradual equalisation of public sector wages, starting at €152 million per year. It includes a phased transfer of pension liabilities, rising by about €115 million per year over 40 years. When we put all of that together, the year 1 cost of unity is about €3 billion. It is certainly not an insignificant figure, but it is less than the 1% combined modified GNI of a united Ireland. More importantly, the same modelling shows that a united Ireland could break even within a number years. By year ten, depending on growth, the model suggests that unification will generate between €2.9 billion and €6.7 billion in annual surplus.

Unification presents distinct challenges that need to be carefully planned for and managed. The analysis done by Professor Doyle shows that the cost of pensions would be unlikely to transfer to a united Ireland straight away. Following Brexit, the UK and Ireland signed a bilateral convention on social security in 2019. This confirmed that pension costs would be shared based on the ratio of years worked in each jurisdiction. Ireland should only take over the liabilities accrued after unity. While there should be no cliff edge, this transition must be thoroughly planned to protect pensioners.

The North has also experienced decades of underinvestment. Levelling up will require sustained funding but it will also unlock future potential and prosperity. The UK allocates almost £1.6 billion in defence spending to Northern Ireland. Ireland spends less than that defending a much larger territory and has decades of underinvestment to catch up on. We need increased investment, particularly in systems and technologies, including sonar and air surveillance radar. Unification may also bring additional security challenges that will need to be planned for and funded appropriately. Even with these increases, we will not replicate the British model of defence spending.

These challenges should not blind us from the opportunities. Northern Ireland has underperformed economically for a century. It is the poorest region in the UK. Unification and the reintegration into the European Union present the people of the North with incredible economic opportunities. Tá sé fíor go bhfuil deis iontach againn. Tá dúshlán agus tá rioscaí ann, ach tá go leor le gnóthú. Níor cheart deifir a chur ar an aontú. Níor cheart moill a chur air ach an oiread. Sin é an fáth gur gá dúinn an comhrá a thosú anois. Sin é an fáth gur gá dúinn áireamh a dhéanamh ar dhaoine agus éisteacht le tuairimí difriúla.

Unification should never come down to simply a question of who pays. We should be asking what kind of future we want to build. We can build a future where prosperity is shared and communities and different traditions are respected. We need to begin planning for that future now.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: As this is my last speaking opportunity, I thank the Ceann Comhairle and everybody who sits in that Chair, and also the staff of the Oireachtas who make our jobs so possible and sometimes so pleasant. I thank the Government for facilitating this debate. Like others, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the fiscal implications of a united Ireland. This topic is probably the one that makes me feel most privileged to be a politician and a national representative at this moment in Ireland's history. The historic nature of these discussions should not be lost on any of us because it is such an opportunity. Over the next

couple of decades as we discuss these things and see the evolution of the debate and the reality outside of the debate, we will have opportunities presented to us.

As many have said already this afternoon, one of the ways that we best need to approach any discussions of the fiscal implications of a united Ireland is to reframe it away from cost and to opportunity, or at least balance better the discussions that we have around what a cost it might be to this jurisdiction to become one Ireland. We also need to look at the opportunities because they are many. It is not just the immediate economic opportunities that seem to be quite apparent in terms of two parts becoming greater than the sum of their parts in various of our economic sectors - I will get to a specific example of that in a moment - but it is the opportunity that is presented to us while we approach constitutional change on a broader basis. There are ways that we can see how our governance of this jurisdiction can be improved simply by the opportunities that will be presented by opening up constitutional change and the discussions that we are all going to have about how we govern ourselves right now and how we may govern an entire island of Ireland. That is a hugely important opportunity for us as a political force here in the Republic. We see it as an opportunity to promote social democracy as a governing methodology for a united Ireland. That is something that we will always be putting forward within this debate. It is also an opportunity for us to look at how we can improve the lives of everybody on this island, including all of the new communities that we now have within our population. That opportunity is something that is important.

The other word that is important to bring into any economic discussion and fiscal discussion around a united Ireland is "holistic" because, unfortunately at times, I see the Government looking at the economy as a discrete part of society and neglecting things that fall outside of economic discussion, economic imperatives, and policymaking. If we look at Brexit, for example, while I acknowledge the strong work of the Civil Service in the preparedness that it did for Brexit and appreciate that it was a positive thing, there was far too much focus on trade in Brexit discussions and Brexit preparedness. Unfortunately, there was not enough on rights and equality. That is something within my previous role that we did a lot of work on by looking at how the rights and equality implications of Brexit were going to play out. Unfortunately, those are still not entirely clear. Although the Windsor Framework did look to enshrine that policy of no diminution of rights and the non-divergence of rights on either side of the Border, that has not been clear in how it is going to play out. Unfortunately, that is where we might see issues around stability and peace coming under threat in the coming years. Looking at the economy through the lens of rights and equality is a helpful way to start talking about the fiscal implications of a united Ireland.

These figures that we talk about on a large scale have to be located in the lives of people, in particular those who live on the Border and those 30,000 who cross the Border daily. What is going to be different for their lives in a united Ireland? What is going to be different for the lives of everybody on this island?

I want to raise one specific sector. Within my portfolio, the culture sector is a good example of where we could see a much better offering in the joining together of the two economic activities. For example, we have a very vibrant production sector for film and television. It is an increasingly growing sector in Northern Ireland, with a lot of investment going into it at the moment. A total of £72 million is being invested in Studio Ulster, which is a recently established virtual production facility. Surely there is an economic loss in how there are very

few cross-Border offerings. There are very few ways in which both of those sectors work together to attract investment to the country. That is an example of where we can see the immediate economic benefit of working together.

I wish to finish in the words of one of those productions. In the final episode, Erin from "Derry Girls" said:

No matter how scary it is, we have to move on, and we have to grow up because things ... well, they might just change for the better. So we have to be brave. And if our dreams get broken along the way ... we have to make new ones from the pieces.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: As this is my final time speaking, I thank the Ceann Comhairle and all of the staff in the Oireachtas, including the ushers in particular who take such good care of us and everybody who makes this place work so well, for all that they have done. I hope that they get a good and well-deserved break.

It is possible, perhaps even hopeful, in my lifetime that we will see a united Ireland and the end of partition on this island. I sincerely hope that we do in a way that benefits all people of all communities, traditions and backgrounds.

We have a long way to go to achieve that vision and to achieve the vision of a republic of equals that we have not achieved here in Ireland. It is worthy that one of the starting points of that discussion will be the fiscal make-up of a united Ireland. In a united Ireland, the Six Counties' economic future should be a prosperous one, and in that it has to be properly supported and transformed. I hope we might be able to extend the economic model of the Republic in such a way that our prosperity is shared, with good jobs in multinationals and SMEs, a strong and balanced regional industrial strategy for the 21st century and entrepreneurial supports that underpin a strong indigenous economy. Ireland will have to lead the way in this, as it has not happened under either a Westminster Government or many Northern Ireland Executives. Financial arrangements will have to be agreed, as will trans-Border tax arrangements. Supply chains will have to be reimagined. In that vision, we will have to give people in the Twenty-six Counties and in the six the confidence that a united Ireland will work for all against poverty, unemployment and deprivation, and that we will challenge these scourges that are felt regardless of community or background, for poverty has no religion, unemployment no flag and exclusion no anthem.

The social protection system will have to play a key role in this and will have to lead with principle. It seems only proper that this new united social protection system would do the following from a principled way: establish a shared prosperity and proper social protection supports to underpin a properly functioning economy and society; ensure that no individual is worse off in a united Ireland than they were under partition; and ensure that no individual in identical socio-economic circumstances is treated substantively differently. It would stand to reason then that, particularly in respect of social insurance funds and pension schemes for individuals who contributed to such schemes during their working lives, these contributions would, at the very least, be recognised in a transitional financial arrangement between Ireland and Britain.

There are challenges in these principles, challenges of politics and reconciliation most of all, but there are practical considerations as well. The UK's universal credit system has had

very mixed results, at best, and has resulted in many receiving smaller social protection payments than they would receive in the Republic, sometimes by as much as 20% to 30%. Of course, the UK provides a universal healthcare system and we do not, and has other social supports, but it should not be lost on us that the challenge of merging these systems in a way that sustains livelihoods and the social floor through which no one should fall is a significant one. While the project of integrating these systems will be significant, it is imperative that we take the opportunities to create a better life for all, North and South, where people do not just survive but are given the means to thrive and contribute, and where a system of public services supports that.

The work on that must begin now and I welcome any person who shares this vision of an island where every person is valued not just as an economic unit, but with a socially inclusive place for each person.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome this debate. As I indicated during the discussions on Irish unity last week, we should always be open to discussing any possibilities for new constitutional arrangements or co-operation on this island or between these islands. At all stages, it is critical that the discussion be evidence based, fully transparent and honest. It cannot just be a discussion purely about the economy. It has to be about society more generally.

As the Tánaiste indicated at the start, what is important at all times during our discussion on these issues is that we look to uphold the principles of the Good Friday Agreement, arguably the real sign that politics does work. There is always the challenge that, when romantic idealism meets economic realism, there can be quite a shock. A lot of what we have been talking about here are the issues of fiscal transfers and the sums of money involved, but we need to have broader discussions. There are different economic models operating on both sides of the Border. I am particularly glad to be hearing some members of the Opposition praising so strongly the strength of the economy here in the South, which we do not always hear. When we talk about the approach to the economy that will operate in future on this island, particularly in terms of young people who are looking at what the constitutional arrangements will be, the economic model we will offer will be critical.

I said last week that German reunification was quite different because, at that time, there was much more of a desire among everybody in Germany to reunify. According to the evidence, the cost of unifying both sides since 1990 is estimated to have been about €2 trillion, yet we still have a situation where GDP *per capita* in east Germany is just 66% of that in the west. As I said, I do not want to concentrate too much on the figures, and the critical issues that were there as that economy grew and emerged were around social cohesion, cultural recognition and acceptance of institutional legitimacy. Those debates also have to be part of the discussion around the economy.

There are crucial differences in our economies. For instance, 15% of the entire workforce here in the South is employed in the public sector while the figure in the North is 30%. That is a quite different economic model and it is something we need to look at. I agree with Deputy Farrell when she says that what we have to consider is how this is about workers, young people and the opportunities we will present to them. There are good examples of work that is being done. I cite Tourism Ireland, for example, for its work to market the island of Ireland quite successfully. In terms of practical measures, we could increase its budget to allow it to do more

of that. When tourists come, they travel all over the island and do not tend to see the Border. There is a lot of good work being done in the shared island unit. I agree with Deputy Gibney when she talked about some of the cultural co-operation that was needed.

Critical to the development of any economy is human capital and I am very proud about the fact that, in the South, we have one of the highest rates of participation in further and higher education. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, on her leadership in expanding the apprenticeship offerings. However, the way in which the Executive in the North operates sees an inhibitory cap on the number of university places, which contributes to a brain drain from the North. We have long seen a tradition, particularly among those from unionist communities, of going to university, particularly in Scotland, and not returning. We have to look at how we invest in human capital well into the future. That is why some of the research initiatives under the shared island unit have been important.

When we talk about economics, it is about the economic vision we need to present in this country. For me and for young people on both sides of the Border, the vision has to be one of investing in education and research, continuing to be a pro-trade island, which is essential for the island, and being at the centre of the European Union. We need to talk about that far more. Brexit robbed people, not just in the North, but particularly young people, of so many opportunities. I have always been very proud of, and the parties on this side of the House have been consistent in our support of, the European Union and the opportunities it has presented for this island but the greatest advocate for how the European Union has been able to change this island was John Hume, who saw the potential of the EU not just to allow the island to grow economically, but also socially. The SDLP and the Alliance Party have been consistent in their support for the EU, but Sinn Féin needs to be much more clear. It needs to move away from that Eurocritical position it had. Sinn Féin was the only party that put up posters after the Brexit referendum. While I appreciate that she is not present, please bear in mind that, as recently as 2021, Mary Lou McDonald was sharing a platform with Nigel Farage about their vision for the European Union. In terms of our economic opportunities, we have to be right at the heart of the European Union.

I noticed that Deputy Bennett quoted Parnell. I was glad, as he would be a constituent of mine if he was alive today. One thing that needs to be remembered about Parnell is that he was pro business and pro trade.

Parnell owned quarries near Arklow, he had sawmills and he was involved in gold prospecting. He saw the economic potential of this island.

The other message we need to send out if we are to grow this economy is that we are pro-trade. Free and fair trade right throughout history is the greatest example of providing people with employment opportunities and lifting people out of poverty. One of the best examples of this is our being able to trade with Canada. We know the success of this relationship here in the South but Canada is Northern Ireland's fourth largest global export market after Ireland, the US and Germany in engineering, manufacturing, financial services and insurance. A message going out that is saying we are not going to support trade deals with Canada is not in the best interest of the young people of Northern Ireland.

I welcome this debate but it has to be grounded in realism. The difference is that we have to set out that the vision we have will be at the centre of the European Union and that it will be one of a trading nation working together.

Deputy Emer Currie: I wish to begin by recognising the substantial work undertaken by the Government-led shared island initiative, the ESRI, academics and opinion leaders. Without that work, we simply could not have a debate of this quality.

For anyone who genuinely wants to prepare for a united Ireland, a unified Ireland or a new and agreed Ireland - whatever terminology they prefer - this is the opportunity to move beyond rhetoric and into practical realities. People will not simply vote on history and identity; they will also weigh up the economic proposition before them, especially those we need to win a referendum.

Much of the economic debate has, understandably, focused on two questions. The first is harmonisation and differences in taxation, social welfare, healthcare, education, pensions and public services, which would have to be reconciled. The second is the fiscal transfer from Britain, what replaces that subvention and what this could mean for our public finances. Whether you agree more with Professors FitzGerald, Morganroth or Doyle, these debates are necessary. They quantify the challenge and help define the scale of decisions that would have to be made. Occasionally, we also discuss the one-off costs of the transition itself - the administrative, legal and institutional costs of constitutional change.

However, there is another side to this wider debate that receives far less attention, and that is the opportunity to build the strongest possible all-island economy; a market of more than 7 million people with strong ties to the UK, EU and international markets. This means designing this island for economic success, with stronger regional balance, strategic investment in infrastructure, better connectivity and full cross-Border growth, unlocking the potential of an integrated north-west region as one of our greatest opportunities for growth. It means recognising the economic synergies that exist across healthcare, education, transport and infrastructure, when they are planned on an all-island basis.

It is incredibly frustrating that so much of the wider debate presents Northern Ireland as a fiscal liability rather than for its economic potential. I also find it deeply frustrating that Northern Ireland has missed out on so many opportunities compared to the South. Many of the economic gaps that will likely be highlighted in the wider debate as barriers to unification - productivity, earnings, disposable income, tax revenue and educational attainment - are not as inevitable as some would like us to believe. Research suggests the scale of those gaps are shaped by policy choices, which can be changed.

The most striking report I read was Northern Ireland Productivity 2040, which identified areas where policy can make a difference, such as business performance, skills, institutions, health and well-being and investment in infrastructure. Most importantly, it argues these challenges are interconnected and require joined-up Government stable institutions and long-term decision-making.

As I said last week, Brexit is not good for anybody. However, Northern Ireland has outperformed many UK regions since Brexit, helped by the competitive advantage created through dual access to the UK and EU goods markets under the Windsor Framework. More

recent research suggests the productivity gap is narrowing. So much more could be done to avail of the opportunities and investment coming from dual market access. Economic outcomes are not fixed; policy matters and leadership matters.

People in Northern Ireland have the same ambition, ability and entrepreneurial spirit as anyone anywhere else on this island. If we are serious about building a vision for a new and agreed Ireland, then prioritising the closure of economic gaps should be every bit as important as debating the need for preparedness and deadlines. If you believe in a united Ireland, then making Northern Ireland more prosperous, a better place to live and a more attractive proposition for the people who are undecided about how they would vote in this referendum should not be a secondary objective; it should be central to achieving a united Ireland.

I wish to conclude by recalling that great economist of war, peace and reconstruction, J.M. Keynes, who said, "anything we can actually do, we can afford." He argued that national ambition should never be constrained by money. Yes, we need to work hard to quantify the costs of a united Ireland. The people who will ultimately decide on whether to unify deserve and demand that detail but cost must never be a barrier to opportunity or a break on ambition. I appeal to my colleagues again today, as I did last week, that we all must work together. Responsibility does not only lie with the Government of Ireland but also with anyone in a position of leadership to bring us closer to that vision we all want.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I welcome the debate today. Ireland has a proud history and tradition of myths and legends, from Cú Chulainn to Tír na nÓg to the Children of Lír, which have passed down through the generations. However, the latest myth and legend some people are telling is far more damaging. There are people who claim that we cannot afford Irish unity. They are using false data and made-up numbers to try to stop the unity of our Thirty-two Counties, saying it will cost billions upon billions. John FitzGerald wrote a paper on how Irish unity could cost €20 billion. I am not an economist but when I want to understand something, I go to experts like Professor John Doyle, who said the figures in that report were not just the worst case scenario but were also completely wrong. Professor Seamus McGuinness of the ESRI clearly stated that FitzGerald's hypotheses were based on a scenario that could never happen.

Do you know what that reminds me of? For years, when we talked about climate change, climate change deniers were rolled out to give their opinions, even though all the science was against them. Now, we have that happening here, where we know the data and the positive implications Irish unity could have but we are allowing false data to come in to skew the conversation. While I welcome the Tánaiste's comments earlier, he referenced that €20 billion at least twice in his contribution. We cannot allow false data and false information. The debate has to be honest and open but it also has to be fact- and data-based.

The truth is the Six Counties have been economically trapped and cannot reach their full potential under Britain. If these economies were to grow like Cork and Galway, they would be a net positive financial impact on Irish unity.

I hope the next generation of Irish children are raised on mythology of the salmon of knowledge and Fionn Mac Cumhail's trickery. I also hope they are not fed lies and misinformation. We cannot afford this to happen to our Ireland. We must submit that the British rule in the Six Counties has been negative on the people on the whole island of Ireland.

My brothers and sisters in the North who are listening today and are probably gutted after the vote in this Chamber last week are looking for their dreams and the vision of a united Ireland. I stand here in the shadow of Cork men and women who fought and died for Irish freedom. I think today of Mary MacSwiney, who went from her brother's deathbed to this Dáil. She was the true embodiment of a rebel. When we talk about the cost of Irish unity, Mary MacSwiney also spoke about the cost of Irish freedom in the Dáil. She said:

...when talking with my dying brother I asked him, was it worth the cost, and we decided it was, and one of the last things he ever said to me was, "Thank God there will be no more compromise now".

That was Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who died on hunger strike in Brixton Prison and was an Irish republican who believed in unity and uniting the whole island of Ireland.

The cost of Irish unity is unclear but we cannot use cost as a reason to abandon our brothers and sisters in the Six Counties. The difference that Irish unity could make is much more tangible for them now. Ireland unfree shall never be at peace. I want to send a message to all of those young people. The cost of unity is the cost of their future. It is the cost of the life they could build here. It is the cost of a border that divides this land, but our peoples will never be divided. Across hundreds of kilometres, across thousands of villages and towns, across mountains and motorways from Cork to Coleraine, we stand united. Onwards to the republic. Cost should never be put in front of Irish unity. We must debate it and be honest but, at the end of the day, it is important that all of us deliver the Irish unity that was in the Proclamation and that the people of Ireland want and deserve.

Deputy Ged Nash: I note Deputy Gould's emotive and emotional remarks and his tour of recent Irish history, but the focus of this debate and this society need to be on the present and on preparing for the future. I mean it most sincerely that there is an onus on us and a responsibility on all of us who believe that uniting Ireland is the best way in which we can serve the material interests of our people to ditch the sloganeering, be less reliant on the four green fieldisms and to have less of a focus on what I might describe as the Kneecapification of Irish history and to focus on a future in which we can all believe. We should also focus on the ways in which we can persuade those who do not agree with us to join us on that journey, because accommodations will need to be reached. Processes will need to be put in place by those of us who are serious about uniting this country, outside of the romantic vision of what our forefathers fought for and all of the rest of it. That work has to happen now. We have to prepare for it and we have to do it. Not only will it have to be led by Government, it will have to be supported by the Opposition as well, because if we cannot agree in this House on the way forward in a consensual fashion, how are we going to persuade those who disagree with us and have a right to disagree with us? That right to disagree with us is enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, which was agreed with the consent of all of the people, North and South, so we know the structure that is in place.

In recent years, I have detected a timidity at government level about how we advance the objectives that I want to see emerge and which are facilitated and catered for in the Good Friday Agreement on how we approach that challenge, ambition and aspiration that I validly have and on which, of course, many on this island disagree with us. Accommodations will have to be

reached with those who disagree with us, and we need to be honest and upfront about that. We also need to be prepared to say what those accommodations look like and how we can make them if it really is our objective to arrive at what I, Deputy Currie and others describe as a new Ireland, a different Ireland. It is not going to be the same and there will be accommodations that may be uncomfortable for some of us, but they will have to be arrived at. There will be fiscal and financial implications for this State in that transition. There is an obligation on us, insofar as we can, to properly interrogate and consider those implications and to be upfront about them.

While I do not want to reach too far back in Irish history, it is important that we have a considered look at the experience of Ireland in the past 30 years. The story has been one of significant economic and social divergence. It is an unpopular thing to say, and it is a contested space, but I hear lots of people, especially from Fianna Fáil, talking about how the transformation of the economy in the Republic of Ireland was down to the Good Friday Agreement in some way. That is a contested space. The transformation of the Irish economy was under way from the early 1990s. Did the Good Friday Agreement do it any harm? No, it did not, but let us not exaggerate its impact on the Irish economy. It is good and it had an impact, but was there a causal relationship? I am not so sure. The jury is out on that. However, is the Good Friday Agreement a good thing and good for our economy? Of course, it is. Did the guns fall silent in the North? Yes, they did, and that is a good thing and it allowed the economy in the North to develop, albeit at a different rate to our own. There are features of the economy in the North that need to be addressed and need our support and the support of the UK to be addressed.

With the notable exception of the crash years and the great recession, the story of the economy in the Republic of Ireland has been one of consistent growth, economic development and more or less full employment for a considerable period. However, it is a rich country that has a problem understanding that it is now sustainably rich. Those of us in opposition will, of course, say that this country needs to do better, and it can. Those problems are not problems of money and resources any more; they are problems to do with ideology, philosophy and different interpretations on how our economy should be run and how public services should be invested in. They are not challenges that cannot be overcome. They can be overcome, and, of course, I will say that they can be overcome if different political decisions are taken, but politics is capable of fixing this country.

I am often kind of alarmed, and I say this with the greatest of respect to my friends and colleagues in Sinn Féin, that there is a degree of partitionism in the way in which that party approaches this question. On the one hand, it is legitimate for an Opposition party to critique the economic model day in, day out. I do it myself all of the time, and we all know that Ireland can do better. However, at the same time, is that kind of critique helping to persuade those whom we need to persuade into a new Ireland? I am not so sure that it is. The arguments are different on both sides of the Border, and I make that point with the greatest of respect. That is perhaps a challenge for a party that is organised on both sides of the Border, and I understand that.

As we know, the North has deep, systemic problems. It is still a deeply divided region and polity and, while we have peace, we do not have reconciliation. There are those who are far too invested in fighting the war by other means, politically, and that is continuing to divide that

society. Call me old-fashioned, but I cling to the idea that every parent wants what is best for their children. Every grandparent wants what is best for their grandchildren. That includes continuing the development of the economy, providing good jobs and educational opportunities and so on.

The more we develop this State and resolve its problems, and the problems are manifold, the better chance we have of persuading those who do not agree with us at the moment to join us on this journey and persuading them of the merits of it. As I say, most people want what is best for their children, regardless of what their political affiliations might be, and those affiliations, by the way, need to be accommodated in the new Ireland. We are not good at describing what those accommodations will be or what that relationship with the UK will be, whether economically, socially, politically, culturally or otherwise. It is a relationship that will have to be maintained. It will look very different as we approach a new Ireland.

When looking at our preparedness, or lack thereof, Brexit is the single biggest warning from our recent history. We could very well end up with Nigel Farage having the keys of No. 10 and the prospect of a united Ireland by some kind of default coming down the tracks much quicker than we thought. We are not prepared. Nigel Farage and Reform UK could not give a monkey's toss about what some would describe as the Celtic fringe of these islands, and that is the reality. They do not understand history. They have not thought about it. They have not thought about the implications of their little Englander mentality. Brexit shows us the vulnerability and the risks of not being prepared, of not considering the impact of referendums, not considering what the question is, not considering transitional arrangements and costs and so on. That needs to be properly thought out but, to date, it has not been.

Of course, as others have said, this is a very contested space. We have had research carried out by the IIEA that says one thing, research carried out by Professor Doyle that says another thing, and the ESRI saying something entirely different. We have solid, important work being carried out on an ongoing basis by, for example, ARINS, and that work is socialised by *The Irish Times*, which gives it a platform to try to disseminate that really important information to be popularly consumed and interrogated. That is very important. I disagree with the leader of Sinn Féin, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald - I think Michelle O'Neill also said it some years ago - that this is something that is being discussed at kitchen tables across the country. I do not believe it is. However, it should be, and I hope it will be. We need more detail because people will naturally ask what the implications are for them.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne referred to the experience of uniting Germany. That was a very different prospect when the vast majority, if not all, of East German citizens wanted to become part of a united German polity. As we know, that is not the case on this island. We need to be careful about how we approach that.

The economic argument that we can make on this part of the island is a strong one, and should continue to be a strong one. In his opening contribution, the Tánaiste said that we need to look at both sides of the ledger when it comes to the financial and fiscal implications of a united Ireland. He is absolutely right. Those of us who represent constituencies like Louth see this every day, and my colleague, Deputy Ó Murchú, will undoubtedly speak about this as well. The impact of partition on places like Louth has been profound, but the impact of peace has been profound as well. We see this in practical terms, day in, day out, in the relationships developing between businesses on both sides of what is now, thankfully, a permeable and

invisible border. These are relationships that were always there, but they were damaged by partition. Chambers of commerce are working together closely in Drogheda, Dundalk and Newry. Local authorities are working closely in Louth, Newry, Mourne and so on. We have seen the development of the Narrow Water Bridge, which will open shortly - I walked by it only two or three weeks ago. That is a manifestation of what is possible. There is the development of the Enterprise network linking Dublin, Drogheda and Dundalk with Newry, Portadown, Belfast and so on. The frequency of those services is making a real impact. We know, for example, that the Dundalk Institute of Technology will transition to university status thanks to its relationship with Queen's University. In real life, in everyday terms, these relationships are forming anyway because they make sense, and they are continuing to form.

At the invitation of SDLP colleagues, I spoke at a meeting in Warrenpoint recently about the ways in which we can better develop cross-border health services. There are huge opportunities in the context of heart and stroke services, cancer services and so on, but those opportunities are not being developed in the way we or our constituents would like. There are barriers still, for a host of different reasons. There are obvious opportunities in a united Ireland on that side of the ledger. Yes, there will be costs, but there are opportunities in a remodelled economy. For example, a new Ireland would obtain a very different culture in the manufacturing space than we have had traditionally in some parts of this country, given the experience in Belfast and the concentration of some important industries in Belfast, Derry and elsewhere. There are economies of scale that we could develop for significant infrastructure development and, for example, we hope that the A5 would materialise in a way that we would like.

We have a major problem in this country with scaling up indigenous enterprises and ensuring that Irish companies can go global from here. I will share with the House one anecdote. During my spell from 2014 to 2016 as Minister of State with responsibility for enterprise, we tried to host a joint Enterprise Ireland-InterTradeIreland trade mission in the United Arab Emirates for a very significant health med-tech initiative. InterTradeIreland was on board and Enterprise Ireland was on board, but that exercise was being resisted by my counterpart at the time in the northern Executive, Arlene Foster. These are the challenges that we have.

That is why I circle back to this point. I cling to the idea that, surely, because of our economic performance, because of the potential of this part of the island and what we have done at a top line over the last few years, we can persuade people that unionist, loyalist and dissenter can do better in a new Ireland - that jobs will be better, that businesses can do better and that there will be a material difference to the lives of everybody. It is on that basis that we have to proceed. We need to be serious about that, and we need to be serious about the fiscal implications. While we are looking at the finances, we need to look at the costs but also the opportunities.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the debate and the contributions from all Members of the House, as well as the varying views. As Cathaoirleach of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, I believe this is exactly the type of debate and discussion that we should be having in this House. The agreement envisages that the people of this island may one day be asked to decide on their constitutional future. It is right that we prepare for that question seriously, honestly and well in advance. The Good Friday Agreement

rests on the principle of consent. Any change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland can only happen with the agreement of a majority of its people. That principle is settled. Our task is to make sure that if people are asked to decide, they can decide with full information.

That brings me to the fiscal implications. Members will have noticed that the estimates vary enormously. In 2025, researchers at Dublin City University and Ulster University published the first peer-reviewed study of the cost of unity over its first ten years. They put the cost in year one at approximately €3 billion. They found the deficit would decline gradually and end within approximately five to nine years, depending on growth. The Institute of International and European Affairs reached a very different conclusion in 2024. Professor John FitzGerald and Professor Edgar Morgenroth estimated a basic cost of close to €11 billion a year. If wages, welfare and pensions in the North were raised immediately to southern levels, their figure rose above €20 billion. Clearly, there is a very considerable gap between the two studies. The studies make different assumptions about pensions and the UK national debt, and very different assumptions about how quickly the Northern economy could grow and converge with our own.

That is the honest position. The true scale of the cost is yet unknown.

Anyone who claims certainty on the figure is not being straight with anybody. It would be a mistake for any of us in this House to pick the study that suits our argument and set the rest aside.

Some speakers have suggested that the money is not the first consideration, and I agree. Identity, belonging and reconciliation are matters of the heart as much as the national balance sheet. Voters from all traditions, however, will want to know where they stand before they go to the polls. That is not crude accounting; that is respect for the electorate. We should certainly do what we can now, and I am suggesting three things.

First, we should build an evidence base. Much reference has been made today to the shared island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, which has published extensive research on two economies, two labour markets, education, health and other areas.

The Department of Finance's 2024 paper *Shared Island, Shared Economy* sets out the facts plainly. Productivity in Northern Ireland is in line with that in our Border and midlands regions, well behind the economy as a whole. Public sector employment accounts for 33% of jobs in the North, against a much lower figure here. The North has a far higher share of people with no formal qualifications, and there are gaps in opportunities any future arrangement would have to address. There are also gaps that we can start closing now through greater co-operation and engagement.

Second, we should build prosperity in the meantime. The Government has announced €377 million in new shared island investment across 12 cross-Border projects. Some €193 million will upgrade the Dublin–Belfast–Derry rail lines between 2027 and 2030. A further €35 million will continue the hourly Dublin–Belfast Enterprise train service. That service doubled rail connectivity between our two largest cities and grew passenger numbers by 40% in its first year. There is also €33 million for a new water quality programme for Lough Neagh, €30 million to complete the Ulster Canal, and €13.5 million for early learning and childcare, including 1,000 upskilling places for early years educators. That is what practical co-operation looks like. It benefits communities North and South today, irrespective of the constitutional

future people choose tomorrow. It is important that we recognise the success of that co-operation today.

The third point is that we must keep asking the right questions. That is very important regarding pensions, debt, transition arrangements and the shape of any agreement with the UK. The assumptions that drive every estimate deserve rigorous independent scrutiny long before any referendum is called. I ask the Taoiseach and, indeed, the Minister for Finance to continue and expand the shared island research programme so the fiscal questions raised in this House today are answered with evidence rather than assertion.

The unity of the Irish people, achieved by consent and through reconciliation, is a founding aspiration of my party. We pursue it by building trust, deepening co-operation and delivering for communities on both sides of the Border.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome this debate this afternoon and am happy to be able to make a small contribution to it. I grew up in a Border town. I ended up in that town because my father was a trade union organiser who represented workers on both sides of the Border for a long number of years and, in fact, went on to be based in the North for a long time. At that time, we knew, and it is very apparent now, that the Border was a barrier to workers becoming organised. Partition has always served, and will always serve, the interests of elites and never ordinary people because it is ordinary people who have always had to pay the price of partition. When we talk about the fiscal implications, we need to see the advantages and discuss the advantages of ending partition.

I am fortunate enough to represent a constituency that is very firmly in the Dublin–Belfast economic corridor. Before partition, as we know, Belfast was a thriving industrial powerhouse. Partition put a lid on the potential of that city to grow and flourish. That potential needs to be unlocked even further for the benefit of our whole island. Likewise, cities like Derry must be allowed to reach their full potential, unhindered by the constraints of partition.

The Border is expensive. London does not care much for the North. When we hear the new Prime Minister talk about devolution, he very rarely, if ever, mentions the North because the North and the people in it have always been little more than an afterthought to the London establishment. When we talk about Irish unity, we should frame that discussion as one about potential for growth, the potential for all-Ireland working and all-Ireland business. Between Belfast and Dublin, there are five universities, numerous colleges of further education and training, and businesses that are ready to scale up.

The Dublin–Belfast economic corridor is 100 miles long and home to one third of the island's population. While there is a lot happening in terms of cross-Border working, there could be a lot more done. The implications of increasing this activity are absolutely positive. Growth, jobs, research and innovation all can and should be achieved within one jurisdiction.

As the debate on Irish unity advances, and it is advancing despite what some of the people opposite would like to happen, we need to frame that discussion in a positive way. We need to look clearly for those opportunities while acknowledging the challenges. We are not blind to the challenges. We know there are challenges but we also know that every single one of them represents a reason to end partition.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for all the flexibility she allows in this Chamber, and hopefully that will continue as we speak.

I welcome an awful lot of what Deputy Devlin said. I have often come in here and welcomed the work of the shared island unit, whether we were talking about the Narrow Water bridge or research on educational attainment and differentiation. That is all worthwhile. Every time I come in and have an interaction here, it is generally with Deputy Devlin's leader, the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin. He states explicitly that the shared island unit will not go anywhere next nor near questions on research or anything else as regards constitutional change on the island. It was hardly a shock to me and many others that he decided that the simplicity that was asked for by Sinn Féin last week, such that we would consider preparations for Irish unity, was not acceptable. Most people would see this as a possibility, even those who do not necessarily like the idea. Most politicians would say there is sense to planning. That is all we were looking for.

I welcome the debate to consider the fiscal realities and the implications of Irish unity. I was at an IBEC meeting earlier and one of the first things stated, following a question from Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh, related to an issue I have raised here many times, namely the implications for those working remotely cross-Border and the fact that, because of the tax systems that need to be created, it just does not work for employers or employees. We have a number of issues like that, including dealing with the common travel area and the impact on workers who cannot just travel from North to South at this point in time. We need to deal with those sorts of issues. However, we must be clear. Reference was made to the difference between Professor John FitzGerald's research and Professor John Doyle's. Obviously, we come down far more in favour of Professor Doyle's. In fairness, he dealt with the issue of pensions, which the Deputy spoke of. However, the fact is that we need to ensure this State does preparatory work on making these comparisons. Only the State can do it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Brian Stanley.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is not about external researchers; it is about getting this State to do it.

An Ceann Comhairle: When Deputy Ó Murchú flatters me, I should be very worried.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: For me, it will always be about delivering the Republic.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Stanley is on his feet.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Once again, I thank the Ceann Comhairle for her great flexibility and decency.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The debate today is hugely important. It is 29 years since the Good Friday Agreement and this is my 16th year in this House. I have been waiting each year patiently, hoping this debate would happen. I particularly welcome the constructive approach. I listened to every word the Tánaiste said. While I would disagree with him on many things

here at different times, I believe he approached the matter very constructively. His statements were very constructive and will contribute greatly. I hope this is the beginning of moving on the process.

The big argument of those who still support partition and have a partitionist mentality is that we cannot afford a united Ireland. As a left republican, I put the case that we cannot afford not to have national reunification. Various claims have been made by economists, some highlighting the economic logic of reunification and others exaggerating the cost, with the latter done mainly by ignoring the fundamental issues and facts.

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As an example of that, they ignored the economic damage caused by partition, particularly in Border areas. The previous speaker referred to the IBEC meeting this morning, which I was happy to attend. Its representatives gave us the example that firms in the Border region are now reluctant to hire workers from the other jurisdiction due to the difficulties with Revenue and tax compliance, etc. That is a real issue that IBEC is highlighting. That is just one more issue that is popping up.

Those who still argue for partition ignore the fact that in a reunified 32-county state, the pension liabilities of those workers in the Six Counties who accrued pension entitlements by paying into the British national insurance system and the British exchequer or employment pensions would receive that portion of their pension liability. It would not fall to a new government of Ireland but, rather, to the British exchequer into which they paid.

Currently, taxpayers in the North contribute to the cost of the British royal family. The relevant figure when last I looked was €137 million. I think that was the figure for last year. There is also the cost of Britain's massive diplomatic mission and its embassies across the world, not to mention its occupation of the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar and many other places. The cost is €2.6 billion for the diplomatic mission alone. There is also MI6 and the massive military machine and capacity, including the army, the navy and the Royal Air Force. I saw a figure of €60.2 billion for 2025 and 2026. That amount is due to rise sharply to meet its increased military capabilities. Proportionate or not, all of that is paid for by residents of the Six Counties. Taxpayers in the Six Counties have to carry part of the burden of Britain's ever-increasing national debt.

Of course, the fundamental points cannot be ignored. One of the key points is that Britain no longer has the benefits of empire. Its coal industry is gone. Revenue from North Sea oil has all but dried up. Britain's manufacturing base has gone south, including car-making. Those jobs have gone to the Third World and China. Those fundamentals cannot be ignored. Are supporters of partition really saying that we can continue on this small island with 14 different departments in each jurisdiction working back to back, often in competition with each other? Are they saying that having Twenty-six Counties in the EU and Six Counties out of it makes economic sense? Are they saying that having two revenue systems and two separate currencies on this small island of 7.3 million people is logical? The fact is that we need an all-Ireland economy that gives us economies of scale both to improve exports and enlarge the whole market. We need a single currency and a single revenue system that will benefit the Thirty-two Counties. Having the whole country in the European Union, which is not the case as a consequence of Brexit, would be of obvious benefit.

We need the North-South interconnector. We should drop all opposition to it. That needs to be built. Government departments working with singular focus in all areas, right across government, would bring efficiencies to public services.

Along with the strong economic case for reunification, there is also the political and social case, with opinion polls now showing an ever-increasing number of people in favour of reunification. There is an onus on the Government to begin planning and preparation work for reunification. There is no reason to delay this any further.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: It has been useful to have this series of debates about the possibility of unification and its implications for all parts of the island in the context of the discussion and debate of the Sinn Féin Green Paper last week and the debate we are having now. These dialogues are important as they allow us to discuss the real opportunities that unification can create. They allow us to also be honest about the challenges that will emerge from unification and to be realistic about the significant political distance that still has to be travelled before this becomes an immediate political question.

As a party that organises on an all-island basis, the Green Party is acutely aware of the economic and social challenges faced by the population of Northern Ireland. These challenges are magnified by the continued failure of the current political institutions in Northern Ireland to operate for the best interests of the people rather than achieving best political advantage for the parties.

We have to be conscious of the major capital investment that will be needed in a united Ireland to improve infrastructure across Northern Ireland. The region has lagged behind in infrastructure and development. We must recognise that a part of that was because a significant portion of the capital investment in Northern Ireland was purely on security infrastructure and not on the long-term infrastructural needs of the population. The approach to capital investment has to be supercharged.

A number of Deputies, particularly on the Government side, mentioned the shared island unit and the shared island fund. They absolutely have been important. Some boutique projects have been partly funded by the State and that is certainly something I welcome. We must recognise that those are just initial forays and are not of the scale that is needed. That scale remains huge.

Just one area where that is highlighted is the all-Ireland rail review, which was published approximately two years ago. That review shows the scale of investment needed in just one area. However, it also demonstrates the benefits that could emerge on an all-island basis if its recommendations were to be implemented.

I welcome the recent public publication of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill by the economy minister in the Executive. If it is enacted and implemented, it will allow more households in Northern Ireland to enjoy the benefit of cheaper renewable energy and also help the region to move towards achieving its emission reduction targets.

Infrastructural investment is also much needed in the context of housing. Some 32,000 households are currently experiencing homelessness in Northern Ireland. The housing crisis there has been exacerbated by the failures of the Executive to reach social housing targets and by too regular cuts in its housing budget.

Just as there is a major question regarding capital investment, a significant increase in current investment will be needed to deal with the many endemic social challenges that would be faced in the context of a united Ireland. Rates of poverty across Northern Ireland are significantly higher than the rates here, and that has resulting impacts on life expectancy and physical and mental health.

We know that Northern Ireland has not kept pace with the level of investment in education and skills that we have witnessed in the Republic. This has led to a significant divergence in skills and has left Northern Ireland in a position now whereby its productivity is similar to where it was as far back as 1998. A number of Deputies have already mentioned that in view of the high proportion of public service employment across Northern Ireland, the question of liability as to the pensions for former Northern Ireland civil servants is significant. These are men and women who served their working lives within the British civil service system but who, following unification, would be drawing their pensions in a united Ireland. The question of the funding of that will be extremely significant in any talks following a "Yes" vote on both parts of the island.

As the leader of the Green Party, I see our island as a common biosphere. The challenges to our environment and biodiversity and our need to achieve climate reduction targets are shared. I think of the work my colleagues in Green Party Northern Ireland are doing to highlight the devastating pollution of Lough Neagh, our island's largest lake, where algal blooms are causing lasting damage to biodiversity. Something similar is happening at Lady's Island Lake in Wexford. A number of steps are finally being taken, which I welcome. I, my colleague Senator Malcolm Noonan and others have raised that issue. This is just one example of the shared environmental and climate challenges across our island. Initial co-operation and, subsequently, all-island action can have real benefits.

I have touched on a very small number of the fiscal challenges and questions to which the possibility of unification would give rise. It is as valuable to discuss those issues as it is necessary to discuss the constitutional questions, because the question of unity goes beyond votes, parties and institutions. A united Ireland must be about raising living standards and providing equal opportunities for everybody across the island and doing that while protecting and enhancing the natural environment for everyone living on our island.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I welcome the opportunity to debate such a significant issue. It is helpful that this debate is being framed from a line Department perspective in that it has begun by looking at the fiscal implications of a united Ireland. It would be helpful if we also had a debate on the implications for education and health of a united Ireland. When the Tánaiste spoke earlier in his capacity as Minister for Finance and our party leader earlier, he began the debate by contemplating how we can be more constructive in relation to how we are going to deliver a united Ireland. He also did so at our commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Garret FitzGerald, who, of course, was instrumental in the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which was vociferously opposed by, I think, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and most unionists. With the passage of time, however, any fair and impartial observer would recognise that institutional benefit of ensuring that Ireland and the United Kingdom had a joint role in the affairs of Northern Ireland proved to be instrumental in all the subsequent peace agreements we ultimately arrived at. That kind of legacy and philosophy is important. We need to build on both if we are going to have a constructive debate on a united Ireland. The debate must be

built based on real pillars and actual things, including what the practical implications are across education, health and finance.

Of course, the aspiration for a united Ireland goes way beyond those issues. It is the foundation of our State. It is what I think most of us, if not every single person who has been elected to this House, believes in. We are sitting in this Chamber because of the sacrifices so many people made in the pursuit of a united Ireland. That has been the long-term aspiration of this State since its establishment and, I think, of every political party whose members have sat in this Chamber since that date. This is an emotive connection to our island that travels through all of us. It is something that is far greater than the practical implications.

If and when the moment arrives, pursuant to the Good Friday Agreement, that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland says it is time to have a referendum on unity, let us have our ducks in a row. Let us have a properly constructed debate. I say, in a non-partisan way, that it would be helpful if other political parties carried out an exercise similar to the one we are carrying out and if they presented different papers. Let us demonstrate to those in Northern Ireland that we do care about the community they believe in and that we believe in their aspirations for a united Ireland. Let us also demonstrate to those who are perhaps sceptical but not opposed to a united Ireland that down here we are thinking about it and about the implications it would have for their lives and livelihoods.

As the Tánaiste outlined, there are always going to be different costs if you assess these things on a static basis but he also highlighted the opportunity of the services we have in our economy, an all-island service economy and recognising the enormous benefits that could bring. He highlighted the euro, which is important. If we think back to the Scottish referendum, one of the biggest reasons it failed was because the Scottish people were not certain whether they were going to have the British pound or the euro. They were not certain of the sovereignty of the new Scotland and what relationship it would have with the British monarchy in future. They were not certain either about defence, which was perhaps an even more important issue for them than would be the case on this island. We can learn from the outcome of a debate that was on a knife-edge; a flip of a coin and Scotland would have been independent. Something else we know from that referendum is just how much it stirs people's interest in politics from a young age.

I have said I am a constitutional nationalist like every single person in this Chamber but every Irish person from a very young age up has a strong connection to this idea of unity and they want to see all their elected politicians within this State speaking to that aspiration. It is up to us to be able to demonstrate that this aspiration can bear fruit. We can demonstrate to an older generation that there is nothing to be fearful about when it comes to the implications relating to the cost involved, to health or to education. The only way we can do that is by having a constructive debate in this Chamber and by adopting the approach of having a line Department look at these issues. Obviously, none of that will be sufficient unless we can demonstrate to every community in Northern Ireland that the country will be an inclusive place, but we in Ireland have shown just how inclusive we can be. I am 41 years old. Thinking back, there is such a difference between Dublin city now and Dublin city 20 or 30 years ago, particularly when one considers that in that one in four of those who live in Dublin are not originally from Ireland. We have demonstrated that we are a much more inclusive city and a much more inclusive country and that the history that would perhaps have scared many of those

in the Protestant and unionist communities in Northern Ireland has been shed by people south of the Border. We do not have the burden of sectarianism and one particular church dominating our views and policies.

We have an awful lot to offer. We hold the Presidency of the European Union. There are an awful lot of young people in Northern Ireland and the Republic who see the opportunities offered by having direct membership of the European Union. It is true that as a result of the negotiations relating to Brexit, we did a lot to protect Northern Ireland's interests in terms of its relationship with Europe, but those people want to be part of the European Union. They feel Irish and they feel European. Many in the middle ground unionism recognise our affinity with Europe, and that would speak to them in a way that would be persuasive to their ideals. However, nobody can underestimate the challenges the State faces in persuading a population that is very sceptical that we would welcome them to this country and that we could provide a state that would function. What we can do right now - I think that is what the Tánaiste's contribution and these statements have commenced - is to talk to the people of this State and say to them that there are things that need to be contemplated at line Department level. We need to convince them that we are looking at what they fear and at the risks involved in order that we can be ready to talk to those to whom I refer. At the same time, we have to continue to engage by means of the shared island initiative and to keep building relationships at a community level in order to support everyone on this island.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I welcome the chance to speak about the fiscal impact of the long-overdue reunification of Ireland. I also welcome the Tánaiste's speech. It is a pity that more people in the House did not speak up in the same way.

For too long a false narrative has been published by those who oppose reunification. Whether in politics or the media, they have used their position of power to scare people off the idea but these are the same people who never cared about the people of the North or those in the Border communities that were forcibly divided. As a farmer, I look at the continued partition of this island and see the damage it is doing to our agricultural sector. Look at the spread of TB among herds. It is a disease that does not recognise artificial borders. Rates of TB in the North are far higher than in the South and many outbreaks in the South have been traced back to Northern herds. Farming families are put under immense pressure financially and mentally when they lose a herd to TB. That is heartbreaking. It makes no sense that on such a small, well-connected island we have two completely different systems trying to tackle the same problem. It is true that there is a joint project under way, but it is far too limited in the context of how it operates. We need a single, unified and all-island approach.

Partition also creates barriers for our agrifood sector and prevents the full potential of a unified economic zone.

It leads to higher costs and more bureaucracy for our farmers and producers and adds to the pressures they face. When we talk about a united Ireland, we need to be ambitious. We need to ask why the economy in the North lags behind that of the South and, more importantly, how we can fix that. There is no doubt that reunification will bring challenges, but it will also bring immense opportunities. It is time that we started focusing on those.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I welcome this debate. Such a debate has been needed for quite a long time. The reality is that for many people, the issue of the financial implications of Irish unity has been used as a put-down to try to smother or put a stop to argument and debate. This is a welcome way in which we can open that up. This debate is really about the opportunities that Irish unification would offer as opposed to the difficulties that might arise. There are opportunities, particularly in the agriculture sector, which I deal with most. I speak to farmers in the North all the time. They see the implications of unity. I meet them at the marts in the South when they are moving animals across the Border. All of those things have difficulties and constraints they should not have. Of course, we have the areas of natural constraint payments that most farmers on this side of the Border avail of. Unfortunately, those payments are no longer available in the North. Sinn Féin has recommended that the payments should be restored. Farmers need support. Brexit took their support away. Brexit took people north of the Border out of the European Union against their will. That placed a sharp focus on the prospect of reunification and what it could deliver for people.

Much has been said about the shared island unit, which has done some magnificent work. However, the Taoiseach explicitly stated from the start that this unit was not a vehicle for constitutional change. We need such a vehicle. We need a means by which we can have discussions like this. A debate here for a couple of hours is fine, but I remember being involved in some of the deep talks with people in the early days of the peace process. We sat in rooms and talked about reconciliation. I met Garret FitzGerald on many occasions at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. All sorts of people from across society, North and South, came together, not just for a couple of hours now and again but for days on end, to discuss the issues and go through the problems and difficulties that peace would entail. It was about a process. That is what we need to develop now, namely a process relating to reunification, as opposed to just having a debate on the odd occasion. This is why the Bill we put forward last week is so important. It is so disappointing that it did not attract support. I hope Government will reflect on that and recognise that we need to build a process. There is an energy for reunification among ordinary people the length and breadth of the country.

This is about the physical constraints, but is also about identity. Many people who live on this island have a British identity. If we are to have a free country, they have to be free to express that identity. We can all stand up for that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I am glad of the opportunity to speak on the issue of Irish unity. Aontú is one of the few parties in this House that is active North and South and that stands candidates in elections in every county. At this time, the poll figures indicate that we are moving in the right direction. Even our opponents on this issue are almost accepting the inevitability of a united Ireland. I feel an enormous privilege and responsibility as an elected member of this House at such a time in this nation's history when we are on the cusp of Irish unity. It is an extraordinary thing to say that the island will be united in the very near future. As a result, it is fundamentally important that we prepare for and discuss Irish unity.

It is important that those who oppose a united Ireland - who are now a minority on this island, and increasingly so - are treated as equals and with the respect they deserve in the discussions relating to a united Ireland. I have good friends from the Protestant tradition to whom I speak on a near daily basis. Despite our differing politics, it is really important that we remain open to communicating with people. The reason we are friends is because we debate

these issues. We do not ignore our differences. Rather, we celebrate and discuss them and challenge each other. One of my favourite quotes from the Good Friday Agreement is, "We acknowledge the substantial differences between our continuing, and equally legitimate, political aspirations."

Some people in this Chamber who are well-intentioned are getting it wrong. Rather than celebrating and respecting our differences and our right to be different politically or religiously, they wish to make us all the same. They want to make us all apolitical atheists who never speak on or campaign in respect of the issues. The move away from faith-based schools in the North towards integrated and secular education is upsetting to people on both sides of the divide. Both sides are ironically united in their fight to remain different. Protestants want to be Protestants and Catholics want to be Catholics. Unionists want to be unionists and republicans want to be republicans. The idea that we should all become the same is completely contrary to the Good Friday Agreement and the vision of John Hume, who said:

Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace — respect for diversity.

Aontú believes fundamentally in a united Ireland. During the Civil War, the pro-Treaty side said that the Treaty would create the freedom necessary to attain freedom. Those on the anti-Treaty side wanted freedom there and then and were sceptical that if it was not achieved in the 1920s, it never would be. No matter what side our political ancestors were on, the crux of it is that they would want us to strive for a united Ireland today. Liam Mellows once said that if Ireland was partitioned, two establishments would arise on each side of the Border and that they would depend on the Border for their power.

The Tánaiste once said that he wanted to make Ireland the best country in the world in which to raise a child. He is failing in that regard. We have a situation where we have record homelessness among children, spinal surgery waiting lists and children with special needs or disabilities who are waiting for supports. Many of the families of those children feel abandoned. If we make Ireland a better place in which to live, we will see a situation where those in the North who are currently undecided on the question of Irish unity will want to be part of this great country. In the event of a united Ireland, unionists in the North would actually have more influence and more of a say in their constituencies and in the running of their localities if they were sitting in the Dáil as opposed to in the British Parliament. They would make up a higher proportion of the membership of the Dáil than is the case at Westminster.

Aontú's leader, Deputy Peadar Kirby, during his time on the Oireachtas enterprise committee, completed the first Oireachtas report on the all-island economy. The basic finding of the report was that every public service on the island would be better served by a united Ireland. The North's economy is in very bad shape because London is not interested in it. The North is primed to take off economically. It would do so if the foreign direct investment strategy that obtains in the South also obtained there. The North has more labour available and more people seeking work. It has a lower costs for labour, property and energy than is the case in the South. If we were operating on an all-island basis, everyone would prosper economically.

I do not agree with the idea of a citizens' assembly because that is just kicking the can down the street. Éamon Ó Cuív famously said that we already have a citizens' assembly in this

country, namely, the Dáil, and this is where we should debate the issue. That is why we have elections. That is why we go to the people. I think we should take this opportunity.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I have been listening to this debate in my office since Deputy Currie started her contribution. I always follow these debates on Irish unity with interest as someone who wants to see a united Ireland by consent. I note that this discussion is focusing on the fiscal elements required to help make it a reality, but these considerations can never be looked at in isolation. During my brief contribution, I will focus on some of the other elements as well.

It is clear that the fiscal and social realities of a potential united Ireland require a lot of actual planning rather than political rhetoric. I would be loath to call a border poll right now because of the risks associated with that, but if a border poll did occur, the State would have to be prepared for the huge structural disruptions that would follow, so we have to start working now - that is why this debate is welcome - without arrogantly presuming it is going to become a reality any time soon, and especially without alienating those of a different background and viewpoint whom we need to bring on board.

We have had discussions about the economic modelling showing the different scenarios and, in some cases, this has been weaponised, depending on one's political outlook. We had the ESRI's €20 billion figure mentioned as the worst-case scenario. We also have other gaps that are much smaller, like a ten-year phased transition, reducing the net annual cost to between €2.5 billion and €3 billion. We then had the middle figure of about €11 billion. We actually do not know how much it is going to cost but we do know it is going to cost something. The debate is really about whether one wants a united Ireland or not, and if we do want a united Ireland, we must be prepared to put up with the cost because there are going to be economic benefits as well as social ones down the line.

The middle-ground figure of €11 billion quoted earlier is more likely a realistic figure, even allowing for the fact that things sometimes become a lot more expensive in this country. Any transition to a united Ireland will require a lot of structural mechanisms, as the Tánaiste said. For example, adopting a single currency, getting rid of the exchange rate volatility and the transaction costs for cross-Border businesses are all advantages. Full re-entry into the EU Single Market for services and removing the jurisdictional barriers are all advantages and allow State bodies to plan for infrastructure, higher education and skills delivery on an all-Ireland basis.

However, the non-financial obstacles are equally severe. There are two parallel administrative systems. There are the healthcare services that others have referenced. Obviously, people in Northern Ireland really like their National Health Service. Merging that with our health service in terms of Sláintecare will require a huge amount of money.

The other angles would be the democratic implications of a vote. As I have mentioned in the House before, if a border poll passes by 52% to 48%, the legal threshold of the Good Friday Agreement is met but the social consensus is not and moving 800,000 citizens into a new state against their explicit, democratic will does risk causing civil unrest. Civil war has been mentioned as an outlier risk but we are talking about localised political polarisation, most likely, stuff that would actually stop a united Ireland from being as viable as it could be. Data from the Analysing and Researching Ireland North and South project confirms fears that loyalist

paramilitary violence and instability could remain a deterrent to people voting for a united Ireland.

To mitigate those risks we need a lot of constitutional and institutional accommodation, necessary measures that people might have to swallow. Some have been mentioned in this House, such as a devolved regional assembly in Stormont to preserve local governance for the unionist community, a shared bill of rights protecting the dual Irish-British citizenship, and re-evaluating our relationship with the Commonwealth. Also, our symbols like the flag and the national anthem are things we hold very dear here, but we are going to have to take those risks and be as accommodating as possible. I hope it comes as soon as it is feasibly possible.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the opportunity to contribute briefly on this debate. I was listening to some of it. I echo some of the comments made by Deputy Gogarty about the provocative nature of some of the matters that he raised and the wide range of issues we would need to consider. We do not talk about the North in this House enough. I have been here ten years and it seems to me that we are only really beginning to have a discussion about it.

There is nothing for us to be afraid of once we have open minds, open hearts and are respectful to the stance that everyone else takes in this House. If we were to agree on something, it would be that we all want to live on an island that every single person on the island can call "home". If we were to start from there, it would be as good a starting point as any. However, it would also give a real indication of the challenges that lie ahead of us in order to make that feeling of home for everybody who lives on the island a real possibility.

That means there is a huge amount of work to be done. The shared island project is a clear example of the kind of work that can be done, dealing with tangible projects being delivered in a non-threatening way, either reinforcing historical, infrastructural connections that used to exist but were broken and re-establishing them or creating synergies on the island, and trust, dialogue and research in relation to specific projects.

However, we can be braver than that. I look at the things that partition robbed us of. We can outline a lot of them but I am thinking of how we had a natural federal system on this island with four provinces. It lends itself to a very natural system of federal government where there is a capital in each province determining - not ruling, but representing everybody in those provinces - and maybe a central government made up of representatives of those four provinces. Partition robbed us of that natural four-province political framework on the island.

Even if we were to start there and re-establish four provinces, we could see the concessions that would need to be made. We could say that Belfast was the natural capital of the province of Ulster. It would require concessions on the part of the three counties of Ulster that remain in the Republic. It would require concessions on the part of the Six Counties that are in Northern Ireland to incorporate the other three counties into the administrative system. I do not want to name what might be the capital cities of the other provinces because that could get me into an awful lot of trouble.

Deputy Mark Ward: Dublin.

Deputy John Lahart: That simple structure in Ireland of four provinces offered and offers a very simple federal system that could be taken going forward, and then we would decide where central government is organised from. It would clearly have to have a Belfast dimension as well as a Dublin dimension.

I do not think one-upmanship in the House assists this because we all have ideas and they are all valid. I do not think there is any one Member or party that is the exclusive carrier of the flame or the ambition for unity.

In the foreign affairs committee, which I chair, we often meet diplomats from other countries and when we talk about this country I often describe it as an unfinished story. In the current debate, when we talk about security, defence and how Ireland is going to approach this, I always say Ireland is having a conversation about this for the first time. Nobody needs to pressurise us about this; we will make our decisions about it ourselves in a mature way. In the context of the Thirty-two Counties, we often do not remember that six counties of the country are essentially in NATO, for example. Deputy Gogarty referred to those kinds of conversations. They cannot just be one-way conversations. They are real conversations that have to be had. They lead me to the conclusion that the difficult considerations are not around how much it would cost but they will be about the give and take.

For example, let us say, hypothetically, that unionism would agree to a united Ireland if the Republic joined NATO. What kind of reaction would that receive? What kind of reaction would it receive on the opposite side of the House or this side of the House? As Deputy Gogarty asked - and I am not outlining a personal position on this - what if we said the price of a united Ireland was rejoining the Commonwealth? What would be the reaction to that? I am not suggesting we rejoin the Commonwealth but I think it is realistic to suggest that it might be a unionist part of the conversation we would have to have down the road.

We had a very interesting presentation by IBEC. Some of my colleagues across the floor were with us this morning when IBEC presented some of the real practical challenges that partition causes, particularly for people who work on the Border. There are real tax implications if they live in the Republic and work in the North, or if they live in the North and work in the Republic. We have not actually established some kind of common area or system that enables people to do that and it is actually hindering economic development and progress. IBEC has said that. I agree with Deputy Lawless as well, and this is not an attack on anybody's position. This is the citizens' assembly and I think we should trust ourselves to debate this as we are doing now, in a respectful way.

In regard to one of the things we can do as well, economically, so many people in the Republic have not been to the Six Counties. I think that is a real piece of work we need to continuously work on. I know we have the all-island tourist body and it has done phenomenal pieces. I am not the world's best traveller to the Six Counties but in the past two years, I have been up there at GAA matches following Dublin and Derry. I am thrilled to say I went to see the Heaney homeplace in Bellaghy. I have not been this year and I think it ought to be on our agenda to visit and to get to know it. It was difficult for us to do it in times gone past.

I want to say this as a Fianna Fáil politician. As someone who joined the party as a young man, one of the things that motivated me was that I wanted to see our country united. I still want to see our country united. I have learned, I think. I have listened, read and continue to

listen. I remember sitting in the back seat of my parents' car as we crossed the Border for the first time, a British soldier talking to my father, seeing his gun and having an awful gut feeling about the idea that a British soldier would be stopping my father's car. I was from Dublin. I had no experience of what it was like to have occupying forces on my doorstep but I know it was a gut feeling. I also know that now I have travelled a long distance, it does not mean the notion of uniting the country has become diluted for me. I hope, however, that I recognise - if I come back to the point I started with - that if we want to create a place that everybody on the island can call home, then there needs to be a much more sophisticated conversation than maybe we have been used to.

The Government could do an awful lot more to lead on this. That is not a criticism; it is just an exhortation to say it needs to trust people, and to trust the people of the Republic to be able to have and cope with a sensitive conversation about sensitive issues. The sooner that conversation starts - here is a good place to kick it off - the sooner we discover the things that are on people's minds when it comes to a discussion about either uniting the people, uniting the territory, or creating a place all of us can call home.

Deputy Mark Ward: Last week, the Dáil debated Irish unity during Opposition time and today, the conversation continues on Government time. This is a welcome and positive step.

The conversation about our constitutional future is moving forward and it is right that the Government begins the serious work of planning for constitutional change now. Across Ireland, more and more people are engaging in this discussion and asking what a united Ireland could mean for their families, communities and future generations. The national conversation is well under way and it is important that it is informed, inclusive and focused on the opportunities that lie ahead.

I welcome the fact that the Government is recognising this by scheduling this debate on the economics of Irish unity today. However, last week, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents failed in their duty and their constitutional obligations to make preparations for unity. The debacle arising from Brexit is all the evidence you need to plan for the future. Fail to prepare and prepare to fail.

In fairness, the biggest question I get when we discuss Irish unity is around how we are going to afford it. It is a genuine concern for the ordinary people I have conversations with on this island. It is based on the British subvention and the figures that are being bandied about. The figures frequently quoted as representing the British Government's annual subvention to the North is a British accounting exercise. For the purpose of this debate, any figures I reference will be in euro.

The total subvention includes central British Government costs allocated to the North that would not be relevant to a united Ireland and here is why. The subvention from the British Exchequer to the North was €16 billion in 2023. Recent analysis shows that the true deficit that would transfer to a united Ireland is approximately €1.7 billion. To put that in context, that is about 13% of the Apple tax money. The 2027 budget in the South will be over €125 billion, so the cost to the Irish State will only be 1.4% of the overall budget.

The single biggest factor of the British subvention to the North is pensions, which is around €6.8 billion. The cost of pensions is unlikely to transfer to a new Ireland. Many people living

in Ireland already receive British pensions because they have worked in Britain and now they live here.

The second largest part of the subvention is the €4.1 billion that relates to public debt. Ireland would have no legal liability to pay any part of this. The cost of defence and international relations is approximately €2.7 billion and almost none of this expenditure relates to activity taking place in the North. This expenditure would not be carried over into a new Irish State. Taxes that are raised in the North would also now revert to a united Ireland. This includes taxes that are currently collected by Westminster, which would be used for the benefit of everybody on this island.

What is often overlooked are the economic benefits of a united Ireland. An all-island, all-Ireland economy would have huge benefits and would allow our nations to thrive once we remove the shackles of partition. Partition has failed everybody on this island. It has not allowed us, as a nation, to reach our full potential.

I also think it is important that we take the current financial situation in the North seriously. It is always disappointing when Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael use the North as a stick to beat Sinn Féin. Even the Labour Party used this tactic this week. The Six Counties have been held back from reaching their full potential because they have not seen the necessary investment.

Westminster holds the purse strings. The devolved institutions can only work with the budget that the British Government allocates to them, yet Sinn Féin as the lead party in the Assembly is working tirelessly to deliver for all the communities in the North. That does not stop Micheál Martin or Simon Harris from bringing in clippings or printouts and standing up in the Dáil with a big "gotcha" moment. That is beneath them. The people of the North deserve more respect than that.

My colleagues in the Assembly would love to have the huge surpluses that the Government in the South has in every budget but they spend every single penny on the people in the North. If Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael want to criticise us, our tactics and what we do up in the North, I suggest that they run candidates in the elections there next year.

Teachtaireachtaí ón Seanad - Messages from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Health (Provision of Contraception Prescribing Service in Retail Pharmacy Businesses) Bill 2026, without amendment.

Seanad Éireann has passed the Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026, without amendment.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: 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:

Deputies Ciarán Ahern, Seán Crowe, Paul Murphy, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, James Geoghegan and John Lahart - to discuss the feasibility of continuing MetroLink from the city to south-west Dublin.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - to discuss the proposed new Garda station at Northern Cross.

Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss regulations to provide that only those over 16 years of age can use e-scooters and e-bikes.

Deputy Martin Daly - to discuss childcare provision in Boyle, County Roscommon.

Deputy Emer Currie - to discuss a school building project in Dublin 7.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara - to discuss the establishment of a sexual assault treatment union, SATU, in the HSE Mid West region.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - to discuss the need for the development of Bunclody Community College, County Wexford.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - to discuss the use of periodic payment orders in the courts.

Deputy Rory Hearne - to discuss the cessation of the financial contribution scheme in Dublin North-West.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss a potential State purchase of the Bessborough site in Blackrock, Cork city.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - to discuss the need for a 24-hour rapid response vehicle at Tuam ambulance base.

Deputy Duncan Smith - to discuss the need for upgraded infrastructure in the Swords area.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman - to discuss the recording, measuring and prevention of heat-related deaths.

Deputies Gary Gannon and Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss issues being created in the court system by the new legal aid model.

The matters raised by Deputies Ciarán Ahern, Seán Crowe, Paul Murphy, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, James Geoghegan, John Lahart, Emer Currie, Malcolm Byrne, Duncan Smith and Brian Stanley have been selected for discussion.

Fiscal Implications of a United Ireland: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I welcome the opportunity to contribute on this debate on the financial implications of Irish unity. It is fair to say that it is an important discussion and one that deserves to be approached with seriousness, honesty and respect. Having listened to the majority of the debate, I do not think I heard one voice in favour of partition even though there may be differences of opinion about how we achieve a united Ireland. As Deputy Lahart quite rightly said, I do not believe one-upmanship is going to achieve anything.

As a member of Fianna Fáil, I am proud to stand in a republican tradition that has always believed in the unity of our people and our island. Our approach has always been grounded in pragmatism and building step by step the conditions that make progress real, sustainable and inclusive. If unity is to mean anything, it must work for all the people on the island. It must work economically, socially and politically.

Quite often, personal experience influences our views and our perceptions of life. My maternal grandfather fought in the First World War and were it not for the pension paid into that house, my mother would not have had the quality of life that she enjoyed. My mother was shaped by the experience and always had a deeply positive view of the UK. That being said, I was raised in a house where Fianna Fáil was consistently supported. We are a party in our 100th year and have played a central role in some of formative issues of our time such as our Constitution, our entry into the EU, the role of Albert Reynolds in the Downing Street Declaration and the Good Friday Agreement, something we were fully committed to realising the full potential of.

However, I am also very mindful that personal experience works both ways, and while our view in our house was shaped positively, that is not the case for many people who grew up around checkpoints, internment, brutality and collusion, so we should approach this debate conscious of the many traditions that exist on this island and the fear on both sides of the divide that some of those traditions could be eroded as we look to unity. Only last weekend, I had the honour of representing the Taoiseach at the commemoration of those who had lost their lives at the Battle of the Somme. The presence of the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland was a very positive development. I understand that it was the first time she was present in Dublin for that commemoration. The commemoration reminded me that nationalists and unionists fought side by side in several conflicts. That shared history matters and must shape how we think about our shared future.

If there is one principle we must be clear on, it is that unity cannot be built on numbers alone. It cannot be simply about the outcome of a referendum or a financial principle. It must be built on consent, reassurance and trust. In particular, trust among those in the unionist community will not be secured through slogans. It can be secured through reassurance, actions and compromise. Deputy Lahart indicated some of the compromises that may need to be considered.

From a financial perspective, we need to look for clarity. Some fundamental questions need to be addressed. What would happen to public services? How would taxation be structured? What would pensions look like? How would we ensure economic stability during any transition? The results vary depending on which report one looks at. DCU and Ulster University talked about a cost of €3 billion per annum to the Irish State. In 2024, the Institute of International and European Affairs presented a much more pessimistic outlook and talked about €20 billion. In 2024, my own Department spoke about a deficit of £7 billion. While many will view these as barriers so as to delay and misinform, we need to realise that our island has overcome its fair share of barriers in the past and we have the capacity to overcome any barriers in the future. What we should be looking at are the opportunities that a united Ireland presents. The Tánaiste outlined some of them in his contribution.

In my role as Minister of State in the Department of Finance, I recently had a courtesy engagement with the Minister of Finance in Northern Ireland. While unity was not the subject

of the meeting, what it did show was that there was real scope for practical co-operation and working together in ways that could build trust, potentially align systems and improve outcomes for people across this island. One such area we looked at was a potential all-Ireland trade mission in relation to financial services. We also looked at a joint initiative in relation to financial literacy for the benefit of both sides of the Border. That kind of steady, practical collaboration is not a distraction from the bigger question. Rather, it is how we prepare for it.

This preparation is not new. The Taoiseach's shared island initiative, which looks to bring communities together and break down those barriers, has been highly influential and positive. It has laid the groundwork that will be vital as we embrace this discussion and as the discussion evolves. It is the largest ever programme of all-island investment and co-operation with all traditions of our island.

If we are serious about unity - I believe we all are - we must be equally serious about preparation. That includes asking the difficult but necessary questions, including about the role of the UK in supporting any transition, whether financial contributions over a defined period would form part of any agreement and how the EU could be involved from a geographical enlargement perspective. While these are complex matters, avoiding does not make them go away.

If unity is to be credible, it must be planned and properly resourced. Today's debate is welcome in that regard.

5 o'clock

It must be about protecting living standards and supporting enterprise and investment and it must ensure no community, North or South, feels left behind. We must also raise the level of financial literacy on this issue. People deserve to know and understand not just the aspiration but the implication for their livelihoods, public services and future.

Transparency is something I have tried to foster during my term as Minister of State in the Department of Finance. People expect it and are savvy enough to find it themselves. We cannot operate in a silo; we need to be open and engaged across the entire spectrum of this issue. There is an old saying, and I heard it mentioned earlier today, fail to prepare, prepare to fail. If unity is to succeed it will not be because certain people demanded it but it will be because it was prepared for in a careful, responsible, and inclusive manner, in a way that respects all traditions on this island, builds trust and ensures the right economic foundations are laid and strong enough to sustain it.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes statements on the fiscal implications of a united Ireland. This was a very interesting, cohesive debate.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Public Transport

An Ceann Comhairle: The format is that the first four Deputies will take a minute each. The Minister of State has four minutes to respond. We will then take another Deputy and the Minister of State can respond to them.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: What we are asking for today is simply that the Government lives up to the commitment made in the programme for Government to carry out a new, independent feasibility study for an extension of the MetroLink from where it is currently due to end in Charlemont, out to Dublin south west. I raised this with the Minister for Transport a few weeks ago, and he advised that the study would be carried out but would be done as part of a review of the greater Dublin area transport strategy. While it is welcome to know the study will take place, what we need to know is that it will be an independent study.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, carried out a feasibility study a number of years ago but it was deeply flawed. It examined quite a nonsensical route that finished abruptly in Knocklyon, and therefore it significantly underestimated the cost benefit of the project. From a common sense perspective, it would seem to us to make most sense for the route to carry on all the way to Tallaght to connect with the Luas line, Technological University Dublin, TUD, the Square and the hospital. We ask that the commitment in the programme for Government is delivered.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Tallaght and the wider south-west Dublin region have been among the fastest growing parts of the State for decades, yet transport investment has consistently failed to keep pace with the growth. Thousands of new homes planned and a rising population place even greater pressure on our roads and public transport networks. MetroLink south west cannot be treated as a project for the 2040s or beyond. We need a feasibility study as a matter of urgency in order that real consideration and planning can begin. It must be planned and delivered as a national priority. Our communities need a modern high-capacity public transport system that connects people to jobs, education and healthcare. Delivering MetroLink south west will reduce congestion, support sustainable housing developments and help meet our climate commitments. The south-west Dublin has waited long enough. Tallaght and the surrounding communities deserve the same ambition and investment as other parts of our capital and that work must begin now.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The case for MetroLink south west is extremely strong. There are 350,000 people living between the Luas red and green lines. That is who will be served by this. What we are asking for is for the Government to live up to the commitment in the programme for Government to "[c]ommission an independent feasibility study into continuing MetroLink from the city to southwest Dublin." What appears to be happening from information from parliamentary questions and written correspondence is that is being rode back on. It has now turned into part of this being examined as part of a broader strategic review process by the NTA. In other words, it is just part of a regular, six-yearly review process. Getting the NTA to do it is not independent and it is not a feasibility study. It is there in black and white in the programme for Government and the Government needs to live up to its commitment to do a new, properly independent feasibility study. I appeal to the Minister of State to ask the Minister for Transport to meet with the metro south west group which has been doing such excellent campaigning on this issue.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: In a reply to a parliamentary question on MetroLink in April of this year, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, again stated his belief that the MetroLink terminus can facilitate any potential future MetroLink expansion to serve the south west, south or south east of Dublin should sufficient demand develop. That demand is already there. It is expanding to such an extent that the roads are clogged up and every bus is full. Now is the time, before any shovel or tunnel boring machine goes into the ground, to change tack to look ensuring we go beyond the Charlemont terminus. To continue this is foolish, bizarre and would delay addressing the public transport needs of the constituency and of this city. Will the Minister of State ensure that before any tunnel boring machine goes into the ground there is a change? A change needs to happen now.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): On behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, I thank the Deputies for the opportunity to address this issue in the House today. As a number of Deputies have alluded to, the programme for Government commits to commissioning an independent feasibility study, continuing MetroLink from the city to south-west Dublin. The Government is committed to undertaking an independent feasibility study for a metro to south-west Dublin. For those reading my script, that is in my final response. However, given that a number of Deputies already raised this, I wanted to clarify it before other Deputies came back in.

Providing an integrated transport network that lets people travel conveniently and efficiently across Dublin is essential as we encourage greater use of public transport. For this reason, we plan and develop public transport in line with the greater Dublin area transport strategy 2022-2042, rather than in isolation, to maximise the use and benefits of each proposal and project. The NTA has statutory responsibility for the transport strategy and must review it every six years, meaning that the next review is due to be concluded by 2028. As part of this review, the NTA will reassess the need for additional metro lines, among other transport options, in the greater Dublin area.

This review will consider updated travel demand forecasts as well as changes in land use and spatial planning policies. This background analytical work is expected to commence over the next year. The feasibility study for a metro to south-west Dublin will be undertaken as part of this broader strategic review process. The Deputies will, I hope, understand that this approach will help ensure that it is considered in an integrated and holistic manner, alongside wider transport and spatial planning objectives for the greater Dublin area.

An Coimisiún Pleanála published its decision to grant the MetroLink Railway Order in October 2025, and a subsequent potential legal challenge was withdrawn following successful mediation by Transport Infrastructure Ireland.

This means that MetroLink secured an operative railway order, or full planning permission, in January. MetroLink is now progressing at pace towards procurement and construction. With this key milestone achieved, attention is turning to the preparation of the review of the strategy.

As I mentioned, any consideration of new transport projects will not happen in isolation. The upcoming review of the strategy will ensure that proposals complement projects already under way, including BusConnects. As the Deputies are aware, BusConnects Dublin is a transformative programme of investment in the bus system across Dublin through the roll-out

of new routes and the construction of core bus corridors. BusConnects will continue to provide benefits for public transport users across Dublin city and its suburbs, including south-west Dublin. In addition, we must recognise that MetroLink's design and alignment, including terminating at Charlemont in the south of Dublin city centre, will facilitate the seamless integration between MetroLink and any potential new metro line to the south or south west. With MetroLink due to enter construction in the coming years, we will have for the first time the people, skills and knowledge to build and operate metros.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I will continue afterwards.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Lahart is on his own, so he can take the two minutes for his other colleague also.

Deputy John Lahart: I will be fair to my colleagues. I welcome the very positive news the Minister of State announced to the effect that the Government is positively committing itself to the consideration of the feasibility study we, as representatives of the various constituencies, are requesting. This is one of the most significant investments in transport in the history of the State, but, for too long, communities in my constituency have watched major transport projects stop short of where growth is happening. We live in a country that was better connected by rail 100 years ago than it is today.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The Deputy does not have to tell me that.

Deputy John Lahart: It is truly remarkable that in 1888, one could board a tram in the city and travel all the way to Blessington via Rathfarnham and Templeogue, yet in 2026, we are still arguing for but have now moved much closer to an independent feasibility study to bring modern rail infrastructure to our constituency.

The Minister of State will agree that the best time to build a metro in Dublin was 20 years ago. The second best time is right now. The Government must not make the people in Dublin South-West wait another 20 years to make a decision on this. Her news today is a very positive and welcome step towards making that a reality.

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate that.

Deputy Marian Harkin: As somebody who comes from the west - I did not write this script - I can assure the Deputy that I know what he is talking about when he says that the system was better 100 years ago than it is now. My purpose here today is not to labour that point, it is to answer his questions. Again, on behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank the Deputies for their comments and for their interest in this important issue. As I have already stated - I will reiterate it - the Government is committed to undertaking an independent feasibility study for a metro to south-west Dublin. Furthermore, the Government recognises the transformational potential of metros, as we will see in the north of Dublin with MetroLink. We recognise that a metro to the south west may offer similar transformational potential.

This year has been significant for MetroLink and the country progressing towards building its first metro line. We have seen significant market engagement and preparations for detailed procurement and the launch of contracts to do the groundwork and enable major construction. MetroLink will be built and will open up opportunities for Ireland, including the expansion and development of a new metro network. As already stated, the potential extension of the new metro line or, indeed, the broader public transport network is not done in isolation. The review of the current greater Dublin area transport strategy will be central to ensuring joined-up thinking and robust planning. This comprehensive approach to planning our public transport network will maximise the opportunities for network integration and the benefits to be gained from expansion in order that we can get the most out of our public transport network. It will also ensure that future proposals complement projects already under way, including Bus Connects, as I have mentioned, and the DART+ and Luas projects that will enter construction in the coming years.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Emer Currie: I want to raise the urgent need to progress the long-awaited school building project for St. John Bosco Junior Boys National School, St. John Bosco Senior Boys National School and Mary, Help of Christians Girls' National School on the Navan Road. These schools have served generations of families in communities on the Navan Road and in Ashtown with distinction, but the reality is that the school buildings have reached the end of their life. Parents, teachers, staff members and past pupils all say the same thing whenever I speak to them. These buildings are outdated, deteriorating and no longer provide the modern learning environment that their children and staff deserve.

These are three distinct schools, but they share a common vision. Rather than simply replacing the existing buildings, they have come together with an ambitious proposal to create one educational campus on the existing site. This project has the potential to be one of the most significant primary school developments in the State. However, the project has been stalled at stage 2a since 2024. It now needs real momentum because this is about more than bricks and mortar.

Through my engagement with families across Dublin 7 and into Dublin 15, I know that many parents feel they have too few options when it comes to choosing schools. This is an area where single-sex provision dominates and many families have gone without the suitable option of co-educational schooling. This is not just my opinion; the Department's recent primary school survey confirms it. The survey looked at educational provision through co-education and through multid denominational provision and through the medium of Irish. Some 73% of parents who responded across these three schools supported co-educational provision across Cabra, Phibsborough and Dublin 7, which is their school planning area. Support rose to almost 89% among households with children currently in primary school. The results are striking. In Mary, Help of Christians, 96 out of 140 respondents supported co-education. In St. John Bosco Senior Boys National School, it was 100 out of 131, which is 76%. In the junior national school, 46 out of 60 or 77% supported co-education.

Following the publication of the survey results, I understand that the Department intends to engage with boards of management to discuss the findings and consider the future configuration of schools. I also understand that boards of management have been asked to

engage with parents, staff, patrons and the wider community, and to notify the patron and the Department by the end of October as to whether they want to put these results into action. Engagement is welcome. I understand that if about 50% of the school population participated in the survey, schools may want to engage further to bring the whole school community with them. This gives them the timeline to do that.

We have a real opportunity here. There is an appetite for change. That is not just clear in the survey but when I speak to families at their doors, which we are privileged to be able to do when we are canvassing. I have two questions. First, what practical supports will the Department provide to schools that decide they wish to move towards co-educational provision while remaining on the existing campus where they have three separate schools? Is the Department working to a timeline? Second, could the Minister of State assure me that this building project is being actively prioritised and that the design process will be sufficiently flexible to accommodate co-educational provision?

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and giving me the opportunity, on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, to outline to the Dáil the current position in relation to the joint school project for St. John Bosco Junior Boys School, St. John Bosco Senior Boys School and Mary, Help of Christians Girls' National School in Dublin 7.

This joint school building project will deliver two new 16-classroom primary schools with additional classrooms for children with special educational needs for both the senior boys' school and the girls' school and a new 11-classroom primary school with additional classrooms for children with special education needs for the junior boys' school.

Initially, it had been anticipated that this joint project would be delivered in the form of an extension and refurbishment. However, due to a scope change to include an increase in classrooms for children with special educational needs, it was decided that new school buildings would be provided. The design team submitted the initial stage 1 report in April 2023 and following the submission of an addendum report in August 2023, the project was approved to the next stage. The design team submitted their stage 2a submission report in January 2024.

Upon review, some key concerns were identified by Department officials. From January 2024 to May 2025, there was significant communication between the design team and the Department to discuss and assist in progressing the stage 2a submission to include a review and audit of the floor area schedules to refine some design elements to meet the approved schedule of accommodation.

Upon receipt of the revised stage 2a report, Department officials carried out an initial review. In early June 2025, a further meeting was held with the wider design team, school authorities and Department officials in attendance. At that meeting, the school was provided with a progress update and advised that the design team were due to submit an addendum stage 2a report to the Department. The outstanding information for the addendum stage 2a report was received by the Department officials on 31 October 2025 and is currently under review by them. They visited the school on Friday 27 March 2026 and discussed potential options for a solution with the school authorities. Further discussions were held on 18 June. Department officials will continue to engage and update the school authorities of progress regarding these decisions. In June, the Department issued primary schools with their school-specific patronage survey results and explanatory information, marking the next stage in the process of engaging

school communities on the future direction of their schools. Where the survey shows demand for change, boards of management have the opportunity to consider being included in the first group of schools to action the survey results. Schools have been asked to inform the Department and their patron by 31 October 2026 should the school wish to be included in this first group of schools to action the primary school survey results.

Deputy Emer Currie: This is not simply about replacing old buildings; this is about building a modern educational campus that reflects the needs and the wishes of the families in Dublin 7 and Dublin 15 for generations to come. The community has waited long enough. They deserve a modern school campus and the opportunity to shape the modern provision of education in their area. When we have previously discussed this building project, I have made it clear from the start that it should be an objective that the building be suitable for co-educational provision. That should be in-built into this project. I have had reassurance from the Department that this will be the case. We do not want for a project that has already taken long enough to get to this point to be in any way stalled by progress on co-educational provision. Parents need reassurance today that the Department is ready, willing and able to work with them on providing a new building and that the building will be suitable for the type of education that they want their children to have. What the Minister of State has outlined in relation to the engagement between the school and parents is important. I am confident enough that after that engagement that the parental survey results will still stand because this community wants a new school in a new method of provision.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I agree with the Deputy that this is not refurbishment. In my initial response, I made it clear that this joint school building project will deliver two new 16-classroom primary schools with additional classrooms for children with special educational needs for both the senior boys' school and the girls' school and an 11-classroom primary school with additional classrooms for children with special educational needs for the junior boys' school. I have no information regarding the co-education provision but the Deputy said that she has received assurances and she is happy with them. I will take her at her word.

As part of the NDP implementation plan for the education and youth sector, a first tranche of projects to progress to tender and-or construction during 2026 and 2027 was published in January 2026. Prioritisation will continue to identify further tranches of projects to proceed to tender and construction over the NDP period with stakeholder consultation to commence in June 2026. Our NDP implementation plan will optimise outputs from the NDP allocations with a strong focus on maximising existing school capacity, progressing priority projects where local capacity across schools in an area is insufficient and ensuring delivery that is affordable, offers value for money and meets functional needs. The accommodation needs at St. John Bosco junior boys' school and senior boys' school and Mary Help of Christian Girls' National School will be considered as part of the ongoing overall Department-led prioritisation process in consultation with the school's patron and school authorities.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: As we are moving towards the recess, I thank the Ceann Comhairle, and indeed, the officials in her office and all of the staff across the House for all of their work during the year that has made this place run so smoothly.

I wish to raise the question of Bunclody Community College. I have had to do it on a number of occasions. This is an excellent and very inclusive school in Bunclody, County Wexford on the Wexford-Carlow border. It has 310 students. It has had a 42% increase in enrolments since 2019. It has an incredibly dedicated principal, staff and board of management, but it also has great supports from the wider Bunclody community. The local councillor there, Barbara-Anne Murphy, has regularly raised this as one of most critical issues around the long-term development of the Bunclody community. To say that the school, and indeed, the wider area are deeply frustrated by the lack of progress is an understatement. This is an excellent school, but when it comes to its physical infrastructure, the school is in dire straits. Of all the schools in the constituency in terms of physical infrastructure that I deal with, it is the worst that I have encountered. There are few anywhere else in the country that I have come across that are more deserving of the necessary work that has to happen. That is not an exaggeration.

I challenge the Minister of State, or indeed, any Deputy to name any other second level school in the country where all but three of the mainstream classrooms are in prefabs. Almost all of the mainstream provision of the school operates out of prefabs. Some of those prefabs are over 20 years old.

It is a split campus, so students have to walk 500 m from one campus in one area of the school to another campus, crossing a busy regional road. That is fine in weather like this, although I know the school is not open at the moment, but the Minister of State, as a teacher, can imagine the pressure that places on students and parents in winter, such as in the winter we just had.

When I submitted a parliamentary question to the Department of education on the number of schools in the country operating on split campuses, I found it unusual that this school was one of the schools included in the reply, even though that fact is a critical part of its application for work to be done.

The process of redeveloping this expanding and very inclusive school started in 2014. I am sure the Ceann Comhairle will remember being approached by the then principal, staff and others. Pressure has been applied. When capital decisions were being made by the Department of education I asked why this school was not included and what criteria were used. I was able to say it is a disadvantaged school, a DEIS school, and one of the top schools in the country for championing support for Traveller education. It is deeply committed to inclusive education for those with disabilities or indeed with exceptional abilities and all students are supported and challenged to thrive. I outlined the physical challenges it faces.

I am sure the Minister of State will read out the Department's response telling us the project is at stage 2b. I have regularly referred to stage 2B in the Department of education as "purgatory". In Catholic philosophy, purgatory is that period of purification so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. I hope the Minister of State will be able to provide some of the joy of heaven for Bunclody Community College in her response today.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State might be like the Pope and get rid of limbo.

Deputy Marian Harkin: It is not often I am asked in this House to behave like the man above. I am not sure what I can deliver from purgatory. Nonetheless, I heard what Deputy Byrne said about the conditions, which he told us are unique and among the worst in the country. He also spoke of the commitment of the staff. While I am not personally familiar with the school, I know that schools where conditions are not good or are very poor often have the most committed staff. I have a response here from the Minister for education and my job is to read it to the Deputy.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am speaking on behalf of the Minister for education. The project referred to by the Deputy is devolved for delivery to the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, WWETB. The project brief is to provide an extension to the existing school building, as well as the appropriate refurbishment of those existing buildings to be retained for ongoing educational use. As the Deputy said, the project is currently at stage 2b - I will remember the term "purgatory" again - of the architectural design process. A stage 2b report has been received from WWETB. The report is undergoing a detailed technical and cost review in line with the infrastructure guidelines. All projects, including this one, are subject to such due diligence requirements.

The Department has been actively engaged with the design team and school authority throughout the process and will continue to engage to provide practical advice and assistance on this important project. The Department has a strong track record of investing in the schools building programme, with over €7 billion invested since 2020. This has delivered approximately 1,500 completed school building projects, along with approximately 4,300 small-scale improvement works to meet priority maintenance needs and advance energy efficiency and climate goals.

Over €200 million in capital funding has been invested in Wexford schools since 2020. Over this period, a total of 66 schools in Wexford have been upgraded either through provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or modular accommodation. There are currently 17 school projects in Wexford under construction.

A total capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth has been confirmed for the period 2026 to 2030 under the national development plan, NDP. As part of this allocation, the Department will place a strong emphasis on provision for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs.

In relation to project roll-out for large-scale projects and additional school accommodation scheme projects, the approach will be to continue to maximise the capacity of the existing school estate as much as possible in the first instance and provide necessary additional capacity through targeted and prioritised project roll-out over the course of 2026 to 2030 period to meet the most urgent and prioritised needs.

While not every project could be included in the first tranche, all projects continue to move through the pipeline. Urgent accommodation needs will continue to be met through modular delivery, SEN repurposing and the emergency works scheme. As part of the Department-led prioritisation process under way for 2026 and 2027, consultation with school patrons began last month. A further tranche of priority projects is targeted for publication in 2027, informed by departmental analysis, engagement with patrons and schools, funding parameters and,

where relevant, the Department's energy and condition inventory of the school estate, due for completion by year-end.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I appreciate the Minister of State is responding on behalf of the Minister but the response provides nothing new. It is almost a carbon copy of the response I received when I raised this issue in January last. We talk about the NDP allocation, and the Department's response refers to "a strong emphasis on provision for children with special educational needs" and those who are disadvantaged. This is a DEIS school with a large Traveller population. The school made clear, including in a meeting with the Minister of State with responsibility for special education, Deputy Michael Moynihan, that while it has a number of SEN classes already, there is also a possibility of developing a special school on a site adjoining the school. This school has a superb record of supporting disadvantaged students, yet it seems to be placed at a disadvantage.

I am conscious the Minister of State referred to additional capital investment in 2027. I fully expect and will continue to campaign to ensure this school is included in the 2027 capital list because it deserved to be addressed before now. I ask the Minister of State to bring back to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, a request that she meet the WWETB, as the patron body, the principal and me to talk about outstanding issues, if any. As the Minister of State said, all of the necessary information has long been provided by the WWETB to the Department. I have outlined the conditions and the Department is aware of them. The Minister of State is right that in times of adversity, it is often the staff and school community that fight better, but these kids and this school deserve a hell of a lot better. They should not be waiting this long to have basic requirements.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I will relay the Deputy's request that the Minister consider meeting him with the WWETB and the school principal. I am not sure what requests have been received, and I cannot speak on the Minister's behalf, but I will certainly relay that request.

The Department is committed to ensuring appropriate accommodation is available for all school pupils and will, in the wider context outlined, ensure each school project on the schools building programme is subject to the due diligence required under the infrastructure guidelines. The Department is required to manage the timing, scope and cost of individual projects in order to remain within budgetary parameters for the overall programme. This involves constant review throughout the project life cycle.

The Department remains committed to providing ongoing guidance and practical support for the delivery of this project. As I outlined previously, WWETB, as the delivery body for this large-scale major project, will continue to engage with the school authorities regarding this important project.

I have to say that the next line of my written reply states that at this stage it is not possible to provide a timeline for the completion of this project. I can understand why that meeting is of great importance to the Deputy. The progression of the project tender will be considered as part of the overall prioritisation process, and Waterford and Wexford ETB will continue to engage directly with the school authorities to keep them fully informed of progress.

Strategic Infrastructure

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, for taking this debate late on a Thursday evening, on the last sitting day of this term.

I would like to talk about the town of Swords in north County Dublin. It is the third largest town by population in Ireland, but it is still treated culturally like a small village with a few airport workers in it. I am not sure how familiar the Minister of State is with Swords, but it is absolutely massive and is undergoing huge change. There is a massive amount of housing being built in Swords, which is welcome. It is all types of housing, from apartment blocks to three- or four-bedroom housing, and it is coming at scale.

Unfortunately, the infrastructure is not coming with the housing. We are currently gridlocked with traffic due to multiple upgrades and works being carried out. I know you cannot make an omelette without cracking a few eggs, but there is a disconnect in the planning of these projects that is causing havoc in Swords. We have a massive issue with our bus network, from bus stops to bus services, and again, we do not have a rail link yet. MetroLink has begun and I believe it is coming, which I am happy about, but it is still ten years away and we have a town of 55,000 people which is getting larger. It is larger than Sligo town and Waterford city; it is absolutely huge. We need bus services, special education classes and some entity to co-ordinate this. It is beyond the county council's capacity, and the Department of housing and infrastructure needs to do this.

Where this is currently hitting hard is in wastewater treatment. We have a very small wastewater treatment plant that has been there for 40 or 50 years and which serviced a much smaller town. It is currently being retrofitted and upgraded, but those works are being delayed. I cannot get across to the Minister of State the smell in the town of Swords right now, particularly in the northern part of the town, because of the upgrading works on the wastewater treatment plant. This is something that has been recurring for years upon years. We need a wastewater treatment plant that is befitting a town of the size of Swords. We need the greater Dublin drainage project to come in for the wider Dublin area, but the people of Swords are suffering.

We do not have our primary care centre yet and we do not have our bus service. Our MetroLink is ten years away and we have traffic gridlock. We do not have enough schools and we have a wastewater treatment plant that is absolutely buckling under the pressure. We welcome the houses. There were no mass protests about housing development in Swords. The majority of people who live there moved there, like myself, in the past 20 years and love living there. We know we need houses and we need sustainable communities, but we cannot deliver this unless we deliver the infrastructure with it.

I ask the Minister of State to have the Department of housing bring in some taskforce or infrastructure manager to monitor, lead and deliver what Swords needs at this point, whether it is a bus stop or a wastewater treatment plant. I do not believe there is a town as big as Swords anywhere else in the country that is undergoing a similar level of growth at this time.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Deputy Smith for raising this matter and for highlighting the significant population growth taking place in Swords. I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I am interested to hear the Deputy say

it is the third largest town in Ireland. In that context, I understand why he has raised these issues.

The Government fully recognises that the successful delivery of new housing must be supported by timely and co-ordinated investment in the infrastructure required to sustain vibrant and thriving communities. Through the housing activation office in my Department, we are working closely with local authorities, infrastructure agencies and service providers to ensure that housing and infrastructure are planned and delivered together.

Swords is a strong example of this approach in practice. As the population continues to grow, substantial investment is being made across a range of critical infrastructure areas to support both existing residents and future development. A key project is the €21 million R132 connectivity project, funded by the National Transport Authority, which is currently under construction. This project will improve transport connectivity, enhance road safety and strengthen active travel infrastructure, while also preparing the corridor for future strategic public transport investments, including MetroLink and Busconnects.

The Deputy also mentioned a significant issue with wastewater treatment. Alongside this, Uisce Éireann is progressing a major upgrade to the wastewater network along Balheary Road. This investment will provide capacity for almost 3,000 additional homes while improving the resilience of essential services in the area. It is a clear example of how targeted infrastructure investment can unlock housing and support sustainable growth. The Government has also established the €1 billion housing infrastructure investment fund, managed by the housing activation office, to accelerate the delivery of housing-enabling infrastructure nationwide. Under the first call of the fund, Fingal County Council was successful in securing support for a number of important projects, including the Fosterstown Link Road and associated road, active travel, water and wastewater infrastructure in Swords. These investments will help unlock significant additional housing capacity while supporting the long-term development of the area.

More broadly, Fingal County Council is progressing a range of complementary projects, including active travel schemes, public realm improvements and the development of the Swords cultural quarter. Together, these initiatives will enhance connectivity, improve quality of life and reinforce Swords' role as a sustainable and vibrant county town.

The Government remains committed to working with Fingal County Council and all relevant agencies to ensure the infrastructure required to support housing growth in Swords is delivered in a co-ordinated, strategic and timely manner.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister of State for her response, which speaks to the issue I am raising. Again, she will sense the tone in which I am raising it. There is an awful lot happening and being built, but it is the co-ordination of these works that is the problem.

If I could take just three examples from the Minister of State's response, we have the Sword's cultural quarter which is closed at the Seatown Road. That is one project. The Seatown Road is connected to the R132, which is an old dual carriageway that is down to one lane for the foreseeable future. That is two projects. That is connected to the Balheary Road, where we have the new water main going in to allow for 3,000 new houses. That is a third project. That is three separate roads that are all in one network and are all closed or heavily restricted because

of these works happening at the same time. This is impacting thousands of existing residents, and will do so for a significant period.

The works are happening and the homes are being built. Some infrastructure is going in to allow for more building, but there is a huge impact on the quality of life. There will be inconveniences, there is no doubt about it, but this is having a huge impact. People are unable to get to work, college and school on time, and will face those restrictions for the foreseeable future. There are no or very few alternatives because of the way Swords has been designed over the years. On top of that, we have the wastewater treatment plant and the upgrade works which are long-delayed and taking a long time. This is causing huge discomfort to Fingallian's GAA club, other sports clubs and people who cannot open their windows in a wide radius from that wastewater treatment plant.

The council and the Department are doing an awful lot, but there seems to be a gap in the co-ordination of these projects and the medium-term impact this is having on the quality of life for the people of Swords at this time. That is the point I am trying to get across.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has a tone of severe frustration.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The Government agrees that the delivery of housing and the delivery of infrastructure have to go hand in hand and creating sustainable communities requires investment, not only in homes, but as the Deputy said, in the transport, energy, water and community infrastructure that supports them. As he also noted, significant investment is already under way in Swords, whether it is the R132 connectivity project, the Balheary Road wastewater upgrade or the Fosterstown link road proposal under the housing infrastructure investment fund. I think that the Deputy accepts that all of those are helping or will help to address key infrastructure requirements while supporting future housing delivery. This demonstrates the value of co-ordinated planning, but in the context in which the Deputy has raised this, all I can say is that the housing activation office will continue to work closely with Fingal County Council, Uisce Éireann, the National Transport Authority, ESB Networks and other stakeholders to identify and address infrastructural constraints and to ensure that investment is aligned with housing growth. I suggest that this is how some of these concerns might be addressed, through co-ordination with a number of these organisations that are working to do this. I have no detail here or expertise, but to me that might be the only possible solution that is there. I can hear the Deputy's frustration and from what he says, I know that some action needs to be taken.

Road Safety

Deputy Brian Stanley: The issue I am raising with the Minister of State is the increase in the number of injuries, including those involving young children, relating to e-scooters and e-bikes. Ten have been killed. Temple Street hospital consultants have been highlighting the number of serious injuries, including the fact that six children are currently in the intensive care unit. The Children's Health Ireland report released today shows the scale of the problem. Eighteen children have been admitted with serious brain injury in the past year. These are all serious injuries. Of those admitted with head injuries, 97% had fractured skulls and 53% required emergency brain surgery. This is a serious matter.

The current laws are not being enforced. The 20 km/h speed limit is not being implemented. E-scooter drivers should be over 16. I have seen children of nine and ten years old on them. They are carrying passengers when they should not. They are on footpaths when they should not be on them. I see them in Dublin, Laois and everywhere else with no lights at night time, particularly in the winter months. I see it in every Laois town, and I have received complaints from every corner of the county about it.

The number of e-scooters and e-bikes has ballooned, but so has the number of serious injuries. Some are travelling at speeds of three times the legal limit. We have all had near misses. I am sure the Minister of State has. If people are shopping in the street or anything like that, they would nearly be crashed into by people on e-scooters. The situation is out of control, and that is only wording I can use for this.

We are dealing with e-scooters and e-bikes, but these are mechanically propelled vehicles. They are not toys. Some of them are capable of travelling at significant speeds comparable to petrol scooters, mopeds and small motorbikes that people need to have a licence to drive.

Some people are calling for a ban on them. I am not in favour of a ban, but we do need to take action quickly. A lot of people use them for work and necessary travel. They are economical to run, have almost zero carbon emissions, take up limited road space and are more environmentally friendly than cars and SUVs, of which there is an increasing number on the road. I do not think we should ban them, but we need to get this right.

What is required is proper regulations for these mechanically propelled vehicles - that is what they are - and for the gardaí to have the training and powers to enforce new laws. The priority has to be enforcing the existing rules around speed limits, so that people stay within the 20 km/h, and ensuring that they have lights, do not carry passengers and are not on footpaths. These are basic things, but much more than that is needed because of the scale of what we are facing.

If people have to pass a test to drive a small motorbike or scooter, they should have to do the same thing for these e-bikes, some of which are as fast as small motorbikes or scooters and maybe even faster. Helmets need to be compulsory. People are suffering serious head injuries and head traumas. The consultants felt that they had to come out to the media and call on us to do this. We need to have registration. They can be registered when they are bought. We should know who owns them and they should have third party insurance. If a driver crashes into someone and injures them, who picks up the medical bill for it? It is the unfortunate shopper.

There needs to be an urgency about this. It is a public safety issue, and the public are demanding action. Can this House bring in legislation as a matter of priority in September? I believe there is support for it across this House and the public would certainly support it, including some people who use e-scooters.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputy, and on behalf of the Minister for Transport, I want to thank him for raising this issue.

He is quite right. A lot of people are speaking about this. We have always been aware, but we have become more acutely aware in recent times, of the serious brain injuries sustained in many cases by children who use e-scooters and the inherent dangers in how e-scooters are being used.

From the Government's perspective, we introduced a comprehensive suite of regulations in 2024 to govern the safe use of e-scooters in public places. These include the Road Traffic (Electric Scooters) Regulations 2024 (SI 199 of 2024), which provides for technical standards and conditions for safe use, including a minimum age of 16 and a speed limit of 20 km/h. The Road Traffic (Signs) Regulations 2024 (SI 200) provides that signs for bicycle use will also apply to e-scooters. The Road Traffic (Traffic and Parking) (Amendment) Regulations 2024 (SI 222 of 2024) provides for traffic rules, including forbidding use on motorways, footpaths and pedestrianised areas. The Road Traffic (Use of Powered Personal Transporters) Regulations 2024 (SI 224 of 2024) provides that other types of powered personal transporters, PPT, and e-scooters that do not comply with the regulations will remain illegal to use in public places. There is also the previous regulation from the Road Traffic Act 1994, but I am not going to go into that at the moment. Key limitations are already in place in relation to speed restrictions of 20 km/h and it is illegal for drivers to use them on a footpath, carry passengers or have a seat.

In relation to the Deputy's question, section 5 of SI 199 of 2024, Road Traffic (Electric Scooters) Regulations 2024, sets a minimum age of 16 for the use of these vehicles. Ongoing consideration is being given to restrict the supply of an e-scooter to persons under the age of 16 by including a provision in the upcoming road traffic Bill, similar to section 30 of the Road Traffic Act 2004.

E-scooters that do not conform with the e-scooter regulations are illegal for use on Irish roads and the enforcement of all road traffic legislation is a matter for An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Unfortunately, I do not get any sense of urgency from the Minister of State that we are going to have laws introduced in September or October, and that is the crucial issue. Yes, we have rules now, and she listed them out in relation to the signs.

6 o'clock

However, they are being ignored. The only place e-scooters are not being used is on the motorways, but they are being used extensively on footpaths and pedestrianised areas.

The type of scooters that do not comply remain illegal if they travel at more than 20 km/h. E-bikes need to be treated the same. Some do multiples of that speed, and very few do less unless they are kids' toys. An ordinary e-scooter should not be treated as a toy. The 16-year-old age category is being completely ignored. I would appeal to parents who still think that these are children's toys. They need to wise up for the safety of their own children and the general public. There is a role for the Government, but there is also a role for the public, which I accept. The existing rules the Minister of State has set out here are not being implemented. Either gardaí do not have the training or do not have the powers. That is the first thing.

Second, we must go further. Who covers the cost? If a pedestrian has a hip or a knee broken or, God forbid, something worse, who picks up the insurance cost? Why do we not have registration of ownership when they are bought so they are registered to an owner? Why is a helmet not compulsory? It is compulsory on a Honda 50, and some of these go much faster. We need to be careful. We need to have it for e-bikes as well. Why do the people who use them not have to know the rules of the road and pass a basic test? These are very basic requirements. If we do not do this, we are failing the public, and the safety of the public is our

primary responsibility. We are also failing those people who drive them safely. We need to make sure that people can use them safely for work purposes and essential travel.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputy. In response to his question about the urgency of this, the Department of Transport is examining the issue of mandating the wearing of helmets, high-vis clothing and protective equipment for e-scooters and e-bikes, along with other road safety focused measures. Proposals in this regard are under consideration by Ministers. The Department is also considering the matter of registration for e-scooters. Any system of mandatory registration requires significant development work to act effectively and efficiently. A registration system for e-scooters would need to address various issues, including how to verify the identity of individuals who use them, safe and visible placement of registration plates and sufficient resourcing for the registration body. In addition, there are no harmonised technical specifications for e-scooters equivalent to the EU-type approval for other vehicle types in place across the EU. These issues will need to be carefully assessed and addressed. However, the Deputy should not think this means it is not being treated as a matter of huge concern and urgency.

As this will be my last opportunity in this Dáil session, I thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and all the staff here in Dáil Éireann for their genuine support and for all the help they give us throughout the year. I think most of us are looking forward to some bit of a break. I wish everyone a nice break over the summer. I look forward to seeing everyone back here in September.

An Ceann Comhairle: Many happy returns for a successful and fruitful recess. Thank you.

Waste Management (Single Household Waste Collection Service) Bill 2026: Second Stage [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Sherlock. The Government has indicated that it is opposing the Second Reading of the Bill.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

We in the Labour Party passionately believe that we need to have a serious overhaul of how waste is collected and regulated across every county in this country. In that context, I am very proud to see our Labour Party Bill proceed to Second Stage in the Dáil today. The Bill is the Waste Management (Single Household Waste Collection Service) Bill 2026. This is an issue that I have been working on for a number of years, both in my time working for SIPTU and while working as a councillor elected to Dublin City Council. Two years ago, Deputy Mark Wall and I, when we were in the Seanad, brought forward a motion there. Today, we see that work coming to the Dáil.

I warmly welcome all those who join us in the Visitors Gallery today, the residents from across Stoneybatter, Smithfield, Broadstone and Phibsborough, along with Rory Hawkins from SIPTU, who has joined us for this debate today.

I think it is fair to say that, three months ago, when Dublin City Council made its decision to finally start banning bin bags across communities in the constituency that I represent, it very much hit a nerve with residents. The council effectively made a policy decision but left it to the private bin companies to decide how to implement those changes. There was consternation at that result, and rightly so. For most households, the impact was going to be a doubling, trebling or even more of an increase in their existing waste costs. They were going to see a reduced incentive to reduce their waste because many would have to sign up to an annual standing charge as opposed to the pay-per-bag or pay-per-drop system they currently have. They were facing the prospect of the proliferation of unsightly bins sitting on the streets seven days a week. The reality is that many of the people in the constituency that I represent do not have a front garden or back garden. Their houses open onto narrow streets, yet very little account has been taken of that in the decision to move to wheelie bins or caddies.

With this outpouring of anger and frustration at the manner in which the changes are being handled by Dublin City Council, our communities have begun to see just how dysfunctional our waste system is. In recent weeks, I have seen a huge call for reform and an appetite for reform. That is why we have so many people sitting in on this final session of the Dáil today before we rise for the summer. They passionately believe that we need to have a better system in place.

The announcement in April is phase 3 of Dublin City Council's plan to ban bags across 900 streets in the city that are currently exempt from bins. While the first two phases were in commercial areas, this current phase is the first attempt to introduce it in a residential area. There is an irony in terms of how it is being rolled out. Dublin City Council was able to negotiate for the installation of ten-tonne compactors in the commercial areas, yet when it came to the residential areas, I understand the council tried to negotiate with the bin collectors on the roll-out of shared collection systems, but to no avail. That pretty much sums up our dysfunctional system. Local authorities rely on private bin companies for waste collection, which is effectively a public service across our communities, yet our local authorities exert little or no power over them.

Our lopsided system means that multiple private bin companies get to drive the same roads in some areas and provide no service elsewhere. They have the luxury of driving past illegally dumped waste and litter on our streets, while local authorities have to spend millions every year cleaning up the mess. Providers get to charge what they want, with some companies making very handsome profits. They are the companies whose profits we are actually aware of, but many other companies are unlimited, so we do not know what they earn. The result is that we have serious underinvestment in public recycling and composting facilities.

Back in 2018, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission said in very clear terms that the current waste management system in Ireland is inefficient, and that Ireland needs an economic regulator for waste companies. Eight years on, households remain at the mercy of unregulated price increases, and there is zero transparency over companies providing a crucial public utility. No other European city does it like this, and nor should we.

Our Bill sets out to make three fundamental changes to the Waste Management Act 1996. First, we provide for local authorities to be able to appoint a single operator for their local authority area. This would be a radical move away from what is called competition in the market to competition for the market. The reality is that section 2 and section 3 of the 1996

Act exclude local authorities from making waste collection arrangements in their area. Ironically, every time I submit a written parliamentary question to the Minister, and when I ask about waste management and local authorities, the Minister tells me that the statutory responsibility for decisions on waste collection arrangements, including any move towards franchise tendering, ultimately rests with the chief executive of each local authority.

I believe he is wrong on that, and, for whatever reason, the Department is misinterpreting the legislation. The reason I say that is that the Waste Management Act 1996 does confer powers on each local authority chief executive, but it was very clear in the High Court case *Nurendale Ltd. v. Dublin City Council* in 2009 that no chief executive could safely use those powers to restructure the waste collection market in his or her area. A chief executive cannot move to a franchise tendering system conferring exclusive rights without proper legislative underpinning. That is why we are here today.

Second, our Bill sets down conditions for the awarding of a waste management contract. It must specify the number of years. It must specify where exactly the contract applies because, again, we know that even in some pockets of Dublin, there is no waste collection service. We know that in some rural areas there is no service, but it also happens in urban areas. We also want to see a waiver scheme on grounds of personal hardship introduced and, crucially, coverage for all areas.

The third key part of our Bill is with regard to landlord responsibility. This is something that Dublin City Council and other local authorities are very much seeking from the Government. As a TD for Dublin Central, I am acutely aware of how very real comfort and deprivation live cheek by jowl. There is appalling exploitation of people right across my constituency who are in desperate need of appropriate accommodation and who are crammed into three- and four-bedroom houses where there could be 16 people. It is an inhumane squeezing of people into tenement-like conditions, and it is landlords who are facilitating it. To be fair, the least of the worries of many of those tenants is where they put their black bags, but we need to make sure that landlords are forced to have a waste management contract for every house or apartment they let.

We felt moved to introduce this Bill because we believe the privatised system of waste collection is not working. The theory of competition was supposed to deliver choice and affordable pricing but the evidence is very much to the contrary. We know that residents have faced extraordinary price increases in collection services in recent years. Panda's bin collection prices have risen by 43% since 2024. The City Bin Company increased its charges by 26% in the past two years. Greyhound's last increase was 48%, back in 2024, and we expect to see another announcement from it soon.

In May of this year, EU waste disposal rules came into force banning the export of waste beyond EU borders. That will force a further hike for households. The reality is that five years ago we were exporting about 70 million tonnes from our shores every year, and that has now doubled in five years.

The second key reason we believe we need to move away from the privatised system is that, ultimately, many of the private bin companies are effectively creaming profits from bin collection, with local authorities having to spend millions of euro. Dublin City Council has to spend millions of euro collecting 3,500 tonnes of illegally dumped waste on our streets every

year. The reality is that we have serious underinvestment in recycling. The Government has effectively admitted that recycling rates have plateaued at about 41%, when we have serious targets to try to meet by 2030.

We know from looking at the accounts of some companies that they are making serious profits. We have no transparency as to what two of the biggest operators are earning because they are unlimited companies. Panda's parent company, Beaparc, sold for €1.3 billion in 2021 to an Australian investment firm. It is also co-owned by a US private equity firm. They are not in Ireland for the good of their health. They are here because they know they can make serious money. We know Greyhound's parent company is registered on the Isle of Man. Again, that speaks volumes about the types of company we are dealing with here.

Yesterday on the radio, the Irish Waste Management Association said it believed a conversation needed to be had about the price of what we were proposing here. I say to it: bring it on. Back in 2018, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission very clearly called for an economic regulator. In 2020, we saw a price monitoring group, which involved a very pale shade of economic regulation and certainly not price regulation. It was just looking at the prices. We need to make sure that householders are paying a fair price.

The third key reason we need to move away from a privatised system of waste collection is that the promise of choice is failing. In my constituency, we see bin lorries traipsing around after one another, with all the congestion, confusion and diesel emissions that go with that. In Dublin 15 and other parts of Dublin, a single operator is effectively operating as a monopoly. There is no competition there. The company is hiking up prices and getting away with it.

I am very worried about the consolidation within the waste management sector. Back in 2012, analysis by my colleague in SIPTU, Michael Taft, showed that we had 81 bin companies across the country. Within a decade, by 2022, we were down to about 30 to 40. That number is going to contract in the future. Therefore, we will have extraordinary over-reliance on very large companies, with the State exerting little or no control over them. That is why we need to change our system. In transforming how we deal with waste in this country, I want to see the State take control of this vital public service. Ultimately, I see this legislation as a stepping stone towards local authorities providing this public service. For a variety of legal and practical reasons, however, we believe our Bill has to start in this place. Our Bill effectively provides for competition for the market as opposed to competition in the market. That distinction is important because, by tendering for a single operator, local authorities will be able to start controlling how precisely waste is collected.

It is important to say that, back in the 2000s, Dublin City Council, along with the three other Dublin local authorities, tried to tender for a single operator but failed. It failed because Panda, in the name of Nurendale Limited, brought it to the High Court and, effectively, it lost that case. It lost it because of EU competition law, but we believe the game-changer now is the 2014 EU concessions directive, which allows for tendering by a state, or an agency of the state, for services of general economic interest or general public interest, of which we believe waste is one. As we all know, waste management is not just about a private arrangement because, when it is done badly, it affects us all. That is why I want to see our local authorities moving from being just bystanders that license waste collection companies to actually controlling how the service is delivered.

I introduced this Bill because I do not believe the issue of litter and dumping on our streets, particularly in the communities I represent, where the issue of litter has existed for many years, is hopeless. I do believe change can be made. Inspiration can be taken from many European cities that have got their systems right. They have underground collection systems, compactors in their communities and innovative solutions. The way our system is set up ultimately does not allow for that investment, and I believe we need to change that. We also need to recognise the incredible work so many of our communities are doing against the odds to try to keep their areas clean. That is why I want to pay tribute to all the people who are here today, including Stoneybatter Pride of Place, Phibsboro Village Tidy Towns and all the people working within their communities to keep them clean.

The other key point in all of this is that, for many years, trade unions have spoken about the need to overhaul the system because of the wages, conditions and exploitation that have existed. I pay tribute to the More Power to You campaign. Fórsa, SIPTU and Connect are the three main unions behind it. At the end of the day, waste collection is a public service and the jobs should be decently paid. We spent a lot of time during the pandemic applauding those who had to go out to work, like those collecting our bins, when the rest of us got to stay at home, yet we know the terms and conditions in many of the companies are very poor.

Ultimately, this is very much about local issues, but we need national policy solutions. That is why we have brought forward our Bill. We are very disappointed to hear that the Government is opposing it. I want to pay tribute to colleagues like Deputy McAuliffe and others who sat on an Oireachtas working group on waste management in the previous Dáil and Seanad. We believe we need to change how we do things. We might disagree on the precise detail, but all of us who sat around the table recognised that we need to have change.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Waste Management (Household Waste Collection Service) Bill. I thank Deputy Sherlock and the Labour Party for bringing this legislation before the House. At the outset, I acknowledge that the Deputy has raised issues that are of real importance to households across the country. Reliable, affordable and environmentally sustainable waste collection services are essential public services. Every household should have confidence that their waste is being collected efficiently and managed responsibly and that the system supports Ireland's transition to a more circular economy.

Equally, households need to see that reducing, recycling and properly segregating waste not only benefits the environment but also reduces household waste costs. An effective waste collection system should reward positive environmental behaviour. I also recognise concerns relating to affordability, service quality, consistency of provision and illegal dumping. These are legitimate public policy issues and they deserve careful consideration.

However, while I acknowledge the intentions behind this Bill, the Government cannot support it. The principal reason is straightforward. The Bill seeks to legislate for a fundamental restructuring of Ireland's household waste collection market at the very time that Government is undertaking a comprehensive, evidence-based review of the future structure of that market. This is not about resisting reform, nor is it about defending the *status quo*. It is about ensuring that reform is informed by evidence. The Government has commissioned an independent study to examine the feasibility of moving Ireland's household waste collection system from the

current side-by-side competition model to a franchise-based system. That study is examining the environmental, economic, operational and consumer implications of alternative market structures. It is considering issues such as service quality, competition, investment, affordability, environmental performance, implementation challenges and the wider impacts on the waste sector. Importantly, it is doing so independently and objectively.

The recommendations arising from that work will be considered as part of the updated waste action plan for a circular economy and the implementation of Ireland's second whole-of-government circular economy strategy in 2027. That is the appropriate policy process. If the evidence supports significant changes to the market structure, the Government will consider those recommendations carefully. If the evidence suggests improvements can be achieved through strengthened regulation, enhanced enforcement or targeted reforms within the existing framework, those options should also be considered. That is how good public policy should be made. It should be based on evidence rather than assumption. It should be informed by independent analysis rather than anecdote. It should also consider both intended and unintended consequences before major legislative changes are introduced. The Bill before us would effectively pre-empt that process. It would commit the State to one particular market model before Government has had the opportunity to consider the findings of the independent review it commissioned. I do not believe that is a responsible way to move forward and develop national policy.

The Bill assumes that replacing competition in the market with competition for the market will resolve many of the challenges facing household waste collection. However, that should not be taken as a given. In many instances, the greatest environmental and economic gains arise from strengthening the regulatory and economic measures that already underpin the existing market. Better outcomes may be achieved by improving the operation of the current system rather than replacing it entirely. That distinction is important. The objective of Government policy is not to favour one market model over another. Our objective is to maximise environmental outcomes, improve resource efficiency, provide high-quality services and support Ireland's transition to a circular economy.

The Bill focuses primarily on who collects household waste and how collection contracts are awarded. However, waste collection is only one component of Ireland's broader circular economy agenda. The waste action plan for a circular economy seeks to prevent waste arising in the first place, maximise reuse, improve recycling, support producer responsibility, encourage innovation and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, the circular economy strategy recognises that achieving national and European objectives requires action across government, industry, local authorities and communities. Any reforms to household waste collection should therefore be considered as part of the wider policy framework.

We should also be careful not to assume that changing market structure automatically delivers better environmental outcomes. The Bill contains no evidence demonstrating that moving to an exclusive franchise model would significantly increase recycling rates, reduce waste generation or materially improve Ireland's ability to meet its obligations under European waste and circular economy legislation. Those outcomes depend on many factors, including household behaviour, public awareness, producer responsibility schemes, recycling infrastructure, market development and effective regulation. Changing contractual

arrangements alone will not necessarily address those challenges. That is why the Government believes that policy development in this area must remain evidence-based and proportionate.

There is no single model of household waste collection that has been shown to be universally superior. Across Europe, countries use a variety of systems, including municipal services, regulated competitive markets, concession arrangements and hybrid models. The success of any system depends not simply on market structure but on effective regulation, enforcement, infrastructure, investment, pricing mechanisms and consumer participation. The Government's objective is not to promote one model for ideological reasons. Our objective is to identify the model that delivers the best outcomes for Ireland. That is precisely what the independent feasibility study was commissioned to do. The House should allow that work to conclude before legislating for a permanent restructuring of the sector.

Deputy Sherlock has suggested that a franchise model could address issues such as illegal dumping and rising household costs. These are important concerns, and I accept that. No Member of this House underestimates the seriousness of illegal dumping. It damages our environment, imposes costs on local authorities and communities and undermines confidence in the waste management system. The Government remains fully committed to tackling illegal dumping through stronger enforcement, such as the most recent increase in litter fines, improved surveillance, enhanced compliance activity and public awareness. However, illegal dumping is a complex behavioural and enforcement challenge. There is no evidence before this House demonstrating that introducing exclusive franchise areas would, in itself, significantly reduce illegal dumping. Similarly, affordability is influenced by a number of factors, including labour costs, fuel prices, treatment costs, landfill levies, vehicle investment, inflation and regulatory requirements. There is no evidence that changing to a franchise system would automatically reduce those underlying costs. Indeed, depending on how exclusive contracts are designed, competitive pressures may diminish over the lifetime of a franchise agreement. These are precisely the questions being examined through the Government's independent feasibility study around the unintended consequences.

Another important consideration is investment certainty. Ireland requires continued investment across the waste and resource sector. We need investment in collection infrastructure, recycling capacity, material recovery technologies, organic waste treatment, digital systems and innovation. Those making long-term investments require certainty regarding Government policy. Introducing fundamental legislative change before the current review is completed risks creating uncertainty for operators, investors and local authorities. The Government does not believe that such uncertainty would serve the interests of households or the wider circular economy.

I now wish to address two elements of the Bill in particular, those being the proposed hardship waiver scheme and the provisions relating to landlords. At the heart of Ireland's waste policy is the polluter pays principle. This is a fundamental principle of European environmental law. It reflects the principle that those who generate waste should bear the costs associated with its management and that pricing signals should encourage waste prevention, reuse and recycling. The Government fully recognises that some households face genuine financial hardship. However, the question is not whether support should be provided. The question is how support should be provided. Waste charges are designed to recover the cost of providing the service while encouraging environmentally responsible behaviour. Introducing

mandatory waivers through waste collection through waste collection permits risks weakening those incentives.

Furthermore, the Bill does not explain how those costs would be funded. The costs do not disappear and they must ultimately be borne by other households, service providers or the State. Where support is required, the Government believes broader social protection measures are a more appropriate and transparent mechanism.

The Bill also proposes to place responsibilities on landlords regarding waste collection in rented residential properties. Again, I understand the objective behind this proposal. However, in most rented properties it is tenants, not landlords, who generate household waste and make decisions regarding waste segregation, recycling and presentation for collection. The polluter pays principle requires responsibility to rest, as far as possible, with the person generating the waste. Landlords are generally not in a position to supervise day-to-day waste management practices within occupied properties. The Government therefore has significant concerns regarding both the practicality and effectiveness of these provisions.

More broadly, the Government believes Ireland's principal challenge is not simply how household waste is collected. Our challenges include how we prevent waste from arising, how we can increase reuse and recycling, how we support producer responsibility, how we reduce emissions and how we build a genuinely circular economy. Changing the market structure for household waste collection is only one potential element of that broader agenda. That is why the Government is updating the waste action plan for a circular economy and implementing Ireland's second whole-of-government circular economy strategy. It is also why we commissioned an independent feasibility study before making decisions on major structural reform. This is the responsible course of action. It allows us to consider evidence. It allows us to continue to engage stakeholders and it allows us to develop reforms that are effective, proportionate and capable of delivering long-term environmental and economic benefits.

The Government shares many of the aspirations underpinning this Bill. We want high-quality services, strong environmental performance, affordable services for households, to eliminate illegal dumping and to accelerate Ireland's transition to a circular economy. However, we do not believe this Bill provides the right mechanism to achieve those objectives. For the reasons I have outlined, and while acknowledging the constructive intentions of Deputy Sherlock, the Government cannot support the Bill at this time. Instead, we are continuing to pursue an evidence-led reform, informed by independent analysis, stakeholder engagement and the updated waste action plan for a circular economy in order that any future changes to Ireland's waste collection system are based not on assumption, but real facts and evidence and deliver lasting benefits for households, communities and the State.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I commend my Labour colleague, Deputy Sherlock, on her work on introducing the Waste Management (Single Household Waste Collection Service) Bill 2026. It is a tribute to her tenacity that she has worked for so many years on this issue. It is the culmination of a good deal of work across her constituency of Dublin Central and I welcome her visitors in the Gallery from Stoneybatter, Phibsborough, Smithfield and Broadstone. From canvassing alongside Deputy Sherlock for our candidate Ruth O'Dea in the recent Dublin Central by-election I know just how pressing an issue waste collection is in the constituency. It came up extensively on the doors. People were very concerned about the changes that are

proposed. There were very concerned also about all sorts of issues like illegal dumping, as Deputy Sherlock mentioned, the proliferation of different companies - they see quite a number of different lorries going up and down the same streets - not to mention the seagulls and foxes pulling apart binbags on the street.

My constituents in Dublin Bay South express similar concerns to me daily. In Portobello, across the south-east inner city and across the constituency I hear from constituents and experience myself these very same issues and concerns about waste collection and how these services are run in Dublin. For residents and businesses alike it is fair to say, as Deputy Sherlock has done, that the waste system is currently dysfunctional. Just today I and other local representatives got an email from the owner of two restaurants in Dublin city centre about this issue. The Minister of State's brief includes not only the circular economy but also small business. The restaurant owner said he fully supported the council's ambition to improve waste management to keep our city cleaner but that commercial waste regulations introduced since December 2025 are creating serious practical difficulties for many hospitality businesses, especially those operating from older city centre buildings with limited storage. He went on to say one of his greatest frustrations is that the regulations are making it harder to recycle. That is a real concern when we are all so committed to seeing the circular economy work and to meeting climate targets on waste. The owner says he no longer has space to accommodate additional recycling bins, cannot leave recyclable waste out for collection and cannot leave flattened cardboard outside for collection. Private waste companies must send a vehicle to collect this directly from premises. This is costly, inefficient and unnecessary. He makes a number of other points but his argument is the burden of solving the city's waste problem has been transferred from the council to small business, many of which have no physical means of complying and will incur significant additional cost.

For householders expressing the concerns I and Deputy Sherlock have outlined, and for small businesses too, waste collection services are simply not working. That is why we need to see a change. The Bill Deputy Sherlock and the Labour Party are proposing is not one we suggest is a silver bullet or a panacea but it offers one small, constructive mechanism to address the dysfunction in waste services. It is a source of great disappointment to me, Deputy Sherlock and the Labour Party to hear the Minister of State say the Government is opposing this Bill. He has acknowledged the Government shares many of the aspirations underpinning this Bill. We want high-quality services and strong environmental performance. We all recognise waste collection is a climate issue and an environmental issue. We all support the move to a circular economy and want to eliminate illegal dumping. This being the case, why can the Minister of State not reconsider his view and let this Bill pass Second Stage? We will be very happy to work with him on developing the broader, evidence-based proposals he speaks about so rightly and which we are in support of. We would have been glad to work with him and Government on how to amend the Bill and work on a broader framework for waste management that addresses the dysfunction.

I am concerned to hear the Minister of State say there is an independent feasibility study without giving any timeline. I understand that was due to be published some months ago. Perhaps he or his Government colleagues might address when we are going to see that study report and hear what precisely are the new mechanisms the Government is proposing to fix the dysfunctional waste system. I do not mean just in Dublin, though Deputy Sherlock and I are focusing on Dublin and most of the TDs present are Dublin ones, as clearly this has

ramifications across the country and the dissatisfaction and the concerns Deputy Sherlock's constituents and mine are expressing are ones felt across the board. We are therefore disappointed at the Government's decision to oppose the Bill.

This is very much a broader issue for the Labour Party. Waste management is an essential public service. It is a climate issue, as I have said, but also one about public services. We want to see remunicipalisation. We have been working with the trade unions on this. We have supported SIPTU and Fórsa's More Power to You campaign, which is a fight for stronger public services. We want to see a move, as Deputy Sherlock has it in the Bill, from competition in the market to competition for the market and this Bill would represent an important positive step on that journey to quality public services provided by the State and to remunicipalisation. Deputy Sherlock has set out the detailed provisions in the Bill. I ask the Minister of State again to reconsider this and support the Bill past Second Stage. It is a Bill that is of significant interest to constituencies across the country and so many people, like the business owner who emailed me, and many individual householders across the country are, out of frustration, addressing waste, illegal dumping and litter issues by themselves. I pay tribute to Tidy Towns organisations. In Dublin Bay South we have superb Tidy Towns organisations that I am proud to work with from Ringsend and Sandymount across to Portobello in my area to Rathgar, Rathmines, Terenure, Donnybrook and Ballsbridge.

We see really important work being done by Tidy Towns organisations. They are addressing what is currently a real problem with litter collection and waste management in this city and this country. I urge the Minister of State to support the Bill on Second Stage and let us continue the debate about how we can improve services.

Since we are on the last sitting day, I want to thank the Ceann Comhairle, her staff, the ushers, the security staff and all the support staff, catering staff and everyone in the House who makes our lives and work environment better. I wish all our colleagues a good recess and I hope we return refreshed and reinvigorated.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much, Deputy, and the same to you.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank Deputy Sherlock for bringing forward this legislation to bring bin collections back to public control. I am disappointed but not surprised that the Government is opposing this legislation. Fine Gael has a long history and policy of privatising public services. It has not worked in housing, water or transport and it definitely has not worked in waste management. By his own admission, the Minister of State knows there is a problem here because he would not have commissioned a report in relation to side-by-side competition otherwise. I am not sure that some of the issues the Minister of State raised could not have been teased out during pre-legislative scrutiny. Then, if they were not sorted out at that stage, the Minister of State had the opportunity to vote down the Bill but he did not even give it a chance. It has been a long-standing policy of Sinn Féin to bring waste management back to public control. Privatisation has failed ordinary people. Bin companies act like a cartel in how they raise their prices. When one company increases its price, the rest follow. I reported this practice to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, when I was a councillor in 2016, as referenced by the Deputy.

Earlier this year, Panda increased its prices by 9% for customers. Ordinary people are being pushed to the pin of their collar. No one's wages have gone up by 9% in the past year so nobody's bill should go up by 9% in the same time. Some bin companies have even increased their recycling fees, as the deposit and return scheme has reduced the amount of waste they recycle. It effectively means that people are paying more for less now.

We have a situation that allows multiple bin trucks to operate on the same street. On my road there could be three different companies coming down the road, sometimes at the same time. This goes against everything we are trying to achieve to make waste collection more environmentally friendly. Sinn Féin has raised the idea of taking waste management back into public control in the Dáil on several occasions. In 2019, I came in here after a by-election. I had nine sitting days before the general election was called. In those nine days I managed to introduce a Bill co-signed with Deputy Cullinane. It was a combination of the work I was doing on the council and the work Deputy Cullinane was doing in the Dáil. This legislation was to appoint an independent regulator for waste management with an aim of reducing fees. At the time, we had engagement with SIPTU and Fórsa, which backed this change in policy.

The Dublin city task force also recommended a single bin operator. In 2022, Dublin City Council commissioned independent research which looked at similar-sized cities to Dublin and compared their waste management systems. Dublin was an outlier. It was the only city that was fully privatised. In other jurisdictions, cities of a similar size at least had some part of their bin collection in public control.

Since bin collections were privatised, illegal dumping has been commonplace in Dublin. I am probably paraphrasing the Minister of State when he says there is no evidence that privatisation has led to more illegal dumping. That is the gist of what I thought he was saying. I can only go by what I see with my own eyes. I grew up in north Clondalkin back in 1980s. We did not have much. It was an area of disadvantage but it was a lot cleaner then than it is today. Illegal dumping has no place in our communities. People who do it need to stop because they are affecting all our communities.

In response to a parliamentary question of mine, the Minister for the environment stated that over €27 million is given to local authorities for anti-dumping initiatives. In 2025, South Dublin County Council alone, in my own area, spent over €2 million to tackle illegal dumping. This money could be better used to enhance our communities. We have sports clubs and community groups that are always looking for funding. We should be able to give them this funding rather than tackling illegal dumping.

Over the last number of years, the nature of what is in our waste has changed. For example, in 2012, there were no problems with nitrous oxide. However, earlier this week *thejournal.ie* reported that 160,000 nitrous oxide canisters end up in Irish waste facilities every year. This shows the scale of the problem. Over 13,000 nitrous oxide canisters have been collected by the local authorities in Dublin in recent years. There were 120 explosions over a two-week period in waste compactors in Ireland. This is costly and dangerous. I introduced legislation to tackle this scourge but the Government delayed it by nine months which means it will not be read again until October. We have youth health issues and environmental issues with nitrous oxide. The Government really needs to take this seriously. I gift-wrapped the solution but the Government kicked it down the road.

Sinn Féin is happy to support this Bill. The process of returning waste management to public control can begin with having one company per local authority. A single bin operator per local authority would reduce the number of bin trucks on streets and should reduce the incidence of illegal dumping. This would lead to a decrease in prices, which could be set out in the tendering process. We would like to see this go further by the introduction of an independent regulator. We are drafting our own legislation that will do this, as well as the remunicipalisation of waste and the introduction of a fee waiver. The Minister of State mentioned costs and how this would be paid for. That could be part of the tendering process as well and, again, could be teased out in pre-legislative scrutiny.

We would also allow for local authorities to re-enter the market. The independent regulator would set and review standards, prices for customers and the criteria for workers to be able to join a union, which is really important. Many of the bin companies are not unionised at the moment. As I said already, we introduced similar legislation in 2019.

I am probably the last Sinn Féin person standing before the recess. I thank the Ceann Comhairle and all the staff for their help over the year and their tireless work that keeps this place going. I hope everybody gets a chance to get out and enjoy the good weather and has some sort of a break over the summer. I will see you all after the recess.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Ward. I look forward to seeing you in September.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I want to acknowledge Deputy Sherlock for her work in bringing forward this Bill. We in the Social Democrats will be supporting it. It is a shame that the Minister of State is not willing to engage further than to simply vote it down on the promise that a review will be released in an unspecified time. As somebody who believes in local government and local elected representatives, I want to acknowledge those in Dublin Central and the north inner city and Dublin 7 who do tireless work to advocate on behalf of the residents, many of whom are here today. That is why we are here and what is motivating us to come in here is the removal of the derogation for bags.

I will talk about that in a couple of minutes but before I do I want to come back to some of the things the Minister of State said in his opening speech, particularly the last paragraph. The Minister of State said:

Instead, we will continue to pursue evidence-led reform informed by independent analysis, stakeholder engagement and the updated waste action plan for the circular economy, so that any future changes to Ireland's waste collection systems are based, not on assumption but on evidence and delivers lasting benefits for households, communities and the environment.

Does the Minister of State consider the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to be an independent body that uses evidence to come to its conclusions? The Dublin city task force was commissioned by Simon Harris and was chaired by David McRedmond from An Post. He engaged with the evidence and with stakeholders and came to the same determination, namely, that what we have at present for waste management services, not only in Dublin but nationally, is no longer tolerable. It has led to a system that is clearly not efficient or not suitable for the purpose intended. We need reform on a scale much broader than even what we are talking about today. There should be a process of the remunicipalisation of waste management.

That is not an assumption. Nor is it an assumption to say that streets such as the ones I represent in Stoneybatter have narrow pathways. If they remove the capacity to leave out a bag and introduce a requirement to put out a wheelie bin instead, I will not be able to get a pram or a wheelchair past. It will create a scenario where vulnerable people will simply not be able to get up their street for potentially three days because there will be a multitude of different providers steaming up these streets, which were never created for such large vehicles.

This will mean that people simply will not be able to get through their locality easily. That is not an assumption. It will shortly be the lived reality for people in Dublin 7 as a result of the removal of the derogation relating to plastic bags. I can see the logic of that up to a point. We have a scenario where seagulls and foxes are tearing at these bags. Rubbish is being strewn along the street and that cannot continue. However, the solution is not to remove the means by which a person can simply walk, use their wheelchair or push a pram down the street. Those things should not be in competition with each other.

The remunicipalisation of waste is going to cost money. That is a simple fact, but public services often should operate at a loss. We have created a scenario where large-scale private operators are generating an absolute fortune for themselves but where the payback for the community is a service that often does not meet the standard envisaged. We simply cannot continue along those lines.

There is a lot in this Bill that I will be supporting, but we need action that happen quickly rather than being obliged to wait for a review that will be released after an unspecified period. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission released a report in 2018, which highlighted Dublin as an outlier in terms of having absolutely no control over its waste. The commission updated its report in 2025 and stated, "The current market structure will never properly deliver for the Irish public. A policy change is long overdue. That is a competition authority saying there is no competition for the market. We all have to open our eyes to that. We probably do not need any more reviews. I appreciate that there is a review coming. I ask the Minister of State to engage with Dublin City Council on something more urgent. The derogation relating to rubbish bags will end in October. The ending of the derogation has been delayed for three months as a result of the advocacy of councillors at local level. We cannot have a scenario that when October comes, people will simply not be able to walk the streets in the Stoneybatter area. If the Minister of State is not going to support Deputy Sherlock's Bill, maybe he can support an appeal from all of us to engage with the local authority about finding a solution that is much better than the one people are quite literally dreading at the moment.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle so much for her work over the past year.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is much appreciated, and by the staff too. I call Deputy McAuliffe.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: In case I forget to do so at the end, I take this opportunity to thank all of the people who work here. This is a workplace, and I often remark that when we leave here at 11 p.m. or midnight on a Wednesday, the people we pass on the way out are often the first people we pass on the way in at 8 a.m. or 9 a.m. the following day when the work of Dáil is starting again. It is not a normal workplace, but it is a great place for people to work in together. I acknowledge the huge work the staff do here in extraordinary circumstances.

I rise to speak in favour of the Bill. I would like to see it proceed to Committee Stage. That is not because, on the last day of term, I have caught some sort of rebellious fever. I made a commitment to Deputies Gannon and Sherlock in 2019 in an agreement we signed together to pursue the issue of remunicipalisation. It was the right thing to do then and it is the right thing to do now.

It is not an accident that there are many Dublin-based Deputies in the House for this debate. Even within Dublin, there is disagreement among different political parties as to whether remunicipalisation is necessarily the way forward. Some of our colleagues in Dublin's county councils are often quite happy with the service they have or may have different views from us in the city. Deputy Mark Ward referenced the independent research which Dublin City Council commissioned in regard to this matter and which shows that councillors are of the view that greater control by the local authority is the way to proceed.

To break that down a little, the issues Deputies Gannon and Sherlock are having in the city centre are vastly different from the ones that are relevant in my constituency. We do not have an issue with bags. Nor do we have the same street structures or networks. It is entirely appropriate that there are different ways of collecting waste in different areas. I often think that this House over-regulates what happens at local government level. When I see legislation relating to licences for tables and chairs on pavements, I am aghast at the fact that we are sometimes so involved in local authority affairs. We should be empowering local authorities to make more decisions, including on local taxation. In the area of waste, we should enable local councillors to make decisions-----

Deputy Gary Gannon: Hear, hear.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: -----to put in place waste solutions that suit their areas. If this means that there is a different solution in Dublin City Council's area than in the other local authority areas across the county, then that is how it should be. Unfortunately, that power rests with the chief executive. Despite councillors and the elected representatives of a city wanting something different, they are not empowered to do take action.

I would like the Bill to proceed to Committee Stage, particularly as this debate is only half of the discussion. Deputy Gannon is right. The Government believes that if Dublin City Council wanted to establish its own waste collection service tomorrow, it could do so. Do not forget that Dublin City Council decided to close its waste collection service and to withdraw from the market. The council did not privatise its service, it withdrew its service. It was open to the council to do that. The reality is that in the absence of the local authority having the financial ability to remunicipalise the service, no chief executive is going to make the decision in that regard.

As stated, the debate on the Bill is one half of the discussion. If we are saying that remunicipalisation is the solution, in some ways this Bill could send us in the wrong direction if it is not matched on the other side. For example, what is proposed in the Bill would provide competition. One downside - this is something I would be cautious about - is that if competition for the market were introduced, it would be private operators that would tender in the first round. This would mean that we could see a scenario where one private company would win the tender in all four Dublin local authority areas. As a result, we would essentially have one

waste company. We could see other waste companies collapse or withdraw, and we would then be left in a second round with no company other than the one to which I refer proceeding to tender. That is one possibility.

I pay tribute to Deputies Sherlock, Gannon, Ward and others. We discussed all these potential outcomes and we know that what is proposed would not be a silver bullet. It would give the local authority control, however. It would also give it more power. It would allow it to say that in the context of my area of Finglas, it is not appropriate that because an area is more affluent, people living in that road have access to five bin companies and because somewhere else is less affluent, it is stuck with one bin company. In some cases, bin companies will not even go into certain places or will insist that residents have to bring their wheelie bins up a hill or out onto a main road. That is not right, but there is no way of regulating it because we have competition in the market not competition for the market.

I do hear what the Minister of State says in regard to the review. There are many in government who believe that, for a range of reasons, including environmental reasons, matters relating to the circular economy and so on, competition for the market has its positive benefits. In the context of the previous Government, some of our Green Party colleagues were also supportive of this for a range of other reasons relating to delivering the circular economy.

From what I hear, one outcome of the review could be the creation of a franchised service. The Minister of State's commentary, in which he went on to explain all the negatives of a franchised service, does not fill me with hope. I ask him and my colleague Deputy Darragh O'Brien, if they cannot provide a national framework, to consider whether they could empower local authorities to make the decisions to which I refer themselves.

Deputy Sherlock stated that no other capital city runs its business this way. That is because they are capital cities. Capital cities should in a position to make way more decisions about everything that happens in their area. If Dublin City Council had been allowed address the housing crisis back in 2012, 2013 or 2014, when it was impacting the city far more than anywhere else, we would have been ahead of the curve. We should be allowing Dublin City Council, if its elected representatives so choose, to establish both competition for the market and its own bin service if it so wishes.

Deputy Gannon is right. This is going to involve difficult political choices, particularly as the waiver system that was there came at a cost.

7 o'clock

It was a direct cost. I think it cost nearly €3 million every year. Councillors had to vote every year for that money and that meant that €3 million went on that waiver and it was not available for other services like parks, libraries and so on. That is what local councillors do. They make those decisions. Sometimes we do not trust our councillors enough and I say that because it was a Fianna Fáil Government that removed the powers of local councillors in regard to waste. It was done because there were not brave decisions being made on large-scale waste disposal and all of those reasons but we have moved on in Ireland. We have far better, committed local representatives. There is a very obvious demand by the people who are elected by Dublin city to change the way they collect their waste. This is something that national government should not be involved. Let them get on with it. Empower them to do it. Let them make the popular and unpopular choices that are part of that.

If I was in the Minister of State's place, I would allow the Bill go to Second Stage. We would need significant amendment and other elements to it but I would allow the debate to take place. In the absence of that, I ask that the Minister of State takes on board the comments that have been made here in the House by Members. Should he have the final review and the outcome, he should consider allowing Dublin city to do its own thing. Maybe it should not be limited it to just Dublin city and he should consider allowing any local authority that chooses to collect its own waste to do it in its own way. It is not rocket science. It is waste collection. They should, at the very least, be allowed to decide how that is done.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Sherlock for drafting and bringing forward this legislation. The Green Party has long pushed for household waste collection to be brought back under public control. This proposal is a good example of how we might do this without maybe opting for full remunicipalisation and the risks that could entail in respect of the burden it could place on local authorities.

Waste collection needs to be seen as a public service that needs to be fully integrated into our circular economy frameworks. This Bill would create a situation where we can retain an element of competition but it would be for a market rather than within a market. That would avoid a lot of the inefficiencies and risks we in the current model. The solution is to rationalise the current system, put local authorities back at the centre of waste management processes and use this to get a better handle on pricing and illegal dumping through contracts that are right for each specific area, instead of the one-size-fits-all model we have at the moment that is not actually working anywhere.

The second part of this legislation, which would place a direct duty on landlords to ensure an adequate waste collection service for their tenants, is really important. This mirrors draft legislation that my colleague Councillor Janet Horner was involved with in 2024, which would have significantly helped with illegal dumping in urban areas. This Bill also tackles significant inefficiencies that emerge under the current competition within the market model. Under the current system, it is not uncommon to see several bin lorries from different companies driving down the exact same residential street on different days of the week. Under a single permit model, we would have rationalised routes that access all homes at the same time. This clearly does not make sense from either a cost or admissions perspective.

It would be remiss of me not to specifically reference Dublin as I know the issues this Bill addresses are in some ways most acute in certain parts of our city. My colleagues on Dublin City Council have been doing positive work in this space. Green Party councillors in Dublin have founded and led on the litter and waste committees for the city and on funding additional resources. Some 100 extra staff have been hired to the public domain team to tackle waste and dumping and our councillors will continue to fight for a cleaner and greener Dublin.

My colleague Councillor Janet Horner and our former Green Party TD Neasa Hourigan drafted a landlord waste contract Bill in 2024 to make it the landlord's responsibility to ensure that tenants have a waste contract in place. It is really positive to see that aspects of that Bill are included in the Bill that Deputy Sherlock has introduced. Councillor Horner succeeded in passing a motion in 2024 declaring a litter and dumping emergency in the inner city, and this was followed by a detailed position paper on what the future of waste management in the city might look like, several elements of which are reflected in the Bill. Again, that is something I

really welcome. Importantly, that research examined best-practice examples in other cities, where each example has limitations and the approach of privatised municipal providers for Dublin has clearly failed the city, its resident and visitors. Too often, waste issues are characterised as a behavioural issue rather than recognising a poorly designed system that makes this system inevitable. Dubliners deserve a better answer than being blamed personally for the system's failure.

A single waste provider for the whole of Dublin city was recommended in the past 18 months by the Taoiseach's Dublin city task force report. A report is due to be provided by the Department investigating the feasibility of this. However, as with so many of the report's recommendations, that has yet to materialise. It just seems there is no urgency behind the recommendations of the task force anymore and instead of trying to deliver it, the Government is spending time looking for a political excuse and someone else to blame for why it has done nothing.

It is important to understand that a waste system that works everywhere in the country does not work in the inner city. This is due to several factors, including short-term tenancies, a high number of tourist lettings, flats, apartments, terraced houses and an overall lack of storage space provided for wheelie bins. Despite it being mandatory for households to be able to separate their organic waste, this remains practically impossible for a significant proportion of inner-city homes, as wheelie bins cannot be stored in flats or terraced homes. In the Dublin Central area, an average of 50 tonnes per month of illegally dumped waste is being removed by the council. It is a huge amount of waste, and this is more than is collected in an entire year from whole counties elsewhere in the country.

Our current model of waste management is a direct contributor to this. The *status quo* is simply leaving Dublin communities to suffer and it is clear again that while the one-size-fits-all approach that is applied to waste collection in our country might suit some of the suburban areas, it absolutely does not suit our city centre communities.

Waste is often an affordability issue as well. Not all households, particularly those in urban areas, have suitable spaces for storing wheelie bins. They have no outside spaces and, of course, they are not allowed keep them on the footpaths. This means that in many areas, bags are the notional solution but these cause issues with seagulls or foxes or are intermingled with illegally dumped bags. The net result is our footpaths are strewn with waste.

Dublin City Council recently rolled out a system of waste compactors in the core areas of the city centre. These seem to have been working well and it is actually similar to what is seen in a lot of cities across the Continent. Such a system could work here and would avoid people having to store bins in their homes, which I know is a significant concern for residents in areas like Stoneybatter and Smithfield. It was something I heard about a lot during the recent by-election campaign.

One of the biggest criticisms of the current privatised system has to be how ineffective it has been on keeping waste costs down. I know from my own area how many times residents have raised issues of seemingly arbitrary price increases and extremely opaque pricing structures implemented by the large waste companies. Many have also pointed to the illusion of choice in the current system, where multiple providers are all essentially providing the exact same service at the exact same price and are increasing prices in lockstep. It ends up conferring

no benefits on households at all. These costs then end up disproportionately impacting families who are already struggling to make ends meet. Having children under the age of three adds to bin costs. Often, elderly families or a family with a member who has a disability have additional waste costs that all add up. A single provider would, I hope, allow local authorities to apply downward pressure on prices and keep them consistent for the duration of a multi-year contract with that particular waste provider.

I again thank Deputy Sherlock for bringing forward the proposed changes outlined in the Bill. We know this does not end here. A lot more work needs to be done to deliver a system that is simpler for users, incentivises and helps a greater volume of recycling and waste recovery and will ultimately lead to a greener environment for all our communities, both urban and rural.

On a final note, a Cheann Comhairle, I give my thanks to you, all the staff in Leinster House and all the ushers and caterers for their work over this term.

I know Leinster House does not shut down for the next two months but I hope the pace will be a little less onerous and people are able to get a break.

An Ceann Comhairle: Much appreciated.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank all the Deputies who contributed to today's debate. I acknowledge and appreciate the thoughtful and constructive manner in which this debate has engaged with a really important issue. The one broad consensus and fundamental point that has been raised is that we all want a household waste collection system that is affordable, reliable and environmentally sustainable but also has the capacity to support Ireland's transition to a more circular economy. We want to continue to invest in ensuring we have cleaner communities and higher recycling rates. Deputy Sherlock made that point. We want to reduce illegal dumping and indeed we want a waste service that meets the needs of our householders, communities and businesses.

We also want to see a well-designed waste collection system that not only delivers environmental benefits but also provides householders with the opportunity to reduce their own household waste costs through reducing residual waste, correctly segregating recyclable materials and correctly segregating organic materials. All this can contribute to minimising disposal costs while contributing to our circular economy objectives.

I acknowledge Deputy Sherlock bringing the Bill forward. It provides us with the clear and genuine desire to improve the household waste collection system and to address the concerns that many have in regard to service provision, affordability and environmental outcomes. Those concerns are legitimate and deserve careful consideration. I also acknowledge Deputy McAuliffe for the constructive points he made.

As I outlined, however, the Government does not believe this Bill represents the appropriate means to address those challenges. As I said, the central proposal contained in the Bill is to replace the current household waste collection market with a mandatory franchise model. That is a really significant structural reform that has potentially far more implications for householders, local authorities, waste operators and the wider circular economy. That is

precisely why the Government is opposing the Bill. It relates to the requirement for robust evidence, which involves looking at the pros and cons. I genuinely do not believe a CCPC report or a local authority report has that robust, evidence-led, fact-finding analysis.

As I said, the Government commissioned the independent report and study to examine the feasibility of transitioning Ireland's household waste collection system from the current side-by-side system to a more franchised model. That work examines the environmental, economic and operational implications and considers the experience of other jurisdictions and specific circumstances that apply here in Ireland. Importantly, the purpose of that study is not to validate a predetermined outcome. It is to provide an objective evidence base upon which further policy decisions can be made. Regarding the wider objectives, namely, to deliver better environmental outcomes, support householders and encourage investment, we need to continue to ensure we have investment in more innovative recycling centres. We have a lack of capacity so we need to continue that, and investment certainty is really important in that regard but also to enable Ireland to meet both our national and European obligations, which are far reaching. These will all benefit from a stable and predictable policy framework. That certainty is really important as we want to continue to invest in our waste collection system.

I again thank Deputy Sherlock for bringing the Bill forward and look forward to continuing our engagement with Members of this House. I thank the Ceann Comhairle, members of staff and everyone in Leinster House for their work over the past number of months. I wish them a very happy summer and wish the Mayo team, its manager Andy Moran and all the supporters who will travel up to Croke Park Sunday week for the All-Ireland final well. It will be a very exciting day and we hope they can deliver this time. I am sure we will end that 75-year famine.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: In the spirit of solidarity, as a proud Corkonian who is very proud to now call Dublin home, I extend my support to Mayo as well. They might just do it this time round. I thank all those who came to support the Bill today, including Deputies Ivana Bacik, Mark Ward, Gary Gannon, Paul McAuliffe and Roderic O'Gorman. It is very clear that while we may all have a slight difference in emphasis about what we want to see, there is very much a clarion call that we do need to see some change, particularly in Dublin, and an acknowledgement by the Government that we have to empower the local authorities in Dublin to be able to bring about that change. Deputy McAuliffe made a really powerful point that we do not necessarily need to legislate for the whole country but we have to be able to empower and enable local authorities to find the right system for their areas because, as somebody who grew up in a very rural area, I know the challenges with regard to fly tipping there are completely different from the issues in my home in the north inner city.

The reality is that Dublin finds itself at a juncture. The reason so many people have come to express anger and frustration over the past few months is because a private bin company is effectively foisting a change upon them relating to what is a public service in terms of a bin collection service and the local authority has been rendered almost powerless because it exerts little or no control over those companies.

I pay tribute to a lot of the work that many officials and workers in Dublin City Council do because, in some ways, their hands are tied behind their back. They recognise the issue with regard to landlord responsibility. I am very disappointed to hear the Minister of State's comments about landlord responsibility. Nobody is talking about landlords hovering over their

tenants to see whether they put out their bin on a Tuesday morning. This is about making sure there is a waste contract attached to the tenancy. It is then up to the tenants to try to make good that, but in many instances there is no contract and tenants are in the dark as to what they should do, so we need to try to ensure we do everything possible.

There is no silver bullet with regard to illegal dumping, litter on our streets and all the issues relating to waste. They will all add up but we have to show a willingness to take action. That is the regrettable thing today. We eagerly await this independent review and yet we see that so many of the arguments put forward effectively eviscerate what we are proposing today, so the Government is already pre-empting the outcome of the independent review by effectively rejecting the proposal we are bringing forward, and I regret that. My background has always been to support the evidence, but we see so many other European cities do things very differently and I think most of us would accept that when one walks the streets of so many other European cities, they are vastly cleaner than Dublin. We want to make our city better.

The other important thing to say is that we did not hear any new ideas today, and I say that with the greatest respect to the Minister of State. We did not hear any ideas with regard to the profound challenges we have regarding our plateauing recycling rates and all the other issues that are there.

That is disappointing. This is a forum to bring forward the Government's ideas. If it is not going to accept our ideas, it should bring forward its own ideas but we did not hear any of those. The leader of the Minister of State's party, the Tánaiste, wrote very enthusiastically about the recommendations of the Dublin task force just before the general election in 2024, and a very clear recommendation was to move to a single operator. That seems to have fallen off the wagon in the months since then but it was a very clear recommendation.

The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission undertook a very detailed analysis in 2018. I would be very careful not to disparage the work that went into its report. I ask that the Government be very careful in its commentary with regard to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission. I disagree with it on many other things but we have to respect what it wrote, in particular with regard to waste management.

We eagerly await this report. It was supposed to be published in the spring. We have not heard a date from the Minister of State today and we would like to hear that date. This fight is not going away. It is about our communities, cost and control. We will stand unified in having another go at this to try to change how Dublin, in particular, deals with its waste.

As the final speaker before the Ceann Comhairle, I wish to thank her for her excellent work over the past year. I think everybody across this Chamber would acknowledge she runs a very tight operation and it is hugely appreciated. We all have lots of issues we want to bring forward and it is genuinely appreciated. I thank her for her work and everything she does here. I also thank all of the staff. There are many staff we never see in Leinster House, particularly those of elected representatives, in the Bills Office and in all the other areas. I say thank you to our cleaners, the catering staff, those in broadcasting and to all of our staff. This place would not run without the benefit of people's work over very long hours, as I know when I have to leave my office sometimes after midnight or 1 a.m. when the ushers are kindly asking me to allow them to lock up. I thank everybody and wish them a good summer.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. That is very much appreciated. However, there remains a question.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: As the Deputy knows, the division will be taken after the recess in September.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Minister of State has the summer to change his mind.

An Ceann Comhairle: Agus téarma reatha na Dála ag teacht chun críche, agus sinn ag díriú ar thús an tsamhraidh, táim buíoch do gach Teachta as a gcomhoibriú. Thar ceann na Comhaltaí go léir, gabhaim buíochas le Elaine Gunn agus lena foireann as a dtacaíocht agus an obair mhór a rinne siad. Gabhaim buíochas freisin le m'fhoireann i gContae Loch Garman as an tacaíocht luachmhar a thug siad dom. Cé nach mbeidh an Dáil ina shuí, tá a fhios agam go mbeidh na Teachtaí Dála ag déanamh ionadaíochta ar na daoine ina nDáilcheantair i gcónaí. Tá súil agam go gcuirfidh siad am ar fáil freisin dá muintir agus dá gcairde. Tá mé ag súil go mór le hiad a fheiceáil i mí Mheán Fómhair agus go mbeidh siad athnuaite agus ullamh do théarma an fhómhair.

As we come to the end of the Dáil term and head into the summer recess, I extend to all Deputies my gratitude for their co-operation. On behalf of all the Members, I thank Elaine Gunn and her large team for their support and hard work. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and my Acting Chairs who make it possible for me to carry out all of the other duties. I thank John Walsh and his staff in the dining room, Darren Brady and his staff, Alan Ruane and his team of ushers, and all those who assist us here in Leinster House. I thank my own staff in County Wexford for their valuable support and my private secretary, Jill Gray, and Barry Ryan, head of security.

Even though the Dáil is not sitting, I know TDs will continue to represent their constituents and I hope they also make time to enjoy the company of their family and friends. It is very important to come back refreshed. I look forward to seeing you all in September revitalised and ready for the autumn term.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.25 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 16 Meán Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.25 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 16 September 2026.