



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2026

Thursday, 1 October 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Diaspora Issues

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to report on the implementation of Ireland's Diaspora Strategy 2026-2030. [69242/26]

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I ask the Minister about the implementation of Ireland's Diaspora Strategy 2026-2030. What actions have come out of it and previous strategies to make life better for the diaspora, especially in relation to reciprocal driving licences?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for raising this question. The Government launched its new diaspora strategy at the global Irish civic forum on 30 April. It was launched by the Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond. He has led the largest ever consultation with the Irish abroad, with over 27 in-person meetings around the world. This included Oireachtas Members. We also hosted the first ever online consultation, the global Irish survey, which received some 10,000 responses.

Since then, the Minister of State has promoted the strategy in Britain, the US and Canada. When any of us travel abroad, we are promoting the strategy and indeed our diaspora. November will see the Asian launch in Hong Kong during the Asian Gaelic Games. The response to the strategy has been overwhelmingly positive, with the communities recognising that the 23 commitments the strategy is built around highlight the challenges but also the opportunities they have highlighted through their engagement prior to its launch. The strategy reflects our commitment to a new and unprecedented relationship with the Irish abroad. No matter where you go, depending on who you speak to, people would say there are anywhere between 30 million and 70 million Irish diaspora. We have a huge number of people to engage with. We will shortly publish an action plan setting out how we will deliver on the commitments up to 2030. The work is already under way.

In advance of the opening of the 2027 immigrant support programme, which will be in December, engagement with key stakeholders and service providers is ongoing to ensure the emigrant support programme remains to existing and emerging needs for the most vulnerable. We are working to support capacity development in some of the organisations. This specific request was made during the consultations, recognising the role of the GAA and how important it is for our overseas communities. Discussions are under way with the GAA on refreshing the global games development fund. I was in New York last week, where I engaged with many of our diaspora and saw the appetite among them for supporting our trade and economic priorities. It is welcome to see a set-up for engagement from diaspora business sectors more broadly. I will touch on more points later.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank the Minister. What actions came out of the previous strategies? There is a commitment to conclude the reciprocal driving licence exchange with the US states. I commend Safe Home Ireland and the Irish-US driver's licence exchange campaign on their work in this area. It is important that such arrangements are based on equivalent standards. The Minister will appreciate that aspects of our often nonsensical bureaucracy are a point of frustration for many members of the diaspora, for example those who drove for years in Ireland, have now driven for years in the United States and are expected to jump through all sorts of hoops when they return to Ireland. Will the Minister inform the House of formal arrangements that have begun with any US state beyond New York? When does she expect the first agreements to conclude?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I spoke to some of our diaspora directly when I was in New York. I see the frustration. This is something we all want to get over the line. We have committed to it previously and are working on it. We have driving licence exchange agreements with 21 jurisdictions, from Australia to Canada and everywhere in between. We are now working on concluding agreements with the US. One of the challenges is that every exchange has to be concluded at a state level, meaning we cannot do just one agreement and it has to be on an individual basis. While there has been widespread political agreement on both sides, it has taken longer than anybody would have liked.

There are three areas in particular where engagement is taking place, namely, New York, Massachusetts and New Jersey. I am assured by my colleagues based in the US that they are in consistent and regular engagement on this. Whatever needs to be done on this side, there is a commitment from our Minister and our Government to move it as quickly as possible. However, I do appreciate there is frustration. When we want people to come home, we want to make sure it is as easy as possible for them, but this work is under way and we hope to have it over the line for many of these states as soon as possible.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Earlier this year such an agreement did conclude, but it related to the commercial sector rather than the diaspora. I assume that if we can do it for the commercial sector, we should be able to do it for the diaspora too. I ask the Minister to push forward with this and try to get a means to an end with this. So many people who live in America really need to get their licences. I have people who have moved home from the States coming to my office all the time. They previously had a licence and just want to get it back, and they are

being put through hoops. I cannot understand why it is not an easier process and why it cannot happen faster.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Technical engagements have to happen with the Road Safety Authority. Again, we want to get this done as quickly as possible. The RSA is engaging with its counterparts in New York, Massachusetts and New Jersey, and our teams. I have asked our teams after last week's engagement to make sure we can move this along as quickly as possible.

There is so much more happening with the diaspora strategy. It is about making sure we revitalise the global Irish hub and respond to community needs, promote well-being and look at advocacy on behalf of our diaspora, as well as the excellent consular assistance our teams provide. It is about preserving the Irish language and the history of our diaspora. It is about the role of sport. This year I launched our new sports diaspora strategy in Boston and here, and we want to make sure we are using sport in the most positive way possible. We see that happening in Ireland with the US, the games that have taken place and the connections that can create. We also want to show collaboration between the different organisations. When I was in New York last week, I launched the green book, a directory of our diaspora organisations in New York all in the one place and directory for people to be able to access them.

A huge amount of work is happening, but I appreciate that in the case of practical matters like this we want to get them over the line. We are pushing to make that happen because when people come home, they want to be able to move on as quickly as possible.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Bogfaidh muid ar aghaidh chuig an gcéad cheist eile in ainm an Teachta Richard Boyd Barrett.

Irish Prisoners Abroad

2. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade further to reports from a recent cross-party delegation of seven Oireachtas Members to the trial of an Irish citizen in Germany, where delegates observed serious procedural issues, and further to her personal assurances that she would be monitoring, keeping a very close eye and providing direct and fair oversight and full sight of the trial, the exact way in which she can provide this without consular observers attending the trial, given the absence of a neutral court transcript, and given that trial observation does not constitute an intervention under the Vienna Convention. [69687/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Daniel Tatlow-Devally has been locked up for 23 hours a day in a German prison for 13 months, having taken part in a protest, in which no human being was hurt, against an arms manufacturer providing weapons to Israel to commit its crimes. His family, myself and a cross-party delegation who went over in July to witness the trial believe he is not getting a fair trial and we have repeatedly asked the Minister to send observers to that trial. Despite conveying the impression she is doing that, in actuality she has not done it. Will she send observers to the trial to give some sort of oversight to ensure this show trial is at least observed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for raising this matter. I know he travelled recently with a number of colleagues from my own party and others to Germany specifically to engage with Daniel and his family. I am aware my officials have facilitated that and provided support and we will continue to provide that support to the Deputy and, most important, to his family.

I am following developments very closely and will continue to do so because at the heart of this an Irish citizen is going through a very difficult time, as are his family. Our focus as a Department has to be the welfare of our Irish citizens, whether they are in prison or on trial. Whatever the circumstances, it is about making sure we have compassionate, non-judgmental consular assistance to ensure the well-being of our Irish citizens. That has been my focus and my priority and, indeed, that of our team.

We have a consulate general in Munich, supported by our embassy in Berlin. Our consular assistance unit in Dublin has been providing assistance since September 2025. We have a dedicated consular officer in Munich assigned to the case. Consulate staff, including the consul general, have visited Daniel in prison on seven occasions, most recently on 1 September. Generally when someone is in this situation, there are about two visits a year. There have been seven visits over the last year because of the issues that have been raised and because I am very keen that we engage directly with Daniel and his family. A further visit is scheduled for this week, which reflects a higher level of engagement than we would generally have. These visits allow us to assess the conditions of detention and Daniel's welfare. They are also an opportunity for him to raise with us any concerns about his treatment. We have been very clear in asking him to raise any issues where they emerge.

Germany shares our foundational commitment to the rule of law as a member state of the European Union. While we recognise that laws and practices can differ greatly across the world, we do expect that for a member of the European Union with which we have shared values and commitments, those practices will be upheld. Naturally, though, there are aspects of the legal process in Germany that may operate differently from a legal process here in Ireland. Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned the formal transcription of court hearings being a common practice in Ireland. It is, absolutely. My understanding, and what has been relayed to me, is that it is not uncommon for a presiding judge in that jurisdiction to dictate a formal summary of the proceedings into the official record. I have other examples of cases that have been brought to me where the jurisdiction has done things differently, but it is not specific to the Irish individual. I have to stress that we are monitoring and keeping a very close eye on this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In recent correspondence about this case, the Minister wrote that her Department was satisfied that Daniel was being treated equally before the law compared with any German citizen in his situation. I went to the court in Stammheim. It is reserved for terrorists and organised criminals. Daniel is neither and nobody is suggesting he is, so why is he in that court? No other German citizen in that situation would be in that court for what he is accused of. In the court next door, there were people from a far-right group who had been engaged in an armed coup against the German state and who had discharged weapons, and some of them were out on bail. Daniel has been refused bail. These are people who threatened the German state being treated better than Daniel is. The Minister, in response to us, has said that she is monitoring the case and keeping a close eye on it, and will have direct

and fair oversight and full sight of the trial. The Taoiseach even said we had sent observers on Tuesday. The Minister has not sent anybody to the trial. We were there as a cross-party group including, as she said, members of her own party. It is a show trial. It is not a fair trial. Daniel's legal team say they have never seen anything like it. Will the Minister send observers?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Based on what Deputy Boyd Barrett has just said about the comparison, I am happy to engage further with Daniel's family to see what more we can do. Germany is a country of the EU and we expect the rules to apply, and their court systems and structures to uphold the values we share. I am conscious of what the Deputy has said and what has been relayed to me by colleagues as well. We are keeping oversight of what is happening. We are engaging extensively with Daniel. We are speaking directly to him and his family because, first and foremost, our role is to make sure the welfare of Irish citizens is protected. I appreciate he is in prison, so it is difficult to square those two aspects. At the same time, we have an obligation to make sure Irish citizens are treated fairly. I will follow up with the Deputy on this and see if there is something further we can do. I do stress that among the many different teams engaged on this within Germany, our consular teams are engaging and have full oversight of what is happening in the court. I will follow up directly with Deputies Boyd Barrett and Barry Ward after this to see if there is more we can do.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: For a start, the Minister should just send observers. Frankly, I would like her to go further. The defendants are kept in glass cages. When we were there, security people were blocking us from just seeing through the glass. They cannot communicate properly with their legal team during the trial. They have to depend on interpretation, which means they cannot hear the actual proceedings. They are being treated as if they are terrorists when they are clearly not. The Oireachtas Members and MEPs had pens and paper physically taken off us, so we could not take notes in the court.

It is unbelievable. Not a single motion put forward by the defence is given by the judge. She just ignores everything the defence says. It is a complete show trial. Something needs to be done. What is being done to them is politically motivated. I am asking the Minister to stop conveying the impression that we are observing when we are not and to send observers to watch the trial. The Minister is signed up to European guidelines on human rights defenders, as is Germany, which recommends sending trial observers, yet we will not do it. I do not understand why we are not doing it. I fear it is something to do with not wanting to embarrass the German Government and that has to stop.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I completely refute that. I have raised this directly with my German colleague. I have no issue in raising this case or highlighting where there are issues of concern. I have consistently stated that the role of our consulate and our teams, first and foremost, is to protect and support our Irish citizens. It is not to provide legal advice, nor to contradict or take on the role of the legal advisers. Daniel and his family have a legal team that is supporting them. I have said clearly today that I am happy to engage further based on what the Deputy has just outlined. Another case has been highlighted to me of an Irish citizen who is abroad, where the criminal justice system is different and where the rules being applied are similar to rules applied to other citizens, not just our own. We have to take that into consideration. The Deputy has just outlined another case that I was not aware of, which sounds completely

different and contradictory. I am happy to engage further with the Deputy on this and see if there is more we can do.

Middle East

3. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her position regarding the continued illegal settlement construction by Israel on Palestinian territory; and the dialogue she has with EU counterparts regarding same. [69241/26]

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I would like to ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her position regarding the continued illegal settlement construction by Israel on Palestinian territory; and the dialogue she has with EU counterparts regarding same.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Irrespective of what we might disagree on, this is an issue that we all actually agree on. We all fully agree that the only viable solution for both Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side and to have peace and security, is the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, with Israelis and Palestinians living side by side in peace and security, and with Jerusalem serving as the future capital of both states.

It has been clear for some time now that the unilateral actions by the Israeli Government are aimed not just at undermining the two-state solution but at making it absolutely impossible to ever have a two-state solution. These actions have been escalating in a very established pattern. In particular, the E1 settlement project that was agreed and moved forward by the Israeli Government very clearly attempts to cut the West Bank in half, preventing a contiguous Palestinian State and ultimately the two-state solution. I have urged the Israeli Government to immediately rescind this tender and reiterated our calls for an end to illegal settlement activity.

However, we all know that Ireland alone calling for this is not going to change the actions of the Israeli Government. At every European meeting I have attended, which we are now hosting, and have hosted here in Ireland, but also at the UN last week, I have consistently raised the need for Ireland, the EU and the international community to do more. I can see a shift and a change. I am not saying that has brought about the changes that we want yet. When I attended the UN last week, the very first meeting I went to on the Sunday evening was a focus on the two-state solution. I attended with colleagues from Europe, but also from Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and from the European Council, including our high representative. The very clear view was that if we do not act in a much stronger way, we will be back again next year at the UN talking about how things have gotten worse, not in any way better, which is not an acceptable position for anybody. The humanitarian situation on the ground is appalling. The situation continues to deteriorate. I will continue to advocate for every possible action to be taken at an EU level, but I believe this needs to be on an international scale as well.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The vicious, criminal, heinous crimes of Israeli settlers in recent days is no new departure. The Nakba is now a near eight-decade-long catastrophe of Israeli settlers stealing Palestinian homes and land with impunity. I welcome that the Government has prohibited the import of goods from illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine. I am glad to see that the Minister is advocating and calling this out. It is shameful and a stain upon Ireland

that the Government has sought to insulate criminal terrorists, Israeli settlers, from the most significant impact of sanctions proposed in the occupied territories Bill, through choosing not to include services.

Recent actions by the Israeli Government increasingly point to the de facto annexation of the entire West Bank, including East Jerusalem. What is the Government doing to bring about the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement?

Deputy Helen McEntee: On that last point, there is a proposal from the Commission to suspend the EU-Israel Association Agreement. That was brought about because of the advocacy of Ireland and a number of countries last year. At that time, proposals were also made to impose sanctions on violent settlers and those responsible for the October attacks a number of years ago. What is very clear, unfortunately, and I say "unfortunately" because we fully support the suspension of the association agreement, is that there is not support for that. There is not an ability to progress that particular proposal. I have been advocating, as have a number of member states, for further proposals to be put on the table by the Commission, specifically for the illegal settlements. I have sat around a table with every single member state and we all agree they are illegal settlements. What is happening is illegal. What is happening with violent settlers is appalling. If we are to uphold what we all agree, and what is very clearly set out in international law, then we need to move forward specifically, even if it is only just this and not the whole association agreement, to ban trade with the illegal settlements. I will continue to advocate.

Ireland and Spain are the first countries to introduce legislation. Ours came into effect on 15 September. Through our engagement, we are now seeing Canada, the UK, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg and other countries saying that they are going to do this, which is a shift and a change. I really hope that if we continue to pressure and push this, we will see a greater response from Europe as a whole.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I also hope that there is a shift. When Ireland fails to comply with our obligations under the EU treaties, infringement proceedings are launched against us. What is the appropriate course of action for an EU member state to take when the European Union itself is in breach of its obligations? The Minister's position would suggest that the EU treaties compel Ireland to continue to provide preferential trading arrangements to a state the Government believes to be involved in genocide and the annexation of different territories of its neighbours. Let us say that somehow this situation was unforeseen. Is it now Irish Government policy to refrain from facilitating EU trade deals that could in the future necessitate such a position, however unforeseen?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am not sure the Irish Government can be any clearer in our position. The Taoiseach and all of us have said we are appalled by the actions of the Israeli Government. We consider this to be an attempt to completely eliminate an entire population and remove them from their land. Trade is an EU competence. We have moved unilaterally, which is not something that the Commission or others want to see happen, but more and more countries are now starting to move unilaterally because the Commission is not moving. As I said last week, we are failing people by not moving. We cannot unilaterally pull back from the

EU-Israel Association Agreement. It is an EU-wide agreement. That is why we have advocated for the EU as a whole to focus on this matter.

I do not believe there is a consensus, no matter how much I push this at the moment, to suspend the entire Israel association agreement, or even the trade element of it at this stage. However, we have seen a consistent shift when it comes specifically to the illegal settlements. I refer to Italy and other countries where perhaps there had not been that clarity. Giorgia Meloni in her own statement at the UN last week was clear in saying that she would welcome further proposals specifically related to the illegal settlements in the West Bank. I will continue to advocate and engage with colleagues. I want to stress again, as was highlighted last week, that the immediate need is for more aid to get to people in Gaza and for us to be able to do more in that regard. The situation, particularly coming into the winter, is only going to get worse.

Northern Ireland

4. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the engagement she has had with her British counterpart, the British ambassador, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chris Bryant, over the events of the past few days surrounding the Garvaghy Road in Portadown. [69715/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: We are all familiar with the scars left on people across this island from the Troubles. We know the hard work done by the people of Garvaghy Road in Portadown to build peace, reconciliation and understanding in their own community. The developments of the last two weeks threaten to derail that peace.

What engagement has the Minister had, alongside her Government colleagues, in the past few days with her British counterparts and counterparts in the North?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. As she said, I do not think any of us expected to be here talking about the Garvaghy Road and the potential for a parade or march to be taking place, given the history and the fact that 28 years have passed without this parade. I do not want to get into the decision last week, but the Government's views are well-known in that regard. The focus and priority now have to be on how we move things forward and make sure there is a peaceful solution for the residents, in particular. I can see that for many residents they are quite literally back in 1997, such was the trauma that was inflicted at the time. We need to work together now to see how we find our way out of this.

I have engaged with a range of political parties, my team in the North and residents of the Garvaghy Road. I have engaged extensively with the Secretary of State, Chris Bryant, who has been in Northern Ireland for most of this week. Importantly, there has been significant dialogue and engagement by the Secretary of State with both parties - the residents of the Garvaghy Road and the Orange Order. The most important thing now is to allow time and space for those engagements to continue. While an agreement had not been reached yesterday evening, we saw the pronouncements from both sides. I hope that today those talks will resume and we are able to find a way forward. For all of us, it is about not skipping past what is happening now because we have to resolve this.

We still have to look at the wider picture. We have to look at what we can do. People are talking about having a referendum soon. What this highlights is that so much work still needs to be done in certain areas and communities to try to bring people together, whether through the reconciliation fund, the shared Ireland fund or the Northern Ireland Executive. We need to make sure that come the next election, we have an agreement in place that allows the parties to continue to work together and to look to the future. That has to be our focus and our priority from a Government perspective as well as everything else.

I am engaging continuously. The Taoiseach has engaged with the Prime Minister. Our teams are working to support in any manner we can. Now is a really important moment to allow those engagements to continue.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister for outlining her position. I was on the Garvaghy Road on Sunday. I also met the residents last week. I was living and studying in the North during the last eruption of violence on the Garvaghy Road in the late nineties. The residents' message is clear and they are a genuinely dignified and clear group of people. We need to be careful about some of the messaging around the two sides in this debate because for me there is a clear act of provocation happening from one side, unfortunately, and on the other side what we have seen is compromise and work at peace and reconciliation over decades for their community, all of which is being undermined and torn apart right now. I urge the Government to engage with residents of the Garvaghy Road.

I do not know from the comments of the Minister if that has happened yet or if she simply described the engagement she has had with the Secretary of State. I have concerns around the time and space she mentioned in respect of finding a solution. I appreciate that has to be the case but, nonetheless, every day, minute and hour that this stand-off continues erodes peace in Northern Ireland. It erodes trust in the institutions from both communities, but I would particularly focus on those living on the Garvaghy Road right now.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy and appreciate the comments she has made. It is important, given where we are now and the engagement that has happened and is happening in quite a short space of time, that we allow communities the time and space to try to find a way forward. A legal case is coming up. Given what happened last weekend with the courts, nobody wants another weekend where we have something similar happening. A huge amount of work has been done this week to bring people together and try and find a way forward.

I have been very clear, as have the Taoiseach and others, about our views as to what has happened. That being said, we have to make sure we can find a way forward that does not allow for a return to the past or what we know were very traumatic and horrific events in 1997 and before. That is my focus and priority. Our team has engaged with the residents. Legally, the situation is that the Government has no remit or role in parading. I am very conscious of that. At the same time, I have engaged consistently not just with the Secretary of State but others as well, with a view to bringing forward a resolution.

Beyond the actual issue of the parade, we need to make sure that we are in lockstep in what we are doing next and how we are working together to make sure the communities and residents on the road are supported. Beyond that, we can look at the political side of this with the Executive.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I agree the Government has made its position on the decision of the Parades Commission clear, although that was quite a number of days ago. I am not clear on what is happening from the Government in terms of the diplomatic efforts the Minister referenced. It would be helpful for us to know more about what exactly the Minister is urging people to do. I appreciate the jurisdictional issues, in that the Government does not have jurisdiction, but it has a huge diplomatic role to play in Dublin in respect of what is happening right now.

We know that the Parades Commission decision was wrong. We appreciate that there is complexity around that. More information is needed on that and on what happened with the PSNI's advice, which seems to be a complete misread of the situation. I heard the Taoiseach speak about it this week during Leaders' Question. He suggested that people were demonising the chief constable. That is not the case. We can call out an act that is wrong done by somebody who has also done good work. It is important that the Government asserts that view and makes sure those elements and levers that are available to the Government are being pushed. We cannot go back. This is a lifetime of trauma. There are generations of trauma for this community that needs to be handled delicately before we dial things back, as is the risk.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the comments of the Taoiseach this week. The PSNI has dealt with a very difficult situation this week and has been doing a very good job. I met the chief constable and others not long ago. We spoke about the challenges that remain in Northern Ireland with the PSNI and different communities, how we can bring people together and how the PSNI can be more representative of both communities. There are many different challenges. This week Jon Boutcher and the community in the PSNI have done a very good job in what has been a very difficult circumstance.

I am in constant engagement with the Secretary of State and parties in the North. I travelled to the North. I am also conscious of the role that we as a Government have specifically in regard to parades, and the wider commitment and role we play in peace, security and power-sharing in Northern Ireland. We are working with all sides to try to make sure this issue can be resolved. Beyond that, we need to determine how we support the communities because support will be needed irrespective of what the agreement is or what process is put in place to move forward. I am already engaging with my colleagues and my colleagues in the North on that.

International Relations

5. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the steps being taken by her Department to recognise and further strengthen Ireland's historic, cultural and diplomatic relationship with France, as Ireland's closest European Union neighbour; and whether consideration is being given to initiatives to mark the historic links and friendship between the two countries. [69692/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Ireland and France are neighbours, not simply through geography but also centuries of shared history. I have raised this matter in parliamentary questions previously. On 31 August, I had the honour of attending the ceremony beneath the Arc de

Triomphe, attended by Deputy Ward last year. A wreath was laid to honour the Irish who fought with French armies. La France se souvient de l'Irlande et l'Irlande doit aussi se souvenir de la France. France remembers Ireland and Ireland should also remember France. During our EU Presidency, what can we do to give permanent expression in Ireland to that extraordinary friendship?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I fully agree with him. The relationship and partnership Ireland and France has is shaped by a number of things, including our proximity. With the UK having left the EU, it is our closest EU neighbour. We have deep historical connections and increasingly integrated economic ties. We also have many shared values. For that reason, earlier this year I launched the new France-Ireland joint strategic framework for 2026 to 2030, with my French counterpart Jean-Noël Barrot. The framework builds on and focuses on the achievements of the first joint action plan from 2021 to 2025, which saw a period of significant expansion in our economic and trading relationship and business links as France unintentionally became our nearest EU neighbour.

The new joint strategic framework focuses on a number of things, including co-operation in three broad areas. This is underpinned by an action plan to make sure that we are not just talking about how we can strengthen our relationship, but how we can put that into action and set ourselves targets to move forward. The first is how we work together as partners for a more competitive Europe.

During our Presidency, one of our three priorities is competitiveness. How do we ensure that Europe is competitive? How do we ensure that Ireland, as well as member states and our partners, remain open and competitive? This includes investment in our resources in France. I am pleased to say that, currently, our three new defence attachés to London, Paris and Washington are going through their training. I hope our French attaché will be able to take up that position in the coming weeks. We also have a talent and innovation attaché to our embassy in Paris. Recently, a consulate general was opened in Lyon. In November, the annual France-Ireland Economic Forum will bring together policymakers, industry and business representatives to focus on enhancing our trade and business ties.

Second, we are working bilaterally and in European and multilateral forums, such as the International Organisation of the Francophonie, to promote a fair, safe and sustainable global environment.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I have spoken to the Minister about this before but one person who brings much of the shared history together is General Charles de Gaulle. His ancestry comes through the McCartan family from County Down. His ancestors served in the Berwick's Regiment as part of the great Wild Geese tradition. Ireland fascinated the de Gaulle family intellectually. His grandmother, Josephine Marie Anne Maillot, wrote a biography of Daniel O'Connell, which de Gaulle read as a young man. When he came to Ireland, he met Éamon de Valera at Áras an Uachtaráin in Phoenix Park. This is, therefore, a tangible connection. We also will have a physical connection with the Celtic interconnector. Will the Minister engage with the OPW and French authorities to investigate a permanent commemoration? Potentially, that could take the form of the naming or co-naming of an appropriate section of Chesterfield Avenue in honour of Charles de Gaulle and the enduring Franco-Irish friendship. It would cost relatively little but its symbolism would endure for generations.

Deputy Barry Ward: I support that call for the change on Chesterfield Avenue. As convener of the Ireland-France Parliamentary Friendship Group, I support any move we can make to solidify that historic and cordial relationship we have with France. I acknowledge the increase in our diplomatic footprint in France that the Minister outlined. We have a great team on the ground, and that is yielding results in its own way.

It is a stated aim of the European affairs committee to advance negotiations to make Ireland part of L'Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie. As the Minister knows – she represented Ireland at it - Ireland has observer status at L'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. While we are a part of that organisation, we are not a part of the associated parliamentary organisation. I ask the Minister to commit to support an application by the Oireachtas to become part of the L'Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie. It is not specifically a French thing but, rather, a French language thing. The French language is spoken and studied by more people in Ireland than any other language, so it is an important move to solidify that relationship.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank both Deputies. The naming of this road was raised before by Deputies Heneghan and Ward, as well as by other Deputies. My understanding is that the OPW engaged on this but I am happy to engage with it further to see whether there are different options available. The point is how we commemorate and acknowledge that relationship and connection. I know there are familial connections, such as with the O'Connell family and others. We have launched our new strategic framework, and it is about finding a way within those actions to commemorate that individual.

Beyond that, however, there is a huge amount of work in this document. It is important to progress it from an economic, energy, cultural and international perspective. I am happy to engage with Deputy Ward on his proposal. As he said, it is the only time I have ever given a full speech in French, which I am very proud of. At the same time, we do not have full status or engage as regularly or in the same way as other countries. I am happy to explore that with the Deputy further.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome that. As the Minister said, we have already joined that framework. We should not allow the Presidency to pass without leaving something permanent. I welcome the Minister's commitment to chase this up with the OPW. There is much connection between Ireland and France, about which I am learning more and more. For example, after the Second World War, the Irish Red Cross established hospitals in shattered Normandy towns. The 92nd Infantry Regiment of the French Army continues to carry the heritage of Irish soldiers who served in France centuries ago. Under the Arc de Triomphe, Irish names of Irish descendants can be seen engraved into the rocks. This Presidency gives us an opportunity to ensure that friendship is not only remembered but permanently recognised. Our histories are intertwined and our friendship will endure.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am happy to engage further on this matter. The Deputy mentioned the security and defence space. I met my French counterpart, Catherine Vautrin, on 3 June 2026. We discussed our Presidency priorities and how we advance co-operation on competitiveness and other areas, with particular regard to bilateral co-operation on European

security and defence. In the Middle East, specifically Lebanon, we have a proud history of working together on the ground. Our troops work to protect the Lebanese people and support the Lebanese armed forces. We also have an increasing bilateral relationship when it comes to our defence co-operation more broadly, and I would like to see that expand and grow, given our history and proud tradition of peacekeeping.

This document is a developed blueprint from the previous document. It details opportunities where we can try to strengthen that relationship. I am happy to follow up on the issues both Deputies specifically raised with me.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

EU Budgets

6. Deputy Ryan O'Meara asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will report on discussions regarding the EU budget at the last meeting of the General Affairs Council. [69091/26]

40. Deputy Aindrias Moynihan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for a report on the EU budget talks at the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 22 September 2026. [68987/26]

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I ask the Minister of State for an update on negotiations around the EU's multi-annual financial framework, MFF, with particular regard to Ireland's priorities for these negotiations. The EU budget has to reflect the realities facing Europe today, including competitiveness, energy security, defence and, importantly, food security. For Ireland, one of the most important elements of that budget is the future of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. Will the Minister outline the Government's priorities for protecting the CAP at the next EU budget?

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 and 40 together.

Pursuing agreement on the next EU long-term budget, that is, the multi-annual financial framework, is a key priority for the Irish Presidency. It overarches all our priorities. The Government is advancing negotiations at a critical juncture. We, as the Presidency, are bringing member states closer to agreement on key issues, such as the overall size of the long-term budget, where the EU should focus its resources and where funding should come from.

The General Affairs Council, which I chair, held its most recent meeting in Brussels on 22 September in which the MFF was discussed in public session. This included substantive engagement among member states on the expenditure, volume and revenue aspects of the future long-term budget of the EU. This discussion was the final one in a series of important debates held between European affairs ministers. It comes in advance of the Irish Presidency publishing our compromise proposal in October. Member States used this discussion as an opportunity to note their views on the overall volume of the future MFF and to highlight where

they consider expenditure should be focused. Some member states called for significant reductions on the Commission's proposals, while others called for the volume to be retained. Priorities varied, but member states highlighted the importance of agricultural, cohesion, defence and security, research, innovation and competitiveness for the next EU budget.

Debate has also continued on sources of revenue under the next MFF, which are known as own resources. Discussion focused primarily on five European Commission proposals, namely, the carbon border adjustment mechanism, the emissions trading system, a tobacco excise duty, a corporate own resource for Europe and a so called e-waste-based own resource. While the general consensus is that a significant package of new own resources is needed for the MFF, member states have a range of different opinion as to which should be implemented.

The variety of views, as set out at the General Affairs Council, emphasises the challenge and need for the Irish Presidency to carefully consider all opinions and deliver a compromise that brings member states closer to agreement. In order to do so, we will deliver a compromise proposal - a so-called revised negotiating box - to member states in the coming period. Our intention and role when holding the Presidency is to find the balance between member states and put forward workable solutions to areas of disagreement that are capable of addressing the Union's current and emerging needs for the next decade. We are doing all we can to balance the views of member states, and we are counting on all around the negotiating table to approach discussions following the publication of our negotiating box flexibly and with a commitment to compromise.

At the end of the day, our objective is to ensure that the MFF will continue to support our farmers, fishers and rural communities, enhance European competitiveness through investment in energy, digital and connectivity, support Irish students to go on Erasmus and Irish researchers to have access to grants, invest in peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland and continue the significant EU humanitarian and development assistance outside the borders.

The next meeting of the leaders of the European Union is on 15 and 16 October. We will publish our negotiating box in advance of that. This will be a key milestone in the agreement and will move the Council, which is the member states, closer to agreement on the overall package to ensure a timely agreement is met.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I thank the Minister of State. I will focus specifically on the Common Agricultural Policy and rural Ireland. The CAP is not simply a payment for farmers. It is an investment in the viability of family farms and the communities that depend on them. When a farm is viable it supports agricultural contractors, machinery businesses, vets, hauliers, merchants, local shops and services. The money circulates through the rural community and economy and remains within it. When farming is going well rural Ireland goes well, and that is certainly true in Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny. However, we also have to recognise the pressures farmers are facing from input costs, market volatility, weather events and the need to invest in the future of our farms. As the Minister of State mentioned, negotiations are continuing. As they continue, will the Government make sure the next CAP provides the certainty our farmers need, supports generational renewal and protects the viability of the family farm in rural Ireland?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Irish whiskey is one of Ireland's most successful indigenous export products, supporting jobs in distilleries, farming, tourism and rural communities. The recent announcement that US tariffs on Irish whiskey were to be removed was very welcome. However, producers, especially smaller and independent distilleries, need certainty. Will the Minister indicate whether the Government has received a clear timeframe from the US Administration for the removal of these tariffs? What assurances can be given to producers that Irish whiskey-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): A Theachta, you are referring to Question No. 11. We are discussing Questions Nos. 6 and 40. Question No. 40, which is in your name, relates to the EU budget talks at the General Affairs Council. We will get to Question No. 11.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputy Moynihan will also want to hear about the Common Agricultural Policy but I will leave it to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to talk about whiskey.

The EU budget negotiations are exactly that; a negotiation. It is not like countries are negotiating with the EU. What is the EU? It is the member states of the EU, so it is a negotiation between the member states as to what the priorities are and how much we will spend. It is our role in the Presidency to chair those talks effectively. We have to act as an honest broker on behalf of the member states, and the Government is committed to doing that. We want to bring member states closer together on key issues, including the Common Agricultural Policy. We published our priorities for the multi-annual financial framework in the summer of last year well in advance of our Presidency so that everybody would know what our priorities were and that we could perform the honest broker role with our priorities well known at the same time. The Common Agricultural Policy has been a top priority for the Irish Government. When we go into Presidency mode we have to become an honest broker. However, it is the case that the Common Agricultural Policy is also a top priority for many other member states, although not for all. Our commitment now as honest broker is not only to listen to the domestic point of view and to put forward our domestic position. We also have to listen to the variety of opinions around the negotiating table and we have to drive the compromise among the member states that everybody can agree on.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Following up on my last point, it brings up the broader argument of food security. With Ireland being one of the world's greatest food producing nations, we have a globally recognised reputation for quality, safety and traceability of the food we produce. Our agriculture and agrifood sectors are fundamental to the Irish economy and rural Ireland. Recent events have shown that we cannot take food security for granted. We would never suggest that Europe should compromise on energy security or defence, because they are strategically important. Food security deserves the exact same recognition. Will the Minister of State give a commitment that Ireland will argue strongly and for a properly funded CAP in the next EU budget, as he has outlined Ireland did over 12 months ago? Will he commit to ensuring that protecting our farmers and our capacity to produce food will remain a strategic priority for Ireland in these negotiations, particularly working with like-minded countries that hold the same views on the importance of the CAP and food security?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: In the interests of Irish farming and rural communities, getting agreement on the CAP is hugely important and giving clarity to farmers and rural communities on the shape and size of funding going forward. It is almost as if there are two separate questions on the multi-annual financial framework - deciding how much will be available and, separately, how CAP funding will be available to support rural communities. The LEADER programme is being funded through the second pillar and groups availing of it are very concerned. Will the Minister of State give an outline as to how that funding could be channelled to rural communities? In the interests of farmers, can the CAP aspect be agreed separately from the multi-annual financial framework?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Food security is one of the foundational reasons for the European Union's existence. The Common Agricultural Policy is a treaty-based policy which the European Union has long been committed to. However, some member states tell us that we need to look at other priorities, particularly competitiveness, as I mentioned. We are trying to get agreement on that. It is also fair to say that in my discussions with Ministers around the European table, many of them have prioritised the Common Agricultural Policy and particularly those policies in heading 1 of the multi-annual financial framework proposal.

Regarding the Common Agricultural Policy in general and the questions raised by Deputy Moynihan, there are two questions. One question is the overall size of the budget. We have heard some of the contributor countries say that they want the budget proposal to be reduced by several hundred billion euro. It is not just the size of the budget, though. It is also about where the priorities within the size of the budget are as well. Again, some member states emphasise what they call more modern priorities. The Government's position has been made very clearly. Last year, we thought it was important to get our spoke out to say what our priorities were, so that we could play the honest broker role, which I have been doing. I have chaired the meetings of the General Affairs Council. I have met each minister for Europe or foreign minister on the MFF in the past month, in a confidential format to find out where they are. We will propose our negotiating document in the coming period. That is not the end of the line. That would be a pointer towards the leaders getting this agreement over the line. It is hoped that our negotiating box will allow the leaders to come to an agreement. What they agree could be different and could be better or worse, from different people's point of view. It could also be different at the end of the day. In the next few weeks, our negotiating box is not the end of the story. The end of the story is when the leaders agree at the European Council. All of them have to agree and the European Parliament has to consent to the final outcome on the amount. There is a lot of work to do even after we put forward our negotiating box.

Question No. 7 taken with Written Answers.

Diplomatic Representation

8. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views on the merits of establishing embassies in all EU accession countries with a view to increasing diplomatic relations as negotiations on their prospective membership continue. [68253/26]

85. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her plans to support the establishment of embassies in all EU accession countries with a view to increasing diplomatic relations as negotiations on their prospective memberships continue. [68254/26]

Deputy Barry Ward: I support the increase of Ireland's diplomatic footprint generally. In the European Union it is hugely important that we invest in those relationships. There is no EU country that does not have an embassy here and there is no EU country in which we do not have an embassy. In relation to accession states to the European Union, an issue that, as part of our Presidency, is hugely important, there are at least three that will come into the accession process, hopefully quite soon, or are completing it, where we do not have embassies. Has thought been given to establishing a permanent diplomatic presence in those countries?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 85 together.

Ireland strongly supports EU enlargement as the European Union's most effective policy for ensuring the security, stability and prosperity of our Union. Ireland strongly benefited from EU membership and we believe that other European countries deserve the same opportunities that European Union membership has brought to us, provided that the necessary reforms are implemented.

EU enlargement is also a key priority of our EU Presidency and takes up a lot of my time as Minister of State with responsibility for EU affairs. During our Presidency, we have already secured significant progress on enlargement over recent months. In July, during the first month of our Presidency, I chaired the highest number of accession conferences, which are the formalities of moving along the process, in a single day since 2002. We advanced the candidacies of Montenegro, Albania, Ukraine and Moldova.

Over recent years, as a demonstration of our commitment to EU enlargement, we have significantly strengthened our diplomatic ties with candidate countries, including through the opening of new embassies in Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in September last year. Ireland also maintains embassies in Ukraine and Türkiye, while our embassies in Athens, Ankara, Belgrade, Bucharest and Budapest are accredited to Albania, Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo, respectively.

Decisions on new missions will be taken in the framework of Global Ireland 2040 and the subsequent whole-of-government regional plans committed to in the programme for Government. All decisions on new openings are based on a robust analysis of how they will support our citizens, contribute to the promotion of our political and economic interests and promote our culture internationally.

Deputy Barry Ward: I entirely agree with what the Minister of State has said about the importance and I also recognise the number of new embassies that have been opened. I was in Moldova last September during the parliamentary elections and I met the ambassador who was setting up the embassy there. Just this week, I attended an EU enlargement conference in Tirana in Albania and I met our Greek ambassador, Ciara O'Floinn, who was not just there and present for the conference in Tirana but was clearly very well connected with Albanian parliamentarians and is clearly very present on the ground in Tirana as well.

I recognise the hard work that has been done by our diplomats who cover, on a non-resident basis, countries such as North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania. Should we now be taking the next step of opening embassies in these countries? Certainly in relation to Montenegro the received wisdom is that it is very far along the track. The Minister of State mentioned that it is one of four countries which are progressing their accession status. In fairness to Montenegro, it has done a huge amount of work. I met the delegation in Tirana this week and I have also met them here. Surely if we are to maintain the principle of having a presence in every EU country, we should also have a presence in those countries close that are to accession.

The Minister of State mentioned other countries such as Kosovo, Georgia and Türkiye. We have an embassy in Türkiye but Georgia and Kosovo are covered by the embassies in Türkiye and Hungary, respectively. They are a little bit further away, realistically. Montenegro seems likely to become a member of the European Union in the coming years and we do not have an embassy on the ground. I am not saying we do not cover it because I know the embassy in Belgrade does a super job there and I pay tribute to it for the work it does. The principle of having a presence in countries is very important. Enlargement is close to our hearts. We were part of the first wave of accession to the European Union and we have been a very important part of many of the accessions since then. Part of this involves establishing a diplomatic presence in these countries.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank Deputy Ward. I am sure the Minister and the Government will take this matter very much into account.

The very fact we opened up new missions in the region in the past year in particular means we are now less thinly spread. Before our embassy was opened in Serbia, which was relatively recently, Montenegro was covered from Budapest, along with other countries, including Serbia. Now the staff of the embassy in Budapest have more time and can also focus on Kosovo, where they are still accredited, while the embassy in Belgrade can focus on Serbia and Montenegro. We are less thinly spread and have more resources in the region. This has been noticed. It gives us a chance to have a deep connection. Deputy Ward mentioned our ambassador in Greece with regard to Albania. It is easier to do this if there is only one country attached to another. It is relatively common that we have countries attached to particular embassies. We do not have a diplomat in every mission.

Without prejudging any Government decision on this, it is the case that we have an embassy in every EU member state. Our diplomats do extraordinary work. They provide extraordinary value for money. They do diplomatic work, consular work, political work and trade work. They help to promote Irish business and trade and, therefore, help to create jobs here. They do incredible work. We have one in every EU member state and if we go with this logic, I would have said that it is likely the Government will make a decision, certainly at the very latest when some of these applicant countries become member states of the European Union. All of this is, of course, under constant review by the Government and we certainly appreciate the need for it and the advantages that it brings.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State and I agree with what he said about our missions on the ground. They provide consistent, excellent service to Irish citizens there and here because of the work they do. The Minister of State mentioned trade and there is also

cultural engagement, the presence on the ground and increasing the profile of Ireland in these countries.

I also recognise what the Minister of State said about the excellent work done by ambassadors who have responsibility, on a non-resident basis, for countries such as Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania. I recognise how much work they do. I also take on board what the Minister of State said about this being under review and the principle that if and when these countries become members of the European Union, it will, hopefully, be a priority to open embassies there.

There is no lack of contact with those countries, and when their delegations come here to meet the European affairs committee or to meet me, as Chair of the committee, they constantly say there is contact with the Irish Government, but we must consider maintaining our connection to accession. When we think of it, we were not only part of the first accession but also key to the negotiations on German unity in the first half of 1990. In 2004 we were key to the day of welcomes when the largest accession ever, of ten new member states, happened during our Presidency. We were key in the negotiations to the most recent accession of Croatia in 2013. This is something that works for us because we understand the value of being part of the European Union and we know how much Ireland has benefited from it.

As the Minister of State has said, we want to make sure the countries that want to share in the success and prosperity should be given the opportunity to do so wherever they can. Part and parcel of this is to send a very clear signal to countries such as Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia that we are so invested in this that we are going to open on the ground resident diplomatic representation in their countries. This would be a very welcome move. I say this conscious of the fact that we are serving these communities and countries extremely well as it is. I think we could do it better. I recognise the commitment the Minister of State has made in terms of the quality of service we are providing at a diplomatic level in these countries as well.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputy Ward has made all of his points very well. Again, it is important to remember that the focus of our missions abroad is primarily to support our citizens, to contribute to the promotion of our political and economic interests and to promote our culture internationally. I am familiar with a number of cases in the region that we will never see in the media or on social media where diplomats are really going out of their way to help Irish citizens who have got into difficulties of various kinds. We all know about these situations. They do incredible work. I said earlier that our embassy in Budapest looked after Serbia but it was actually our embassy in Bucharest. It was our embassy in Romania that looked after Serbia. However, the point is valid that having more embassies frees up resources, and it has freed up significant resources. There is now a significant focus on Serbia and Montenegro and, as I said, our embassies in Budapest and Bucharest can focus more on the work they do there. Embassies in places such as Bucharest are very busy because there is a huge connection between Ireland and Romania in terms of the movement of people. Again, if we look at Moldova, we have opened an embassy there. This is important from the point of view of it being an accession country but there are also a lot of people coming from Moldova to Ireland. This generates work for an embassy also.

There is a range of different factors that the Government has to take into account when opening embassies, primarily resources. I am hopeful in the context of the accession, without

wishing to prejudge the situation, that the Government will be inclined to continue its position of having an embassy in every member state of the European Union. I can tell Deputy Ward that during the Brexit process it was very useful to have somebody in every capital. It was very useful to get our position across and explain the difficulties we were facing. When other countries are in difficulties we hear it directly if we have embassies there. I thank Deputy Ward for raising this point.

Passport Services

9. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the action being taken by her Department to reduce the current re-processing timeline of a passport application where a query is raised, in view of the fact that when an additional information request is made, the application is paused until such time as the new documentation is received and processed, which can add an additional 15 working days to an application. [69138/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Minister outline what action is being taken by the Department to reduce the current timeline for reprocessing a passport application query when a query is raised, in view of the fact that when an additional information request is made the application is paused until such time as the new documentation is received and processed, which can add an additional 15 working days, which is three full weeks, to the application?

10 o'clock

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. If we look at the timelines and the work done this year, the passport service has issued over 740,000 passports to date, and it will continue to issue a significant number between now and the end of the year. All application types are currently being processed well within the advertised turnaround times. In fact, I would say that if people ordered a renewed passport this morning, it would be received in the post tomorrow, such are the turnaround times.

In the case of first-time and child renewal applications, supporting documents are required to be submitted. I appreciate, as we all do, that there is a process there that takes longer but it is, essentially, a confirmation of our citizenship, so it is an extremely important process that the office has to go through. The turnaround time for these applications begins on the date the required documents are received. We tend to see those paper applications being submitted, in particular, for the first-time child applications.

In cases where an application is incomplete or incorrect, and that is when we hear from people and they come to us, the passport service will contact the applicant to advise them of what is required to ensure their application is complete. The passport service then operates a document management system whereby incomplete applications are prioritised once the additional documents are received by the passport service. It had been the case previously where those applications may have gone to the back of the queue or might not have progressed as quickly. That has now changed, thankfully. It is now the situation that until the documents are received, those applications are paused, and then they are taken up and immediately prioritised once they come in. A number of steps still have to be taken once the documents are

received, including registration, scanning, document verification and a review by an entitlement officer.

While it is said that this can take up to 15 working days, my experience is that when people engage with the Passport Office and send in those documents, and they are correct, the process moves much more quickly. However, there can sometimes be cases where there are challenges, and cases where the documents that have been resent have to then be sent again. These are the instances where we see applications taking a little bit longer. What we have tried to do to prevent that from happening, and I remember this from putting in the applications for my own two little boys, is put in place a form with a tick box at the front detailing exactly what applicants need to have sent in along with their applications. There are also video tutorials and a helpline for people to be able to ring up to make sure they have everything right. Additionally, when documents are sent in, they go directly to the team, so they know those documents are there on a desk and need to be scanned in. I will comment later on the office more broadly and how it has been expanded over the last number of years.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister very much. It is important that I first acknowledge that huge improvements have been made by the Passport Office. In fairness to the staff, they are extremely helpful when we do contact the office. My concern is that in a lot of cases where we run into problems, it relates to young children. If parents have two or three children who they are trying to sort out passports for, it is very stressful. When the notice comes and they are advised that it is 15 working days, people get even more stressed out. This is something we need to look at.

Equally, we need to look at the whole issue of advising people about getting applications in on time. I think the requirement should be that people should try, if at all possible, to get applications in four months before the time of a flight, because issues can arise. If two issues arise, for example, then there could be two periods of 15 working days. That is where the real stress comes from. This is something we might try to look at to see how we can help address the situation. The other question that comes up quite a bit is in relation to photographs for young children. It is a real difficulty, and something we need to look at as well.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have campaigns but what I always try to do, and I encourage colleagues to do as well, is to highlight, insofar as possible and as often as possible, on our own social media and our own channels, just how important it is for people to apply on time. The ones that we hear about, and the ones that come to our offices, are naturally those instances where a mistake has been made, people have forgotten or people do not realise their passport is out of date. In particular, people might decide at the last minute to take a holiday and their infant child does not have their first passport. It is always advisable, therefore, to apply for a child's passport as early as possible because a much longer process has to be gone through. Citizenship does have to be confirmed and a process also has to be gone through with the Garda and others in terms of checking, so the earlier a person can make those applications, the better. I will continue to make sure that our campaigns roll out throughout the year, and not just throughout the summer months. Actually, it is when it is not the holiday season that people should be thinking about making sure that their house is in order.

In terms of the photos, a lot of what was happening was to do with photos, with faces not being positioned correctly and issues in terms of lighting and backgrounds. There are video

tutorials for families to be able to look at how to make sure their photo is correct and what they are sending in is correct. Where there are issues continuously emerging, however, as the Deputy highlighted, we need to do more to specifically home in on those issues and highlight them in our online system to ensure that when people go to the Department's website, they can see those issues very clearly and they are brought to their attention before they make their application.

Deputy Colm Burke: One of the problems we find is that people going on holiday, for example, in July, apply for passports in May, when, in fact, they could have easily applied in February or March. The Department might consider bringing forward the awareness campaign to early January or February. It is something that needs to be looked at to encourage people to apply well in advance of the time they intend to travel.

In relation to photographs, one of the common issues that comes up, especially with very young children, is the difficulty a parent has in trying to get a child to stay still for a photograph. It is one of the concerns that comes up quite a bit, and it can delay an application quite substantially. Can we look at that issue as well, as regards how we can expedite that whole area?

I again thank the Department and the Passport Office for the work they are doing and for dealing with situations where there are serious issues, especially when someone wants to travel for health reasons or to support a family member who is unwell in another country. I very much appreciate the help that is given to them.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): With the agreement of the House, I call an Teachta Bennett.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome the work the Passport Office does. I believe it is very efficient. I see many people getting their passports within a week of applying. I believe it is a fantastic service and does operate very well. I encourage people to apply online because it is the fastest process, whereas the paper process can be much slower.

What I would like to say today concerns the checks. I brought this issue up when I met the Passport Office in the audiovisual room one day. The Passport Office seems to have a system where it checks the photographs and the birth certificates as the application proceeds through the process, instead of checking everything in one instance. I have had complaints come into my office where people have had to wait six months because, on the first check of a passport, the pictures were not correct and they had to resend the pictures. The application then went back to the checker again but then the next issue arose, instead of all the issues arising during the first check by the Passport Office. I have requested before, and I request it again, that checkers request everything in the first instance instead of people posting documents back and forth and incurring postage costs as well. I thank the Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will be very honest. I have not heard of anybody waiting six months which is a long, long time because we now have 840 members of staff working around the clock to respond and to make sure the passports are posted out and everything is turned around as quickly as possible. Some 97% of passport applications are now online, so

everything is uploaded and we do not have that issue with postage time, although that method is obviously quick as well.

For anybody whose application has an issue, it does not go back to the end of the queue. That does not happen. It is paused. The Passport Office cannot progress an application, particularly a first-time application, if it does not have all the details. I know from my own office and from dealing with the passport service, that if you pick up the phone and say there was an issue with an application but that the new documents are now in and ask the staff there to make sure it is progressing as quickly as possible, they generally do so. I have yet to see for myself where people are waiting up to 15 days.

At the same time, it is about making sure that we are all highlighting the need for people to apply on time, make sure their documents are correct and make sure things are signed appropriately so that, when the team receives them, applications can move through the process as quickly as possible. It is very much linear. I have been in the office a number of times, and it is not that an application goes from one part of the process and then takes weeks to get to another. They are all working in tandem with each other and moving at a really efficient rate, so much so that we have won awards in terms of our new online system. We now have a new passport as well, which is cutting-edge in terms of our security mechanisms.

All of the points made just highlight how well the Passport Office is doing but also the need to constantly highlight to people that they need to get their passport applications in on time and to appeal to them to please make sure their documents are correct.

European Union

10. Deputy Aisling Dempsey asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the way in which Ireland is progressing EU enlargement. [69008/26]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Dempsey. The pledge of the Government for this EU Presidency was that we would seek to repeat the successes of the past in substantially advancing the case of EU accession countries.

Given that many of the countries that lie along the eastern boundary of the EU have a binary choice facing them, between the EU and the dreaded Putin, I ask the Minister of State to give us a mid-term report on progress.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank the Deputy. I also thank him for mentioning that it is mid-term because today we are basically three months gone with three calendar months to go. We strongly support EU enlargement. It is a key priority. We have already secured significant progress on the enlargement files and we want to maintain that progress. The entire Government, including the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I are working every day to make this a reality.

In July, during the first month of our Presidency, I chaired the highest number of accession conferences in a single day since 2002 - we called it Super Tuesday - advancing the candidacies of Montenegro, Albania, Ukraine and Moldova. On that day, Montenegro closed two extra chapters, with more than half of its negotiating chapters now closed. Albania entered the next

phase of its accession process with the closure of its first three negotiating chapters. We also facilitated the opening of the second negotiating cluster, cluster 6, with both Ukraine and Moldova.

As holders of the Presidency, we are advancing crucial discussions on enlargement. We had the informal meeting of European affairs ministers in Dublin in September and I facilitated a discussion on new safeguards for future accession treaties. We are already getting into that phase of asking the existing member states what we need in terms of safeguards. This is a clear indication the process is moving forward and member states are starting to react to that.

Over the coming months, we stand ready to advance the candidacies of every candidate country, provided, of course, that reforms are implemented and they fulfil the conditions. That is challenging in some countries. We need, and will look for, EU 27 agreement, with every single member state agreeing to the closure of all remaining negotiating chapters with Montenegro by the end of the year. This will depend, of course, on the implementation by Montenegro of its reforms and the agreement of every member state.

We will also continue to advance the work of the *ad hoc* working party on the drafting of Montenegro's accession treaty. We want to close more chapters with Albania and we are working now to open more clusters, all clusters, with Ukraine and Moldova.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I would like to refer to three countries specifically. I acknowledge the foresight of Montenegro in adopting the euro many years ago and its commitment to becoming a member. Moldova has a new Government and is passionate about being a member of the EU. We know the work the ambassador, Larisa Miculeţ, is doing here. I understand the Minister of State hosted the Deputy Prime Minister of Moldova here yesterday.

When it comes to Ukraine, while we are changing some of the circumstances of the huge number of Ukrainians residing in this country, the most significant thing we can do today for Ukraine is substantially advance its case for membership. There is nothing that would do more for Ukraine than membership of the EU. What is happening in respect of those three countries?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: All I can say is that those three countries are on the list for major progress this year. As I said, however, it requires every single member state of the EU to agree.

Even this week, I have had quite a number of discussions, including with the Moldovans yesterday and the Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister the day before. I am in constant contact with the Montenegrin Government. I have also had discussions with existing member states about how we can move the process forward. We are working very hard to bring more negotiating chapters forward for closure for Montenegro and Albania next month and to open a number of the clusters of negotiating chapters for Ukraine and Moldova next month as well. It is going to be very tight to get some of that across the line, but we, our Department, all the officials and our embassy teams are working very hard on it.

It is important to remember that all of those countries are extremely vulnerable in their own way. The Deputy is right that membership of the EU is the single best guarantee of safety, security and democracy for them.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: Deputy Barry Ward asked earlier about diplomatic missions. The Minister of State referred to Serbia and the fact that we have a new mission there. I want to echo what has been said about our diplomats. The finest people we have in our Irish public service are to be found in the diplomatic corps, serving this country as great patriots throughout the world. I have never failed to be impressed by them. I want to ask, however, about the situation in Serbia because the death of Ratko Mladić raised certain issues from the past. There appeared to be a willingness in Serbia, a candidate country, to make a fuss and commemorate the man's death. He was a war criminal. Former President Vučić did not attend his funeral but a number of ministers did. Did the behaviour of people in the Serbian Government raise questions about whether Serbia is, in fact, today embracing the spirit and values of the EU?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: As a matter of fact, ministers from a number of member states raised that issue at a number of the meetings we have had recently. What happened in terms of that funeral was simply not appropriate for somebody who had been jailed for genocide. It was totally and utterly inappropriate. We know, though, that in Serbia there is a part of the population that very much wants to have strong ties with the EU. The current Acting President, Ms Ana Brnabić, was Prime Minister when I was previously Minister of State for European affairs and she seemed to be a very pro-European person. She led Serbia's negotiating teams at some of the intergovernmental conferences we had. We did attempt, as holders of the Presidency, to bring some progress to Serbia's candidacy before that. It was very challenging. Many member states had issues, so that is off the agenda for now, I would say. Serbia is a candidate country, however, and the most important part of being a candidate country is that it has a pro-European direction and implements the reforms it needs to implement. That includes a commitment to democracy and the rule of law if it ever wants to become a member state of the EU or if it has that European vision we all cherish.

Trade Agreements

11. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for the up-to-date position on the tariff on Irish whiskey exported to the United States; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [69128/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Irish whiskey is one of our more successful indigenous exports, supporting jobs in distilleries, farming, rural communities and tourism. The recent announcement on the removal of US tariffs on Irish whiskey is very positive. People in the industry, however, need to see things move from an announcement to something concrete. Will the Minister give an update on the current position regarding implementation and any engagement the Government is having with the EU and the US on it?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Like all colleagues, I very much welcome the announcement by President Trump during his recent visit to Ireland regarding the elimination of US tariffs on Irish whiskey. As the Deputy said, this is a hugely important market for us. The US market, in particular, is a very strategic market for Irish whiskey.

Irish whiskey exports to the US in 2025 were worth €362 million, according to Eurostat data. This represents approximately 39% of overall whiskey exports, which is a huge amount when looked at on that scale. The elimination of the 10% tariff on whiskey will also amount to a saving of approximately €36 million for US importers of Irish whiskey. Again, that highlights the fact that tariffs do not benefit anybody. On the US side, there will be a saving of approximately €36 million. Given that it is such an important market for us, we want to keep those numbers high.

My officials continue to actively follow up on the technical implementation. Our team and embassy in Washington are in close contact with the Office of the United States Trade Representative on this. It usually takes time before adjustments can be made, but we are hopeful that we will see these brought in as soon as possible. While I cannot give a specific date, we are actively working and engaging on the matter.

The exemption from tariffs on whiskey shows a welcome for European spirits exported to the US. We want to continue to call for zero tariffs for all whiskey exports, not just for those of Ireland. This is in both of our interests. It remains a priority for the Irish Presidency, the European Commission and EU member states. We also want to see the full implementation of the EU–US joint statement and the extension of exemptions to other areas.

The last couple of months, in particular, have allowed us to get to a point where the relationship has stabilised. Last year was particularly turbulent but, with the Turnberry agreement and the recent ratification by the European Parliament, we are now in a position where the relationship is stabilising in a way that assists in getting us back to where we need to be, even though we might not like the legal direction or the positions that have been taken by the US.

Importantly, through the EU Presidency, my ambition as Minister for trade is to see what more we can do and what other industries we can support. Specifically for the whiskey industry, it was important that we achieved this given the all-island nature of it. Many people contributed to it.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: While securing tariff-free access to the US is hugely important, there is also a significant opportunity for the future development of the Irish whiskey sector, as the Minister mentioned, through the whiskey technical file and the protection of Irish whiskey's geographical indicator. Many producers, farmers and other stakeholders believe the technical file can help to ensure that consumers, when they buy Irish whiskey, are buying a genuinely Irish product from Ireland, with stronger links to Ireland, including greater use of Irish-grown grain. That would only strengthen the premium reputation and the authenticity of Irish whiskey in the international market. It would also create additional opportunities for Irish tillage farmers and rural communities. Does the Minister agree that, alongside securing tariff-free access to the US, the Government could maximise export growth in Ireland by encouraging a stronger connection between the whiskey sector and Irish grain growers?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Any way in which we can highlight our produce that is home grown and directly connected to our food producers is a win-win for everyone here. I am not just talking about whiskey. I am also talking about food and other types of spirits we produce. There is a connectedness and when it comes to source to product, our country is seen as green,

sustainable and one that applies the highest standards across the board. Therefore, we should take every opportunity we have to highlight our produce, farmers and excellent agrifood industry.

We want to expand and grow, so with 39% of our whiskey going to the US, there is an opportunity with zero tariffs to do even more, but we also want to make sure at the same time that we are advocating for produce at a European level because tariffs do not benefit anyone. They do not benefit the producers, individual countries or consumers or buyers of the products. We need to focus on how we can advocate for our industries at home and at a European level and that is exactly what I will be doing in the upcoming informal trade meeting, to which I will welcome colleagues from across the EU and from other parts of the world, and where the focus on the US and other countries will be a particular emphasis.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: While the whiskey technical file might often been seen as led by the Department of agriculture, and we have shown it is hugely important for Irish whiskey exports, can co-ordinated efforts be made across government, whether in the Department of enterprise, foreign affairs or agriculture, to enhance the position of Irish whiskey and grain growers and to press it forward?

Second, to return to the question on tariffs, the Minister might not have a timeline for it today. What will be the next steps in bringing about that tariff-free access?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The co-ordination is already happening. The fact this was achieved, that there is an agreement with the US for Irish whiskey, came about not just because of political engagement from my side. I engaged directly with Mr. Jamieson Greer and the ambassador. The industry and agricultural sector engaged directly, as did the Taoiseach with President Trump. There has been a significant level of engagement from agriculture and trade and from the economic side of things by the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, as well the representative organisations on the ground. That is the approach we are trying to take more generally.

I was in the US last week. In the new Ireland House, Enterprise Ireland, Bord Bia, Fáilte Ireland, the consulate and the diplomatic teams are all working together in the same building. Where we can promote and work together on different issues, that is exactly what we are doing. That is to assure the Deputy that the co-ordination and co-operation, not only on whiskey but in every sector we are trying to promote and expand, is happening already. Our officials, in particular in Washington, are working around the clock to make sure this can come into effect as quickly as possible. While I cannot give a timeline, I hope to see it happen in the coming weeks.

EU Budgets

12. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her Department's priorities in negotiating the multi-annual financial framework. [69077/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Much of the daily lives of our citizens, from farmers to researchers, small businesses and community organisations, is shaped by what is in the EU budget. We

have seen calls across Europe, including from the likes of Chancellor Merz, for a slashing of social cohesion funding and a focus on a wartime economy. What are the Department's priorities for this multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and how is the Government advocating for Irish interests in negotiations?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: First, if the Deputy has read the letter from Chancellor Merz, she will know that he did not say the cohesion budget should be slashed or that a wartime economy should be funded.

Pursuing agreement on the next MFF is a top priority for the Irish Presidency. The Irish Presidency has advanced work ambitiously and at pace over recent months in an effort to bring member states closer to a consensus and with a view to concluding overarching negotiations on the MFF by the end of 2026. In an effort to do so, the Presidency will deliver a compromise proposal on key issues related to volume, expenditure and revenue to member states in October. It will then be for leaders at the European Council to decide the direction of negotiations, but what is clear is the need for compromise and flexibility among all member states. Each and every member state has to agree to this proposal.

As the holders of the Presidency, we are committed to our role in being an honest broker in negotiations as we continue to seek workable compromises in some of the key outstanding questions under discussion. This includes the overall size of the MFF, the sources of revenue and the balance between expenditure priorities. There have been varying views among member states throughout the negotiations on these key questions, and they remain today. Ireland's compromise will seek to move everyone closer to agreement.

We recognise that it will be challenging for Ireland to bridge the gaps between member states, but we have made every effort to do so. This has included four substantive discussions among permanent representatives in Brussels and three debates among European affairs ministers at the General Affairs Council, which I chair, as well as bilateral meetings with all member states by our permanent representative in Brussels in July, and by me in September. This has been complemented by engagement with the Taoiseach, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and other Ministers with their EU counterparts in bilateral exchanges. In all these engagements, we have listened carefully to all member states and now, in our honest broker role, we are carefully considering compromises based on sound and robust evidence, which we believe will be capable of moving member states closer to a consensus.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Voices in that letter did call for a cut in funding. That is just the reality of the reporting.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputy referred to a slashing of cohesion funding

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The letter states, "The funding should be focused on common investment in security and defence, competitiveness, innovation and the fight against irregular migration". While I appreciate the Minister of State's description of the process he is engaged in, I would like to understand how he is representing the interests of Irish people.

I am extremely concerned with the development of the next MFF based on the direction of travel at EU level. The EU cohesion funding, horizon funding, the Common Agricultural

Policy, CAP, and other key supports that are vital to many people across Irish society are under serious threat. These are also things that protect our democracies and societies from outside interference and ensure we have just and open societies and that children do not grow up in poverty and into adulthood in a world of fires and food shortages. This is the opportunity cost when the sole priorities of the EU are competitiveness and spending on the defence industry. Nothing the Minister of State has said has assured me he is pushing back against that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I am glad I pushed back against the Deputy's initial question because she went on to quote from the letter. The letter also says there should be cuts across all the headings and that the member states that signed it accept an increase in the EU budget. During our Presidency, I have to represent not just this country but all the member states and what they want is a cut to the increases proposed by the European Commission. They have accepted that there will be an increase in the EU budget.

We have to balance that. We have to get agreement from every member state given that each member state has a veto on this process, not just Germany or any other country that might be mentioned. Every member state has a veto, but everyone feels the need to compromise in order to get agreement. The Deputy is right that it is in our interests to have agreement on all these things. There are people who will be waiting for funding from the MFF. The Deputy named them. They include farmers and universities. The competitiveness fund will be important for Ireland as well, and businesses will be waiting for it. Humanitarian aid organisations abroad will also be waiting for funding under heading 3. The negotiation that is happening is important and it is a negotiation among the member states, not with any faceless institution.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: When I look to small Irish businesses, to our domestic productivity and to our communities on the ground, I do not see the benefits of the competitiveness agenda. No matter what the Minister of State says, his Government absolutely supports and champions that competitiveness agenda. I see redundancies from multinational tech companies and indigenous businesses struggling to survive. I also see a Government working in lockstep with whatever is the prevailing wind at EU level instead of standing up for what is most important to people on the ground here in Ireland. In this MFF, we need to see a focus on the peace project that the EU is supposed to be and can be. We need voices at EU level who will push for that focus on cohesion, democracy and delivering a better quality of life for citizens in the here and now. While we hear lip service and acknowledgement of these things, I do not see or hear anything about this being made a priority. It must be a priority. Those I represent want to know why our taxpayers' money should go towards subsidising arms factories rather than towards improving our society. I want to know what the Minister of State's Department is doing to demand that civil society, civilian life, agricultural life and civil businesses be the focus of the next MFF.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Farmers are a very significant focus of the MFF. They are hugely significant focus. Before our Presidency, we put forward our priorities and briefed Members of the Dáil and of the European Parliament on them. Those priorities we set out included agriculture and a real commitment to European engagement abroad. They also included competitiveness. What is competitiveness about? It is about making sure that we keep good-

paying jobs in the European Union. That includes farming and small and medium enterprises. It also includes big businesses that employ people and provide essential manufacturing for the European Union. On cohesion, one of the priorities we negotiated into the negotiating document before we took on the Presidency was the PEACEPLUS programme, a unique fund that is jointly funded by the British Government, the Irish Government and the European Union. We succeeded in getting that into the negotiating document. That is cohesion funding in action. It shows where the Irish Government's priorities were before we got the Presidency, taking on this honest broker role.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 10.33 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.37 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.33 a.m. and resumed at 10.37 a.m.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Housing Policy

93. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to set out his plans to address the worsening homelessness crisis. [69619/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister will know, last Friday, his Department published the August homelessness report, which saw a very significant increase in the number of adults and children in emergency accommodation funded by the Department. Some 17,885 people, including 5,830 children, are in bed and breakfast accommodation, hotels or family hubs. Will the Minister outline to the House what he is going to do differently in the weeks and months ahead to stop this relentless rise in homelessness?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I assure the Deputy that the Government is taking a comprehensive approach to tackling homelessness, focusing on increasing housing supply, strengthening protection for renters and, crucially, preventing homelessness in the first instance.

Increased supply is key to addressing homelessness, meeting need and addressing the challenges in the housing markets. We have therefore been building more than ever in recent times. A record level of investment is being provided for the delivery of housing in 2026, with €5.2 billion in Exchequer capital funding complemented by investment through the Land Development Agency and lending from the Housing Finance Agency, bringing the total capital funding for housing in 2026 to over €9 billion. Our housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, aims to deliver 300,000 new homes in the period to 2030. This includes 72,000 social homes and 90,000 starter home supports. This means an average of 12,000 new social homes will be delivered every year to the end of 2030.

Supply alone is not enough. We also need to protect people in their existing homes. The Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026, which came into effect on 1 March 2026, provides the strongest tenancy protections in the history of the State. The new Act introduced a new national rent control for all tenancies. This limits rent increases to inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, up to a maximum of 2%. For new-build apartments

and student-specific accommodation, rent increases are capped at the level of inflation only. These changes were introduced to promote greater investment in the rental market and to increase the supply of rental properties while strengthening the protection of tenants.

The Act also provides significant improvements in security of tenure for renters. The latest data published by the RTB in September 2026 shows that the number of registered landlords and tenancies has increased on a quarterly and yearly basis.

Alongside this, we are strengthening our focus on early intervention and prevention through the new homelessness prevention framework and forthcoming child and family homelessness action plan.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It seems to be that the Minister lives in a parallel universe. In the 22 months he has been Minister, homelessness has increased by a staggering 17%, child homelessness is up by 27% and family homelessness is up 29%. The number of people over the age of 65 in emergency accommodation is up 14%. That has not happened by accident. It has happened because of the Government's policies. The targets for social housing are too low and the Government is missing them. It has slashed funding for vital homelessness prevention schemes, such as tenant in situ. The Minister has fumbled his way through the tendering process for Housing First. He has delayed the child and homelessness strategy and has no proposals that are different from what he has been doing for the past two years to address this crisis. If the Minister keeps doing the same thing over and over again, we will get the same results; more adults, more children, more families, more single people and more pensioners trapped in unsuitable and inappropriate emergency accommodation. Will the Minister do anything different in the time ahead from the failing policies he has implemented since becoming the Minister for housing?

Deputy James Browne: We are taking a number of very significant measures, including significantly increasing the number of social houses delivered. Last year, new builds were at the highest number delivered in the history of the State. I expect it will be higher again this year. They are crucial to bringing people into social housing and giving them a secure, safe home for the rest of their lives. That is reflected in the significant decrease in the number of people in HAP properties moving from rental properties into permanent State social homes that are owned by local authorities or approved housing bodies.

We also have our new plans coming out, such as the child and family homelessness action plan. There is also the homelessness prevention framework as well. One person in homelessness is one too many. Like everybody, I am deeply concerned about the increase in homelessness. We are making significant strides in providing social homes for people and providing housing solutions but we are dealing with a rapidly increasing population. It is proving challenging to be able to provide sufficient homes, even with the significant increase in housing delivery. Housing delivery will increase again this year. We will get ahead of this but we are in very challenging times. There is no question about that.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There is nothing in what the Minister has said that suggests he will get ahead of it. In fact, what he is telling us and all of those people out there at risk of homelessness is that the numbers will rise. HAP numbers have reduced but council waiting

lists have increased. The Government delivered more new-build social homes last year than the 1970s but since then, the population of the country has doubled and we have far greater social housing need. The Minister talked about protection for renters but he has trashed the key protection for renters in terms of rents, which will see rents rise and the risk of homelessness rise in response. This is not a comprehensive response to a homelessness crisis that the Minister and his colleagues in Government have created. We do not have the homeless prevention protocol as yet because it has not been published. We do not have the child and family homelessness plan as it has yet to be published. The youth homelessness strategy has expired and we do not know what the future of it is. Unless the Minister is willing to bring something new to the table, we will be here in November, December, January and February with rising numbers. I again ask the Minister if he can confirm there will be no new policy initiatives from this Government to address the ever escalating level of homelessness. In the absence of any new policy initiative, when will he accept this crisis will only get worse?

Deputy James Browne: I have already outlined a number of new policies. The key is to prevent people going into homelessness in the first place so we can keep them in the home they have, which is the best home they can be kept in. We are doing everything we can to prevent homelessness in the first place. The reality is we have a supply challenge in this country. The comprehensive support is driving supply and we are seeing that increase already, with a 20% increase in supply last year. We will see an increase again this year. There are record numbers of new-build social houses being delivered as well.

The Deputy mentioned tenant in situ. Buying up existing homes is not the solution to solving the housing crisis in this country. Sinn Féin's own housing plan proposed slashing tenant in situ, as the Deputy knows full well.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Absolutely not. That is just not true.

Deputy James Browne: It did.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We would have funded 2,000 of those this year.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy wanted to cut it down to 800.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister halved the funding to 750. The Minister is misleading the House.

Deputy James Browne: It is in the Deputy's party's own plan. I know it hurts when these things are called out to Deputy Ó Broin but it is actually true.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It does not. I am correcting the record so people have factual information.

Deputy James Browne: Sinn Féin's proposal is to slash tenant in situ down to 800 homes. The nature of homelessness is changing as well so we have to evolve to meet the challenge and

ensure people who are becoming homeless exit it as quickly as possible, wherever that homelessness may be coming from.

Homeless Persons Supports

94. **Deputy Rory Hearne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider an emergency response to the growing number of people homeless in emergency accommodation and the very high estimates of those who are living in hidden homelessness; to outline the measures his Department is already taking; if he will declare the situation a crisis requiring an emergency and coordinated response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [69315/26]

Deputy Rory Hearne: Last week, we saw record levels of homelessness in this country with 5,830 children in emergency accommodation. What emergency action is the Minister taking to immediately stem the flow of families and children into homelessness and the length of time people are spending in homelessness? I have not seen an emergency response from the Minister to this homelessness disaster. What will he do about it?

Deputy James Browne: I will be absolutely clear; I do not want find any person in homelessness and one is one too many. In particular, it is not acceptable that young children and young people are ending up in emergency accommodation. We want them to exit as quickly as possible when it does happen. We are determined that this situation is not normalised. I do not want it to be considered acceptable by any member of this State or any State agency and we do not. We are challenging this situation. We have record preventions in terms of preventing people from entering homelessness. We also have a very high record of people exiting homelessness. We can get them back out of homelessness when it does happen as quickly as possible. When people are homeless, we provide emergency accommodation. It is important to understand these people are not sleeping on the streets. We have people sleeping on the streets and there is outreach. There is no need for anybody to be on the streets. People living on the streets are in very complex situations but we provide accommodation for everybody who needs it by way of emergency accommodation.

We are working relentlessly to address this situation and to tackle homelessness through prevention but also speeding up exits as quickly as possible. Driving on with the delivery of public housing is absolutely critical. That is why last year, we provided the highest number of social houses in the history of the State so we can exit people from emergency accommodation into social housing and to remove people from HAP, where the State is paying rent to private landlords, and into State-provided housing. That is why we have seen the number of HAP properties fall very significantly because of people exiting into permanent social housing solutions. There is no doubt in my mind about this. We want people to be able to grow up and grow old in secure and safe accommodation. Supporting people while they are in homelessness is a priority so they get as many supports as possible.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister knows the main cause of families and children being made homeless is eviction from the private rental sector. He says he has brought in measures that give the strongest tenancy protections we have seen but he knows also that those tenancy

protections do not apply to all existing tenants. There are hundreds of thousands of tenants, including tens of thousands of families and children, who are as vulnerable to eviction as they were before the Minister brought in the new measures. We can look at the scale of evictions. There were 20,000 households evicted last year and over 11,000 evicted this year. In the past two and half years, 48,000 households have been issued with eviction notices. That is why we are seeing a massive rise in homelessness. What really frustrates me is the Minister has the power right now to implement an emergency ban on evictions that would at least stem the flow and stop the trauma of families and children being evicted. He showed what he can do when he wants to when he made the changes for vulture funds but when it comes to stopping families being made homeless, he should put in place a ban on evictions.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy knows full well he is giving people false hope. If you implement a ban on evictions, you kill supply straight away. The population is increasing. Where will you house everybody else who needs somewhere to live? We have now brought in the strongest tenancy protection measures in the history of this State. The Deputy left out that the notices to quit for people to leave their homes have fallen dramatically every month since April in the last period of time.

We want to see them fall even further. We also have to get the private investment to build those homes. Something the Deputy conveniently ignores is where that funding will come from to deliver the homes that we need.

Freezing the crisis into a permanent crisis is not the solution to solving the housing crisis. It gives some people short-term support but when you end it, you do not have any solutions. We are where we are, only even worse when a temporary eviction ban comes to an end. We have seen that. That was tried. We have seen exactly what happens in that - kill supply and the crisis is only worse when you come out the other side of it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: This week, I met three different people who are in homelessness in emergency accommodation, in particular, parents of children. Any length of time spent in emergency accommodation is deeply damaging. It is a trauma to a child. The trauma started even before they entered emergency accommodation, with the stress and trauma of being evicted from their home. It is having to take a child, having to take their teddy bears and their few little toys, put them into a bag, bring them and go into a place they do not know, a strange place with others in emergency accommodation. They hear their parents going to sleep at night crying because they are in the same room. They go to sleep at night crying. The Minister can talk about supply and the things that this will do but an eviction ban would at least stop those children in families from being made homeless in the coming months.

The Minister said it reduced, but it reduced to 4,000 households per quarter. We will see another 4,000 now. We are seeing hundreds of families and children being evicted every week. The Minister cannot turn away from that. That is a human catastrophe. Whatever about the supply, the Minister needs to put in place an emergency ban that will stop this.

Deputy James Browne: I am deeply concerned about those young children who find themselves in that situation. That is why we provided record numbers of social housing last year and we will increase that delivery again this year. The State is putting in an extraordinary

amount of funding directly to try to address all of the housing crisis so that we do not have that situation arising. What we are doing is making difficult decisions to ensure that we provide the supply, not only for people who are currently in accommodation but for those people who need accommodation who are living at home and need somewhere to live, and also those who are coming along in the next few years. Freezing the crisis into a permanent crisis, which is the Deputy's proposal, will not solve this.

Legislative Programme

95. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to state when he will publish the legislation for the Celtic tiger era building defects redress scheme. [69620/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is almost three years since Cabinet, in December 2023, gave approval to the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to draft legislation to underpin a redress scheme for homeowners and tenants living in Celtic tiger era defective homes. That Minister missed the timelines for the publication and passing of the legislation. Deputy Browne indicated to us earlier this year that he hoped to have the legislation published before the summer and passed in the autumn, with applications open before the end of the year. Will the Minister provide us with an update as to where that legislation is and when that much-needed scheme will open to homeowners?

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Ó Broin for his question in relation to this legislation for a redress scheme. The safety of people, when it comes to both the quality and standard of the homes they are living in, whether rented or bought, has to be a top priority for all of us. I want to be crystal clear on that. As a Government, we previously approved the development of supports for the remediation of fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 and 2013.

An interim remediation scheme has been in place since December 2023. This was put together as a scheme with the aim of providing an acceptable level of fire safety in buildings pending introduction of the statutory scheme and completion of the full remedial works. The interim scheme is for the funding of emergency fire safety defect works and the scheme is administered by the Housing Agency. Applications can be made via the Housing Agency's website. I urge anyone who believes they are impacted to make contact with the Housing Agency. As of the end of August 2026, 293 applications to the interim scheme have been validated, having met the required eligibility criteria. These applications represent 25,947 residential units, with circa 75% of these in the Dublin region.

In February 2026, the Government announced a number of significant amendments to the interim scheme. This was in order to simplify procurement and cut through administrative hurdles. I wanted to make sure that we were allowing works relating to fire detection and alarm systems to be completed far more quickly, while ensuring residents can remain safely in their homes until full building remediation is finished. For many residents we have engaged with, this has been a critical and timely measure.

Alongside this ongoing work, my Department has been engaged in drafting legislation to underpin a statutory scheme with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. Drafting is at an advanced stage and I expect the apartment and duplex defects remediation scheme Bill to be published in the coming months. I look forward to bringing the legislation through the Dáil and, once passed, I expect that the statutory scheme will be operational shortly thereafter. What is expected and being planned carefully for is that applicants to the current interim scheme will transfer seamlessly over to the new statutory scheme.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Tonight, tens of thousands of families will be forced to sleep in defective, and in many cases unsafe, homes. All they want to know is when the legislation will be published and when the scheme will be open for applications. On the basis of the answer the Minister provided to us, given that there are only ten sitting weeks left in this Dáil term, it is unlikely, if not nigh impossible, for the legislation to complete passage through the Oireachtas, which means at the earliest the scheme will be open next year. Can the Minister confirm that is realistically the timeline in front of us? Will he tell us if it is his hope or intention to at least have the legislation published and to commence the legislative process over the next ten weeks? Will he give any indication to those families who will be waiting for the comprehensive scheme when it will be open for applications?

Deputy James Browne: It is very much my intention to have this legislation published within the next ten weeks and to move on and get it passed as quickly as possible. As the Deputy will know, we have a number of pathfinder projects that are redressing 600 residential units with the interim remediation scheme.

While I want this done as quickly as possible, what is also critical for me is that it is simple and straightforward for residents to be able to use this scheme and that we do not have an overly complex scheme. That is what I have been driving within the Department in drafting this legislation to ensure that it is not something that theoretically works well but is something that is manageable. As the Deputy knows and has highlighted previously, it is ordinary people who are managing these residential units who have to manage this scheme. I want to make sure that it is navigable by ordinary people who will have to deal with this legislation.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Given people's experience of the defective concrete blocks scheme and the interim fire safety scheme, the difficulty is there is nothing simple or straightforward about either. In fact, the Government also took the decision in December 2023 to open the interim scheme. The Minister is correct that 25,000 homes have now been approved but three years on, only 600 homes have been approved and are able to access funding. That means 24,000 homes - these are emergency fire safety works that are to be funded - are still left in limbo. The Government also approved, in 2023, a retrospective payment for homeowners who had already paid those costs. Pathfinders were meant to be funded. Not a single one has been done.

Now that the Minister has initiated the review of the defective concrete blocks scheme, people in Donegal, Mayo, Clare and elsewhere will ask whether they will now get retrospective payments, a full 100% redress and the kinds of supports we are hoping the Minister will include in the new scheme provided by the Housing Agency that were denied to homeowners on the western seaboard. We want it to be simple and straightforward, but three years of delay for

these families is unacceptable, like a decade of delay for families impacted by defective concrete blocks.

Deputy James Browne: I certainly hear the Deputy and I have real concern for the people in these properties. I have met their representatives on a number of occasions and we are working closely with them. As I say, I want this done as quickly as possible. I had hoped and aimed to have it more quickly than this but I do not want a scheme, as I said, that is overly complex. I want one that is workable and deliverable. We will get this right.

Homeless Persons Supports

96. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures he will take this winter to reverse rising homelessness; when the promised and delayed child and family homelessness action plan will be published; and the emergency measures he will take this winter to accelerate exits from emergency accommodation. [68816/26]

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Since the Minister came to office in January 2025, we have had a 17% overall increase in homelessness, including a 26.66% increase in the number of children homeless. I will ask the Minister specifically about the measures he will take this winter to reverse rising homelessness. When will the promised and repeatedly delayed child and family homelessness action plan be published? What are the accelerated emergency measures he will take to increase and accelerate exits from emergency accommodation this winter?

11 o'clock

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for raising the very important issue of homelessness, which has to be the most important issue any of us deal with.

Addressing family homelessness is a key priority for Government. Our housing plan commits to the development of a child and family homelessness action plan. This has brought together key stakeholders to drive the continued focus on preventing children and families entering emergency accommodation and providing enhanced supports for children experiencing homelessness, as well as measures to accelerate exits and reduce the time spent by children and their families in homeless emergency accommodation. The plan will provide a strengthened focus on the particular needs of children and families and bring together actions across Government to improve outcomes for families experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. This plan is at an advanced stage of drafting and is intended to be published shortly. Following publication, a delivery steering group will be established under the auspices of the National Homeless Action Committee, NHAC, to drive progress on all actions and maintain a strong cross-Government focus on implementation.

More broadly, our focus is on ensuring homelessness is prevented where possible and, where families do enter emergency accommodation, that they are supported to move to a secure and sustainable home as quickly as possible. Local authorities will continue to work with households to identify appropriate pathways out of emergency accommodation, including through social housing, HAP and Homeless HAP. Significant resources are being provided to

support this response. Budget 2026 provided a total allocation of €563.5 million to address homelessness. This included €513.5 million in current funding to ensure local authorities can provide sufficient emergency accommodation.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: There is nothing in the briefing the Minister's Department gave him and which he read out - it is essentially the same as the one read out to my colleagues who asked similar questions earlier - that addresses the crux of my question because the child and family homelessness plan has been delayed repeatedly. It was supposed to come in quarter 2, then in June and then in September. The budget is next week. When exactly will the plan be published? Is there going to be ringfenced, dedicated funding in the budget specifically to reduce the duration people, and families in particular, are spending in emergency accommodation?

Threshold made a very good pre-budget submission. Some €84 million is the figure it put forward. I would like to know the Minister's thoughts on that. I want to hear from him specifically on how we are going to get more people out of emergency accommodation this winter.

Deputy James Browne: It is important we not just have a plan - in this case the child and family homelessness action plan - but that it is funded and we can ensure it is delivered quickly so that we prevent as many children as possible from becoming homeless or exit them as quickly as possible. We are providing a record number of exits from homelessness but it is challenging because of the number we have coming into homelessness in the first place. All of this is driven by the lack and shortage of housing in this country. Everything I do is to prevent people from becoming homeless, to exit them as quickly as possible and ensure that while they are in homelessness, the best supports are provided to them. It is traumatic for children to be in homelessness, and we do not want a single child spending a single day in it. That is why we have a number of measures and are providing record funding to tackle the homelessness situation but, ultimately, we have to drive supply in this country otherwise we are not going to end any of the challenges we face within homelessness.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The issue I have is that we are functionally out of capacity. We are running out of emergency accommodation coming into this winter and there is a real concern that the incoming demand will exhaust all the remaining beds. There is nothing in what the Minister said, albeit his acknowledgement that the plan does need to be funded but it needs to be funded properly and it is going to need a significant envelope. Something around 20% of all section 10 funding needs to go into a homelessness prevention framework. The staggering amount of money we are spending on emergency accommodation is an indictment of how Government has failed.

Everything that has been floated in the budget has related to essentially putting up house prices for first-time buyers. When exactly will the plan be published and will the funding envelope allocated to the plan be adequate enough to stop more children and families ending up in homelessness this winter?

Deputy James Browne: We will be publishing that plan very soon. We want to ensure it is funded and can be delivered, that it is not simply a plan to sit on the shelf because we are

acutely aware of the increase in homelessness but, in particular, the number of children who are going into homelessness. Where this happens, we want to exit them as quickly as possible into permanent, safe and secure homes. That is why last year we delivered record numbers of social housing and I have no doubt we will deliver even more this year.

I am conscious that while people, particularly children, are in emergency accommodation, the best supports that can be provided are provided to them. As I said, it is about getting them out there as quickly as possible because it is traumatic for any child to spend even a single day in homelessness.

Defective Building Materials

97. **Deputy Charles Ward** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a local authority or an approved housing body's I.S. 465 building professional recommends option 1 remediation (details supplied), his power to seek documentary evidence and request review by the Housing Agency can result in the original remediation recommendation being altered or overturned; the precise statutory basis for this additional oversight; the safeguards in place to ensure that the independent engineer's determination is not undermined by a subsequent administrative review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [69666/26]

Deputy James Browne: The Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022, as amended by the Act of 2025, underpins the grant scheme which provides grant funding to people whose homes have been affected by defective concrete blocks. As the Deputy is aware, the Act also provides for the making of a defective concrete blocks social homes scheme.

The draft defective concrete blocks social homes scheme 2026 is a scheme for the purpose of enabling a designated local authority or an approved housing body with dwellings located in a designated local authority area to remediate damage caused to dwellings owned by the local authority or approved housing body by the use of defective concrete blocks in their construction. Prior to the drafting of the draft scheme, my Department engaged in consultation with designated local authorities, the Irish Council for Social Housing and a small number of approved housing bodies, with feedback from this process informing the draft scheme. The final version of the scheme, as presented in the Dáil last week and the Seanad this week, does not contain such provisions as suggested by the Deputy and there is no role for the Housing Agency in the scheme.

On 22 July 2026, I received Government approval for the draft defective concrete blocks social homes scheme 2026. I subsequently arranged for the moving of a motion for a resolution in each House of the Oireachtas. On 23 September 2026, this resolution passed through Dáil Éireann, and subject to approval in Seanad Éireann, I will shortly seek a Government order to give effect to the scheme. This process is expected to conclude in October 2026. I am keen that local authorities will be enabled as soon as possible to begin remediating social homes which are affected in their local areas, thereby ensuring the appropriate management and maintenance of social housing stock is promoted and there is maximum use of social housing stock to meet local need.

Deputy Charles Ward: It concerns me that option 1 recommendations appear to be subject to an additional layer of scrutiny that does not seem to apply where engineers' recommendations are options 2, 3, 4 or 5. Can the Minister explain the rationale and outline the safeguards in place to ensure constant evidential engineering standards across the remediation options? Furthermore, where an independent I.S. 465 chartered engineer has assessed the property, determined the damaged threshold has been met and has recommended option 1, why is a further ministerial or Housing Agency review required before the work can proceed? What powers does this review have, is it limited to varying evidence submitted or can it ultimately alter an engineer's recommendation on the option?

Deputy James Browne: We are satisfied the scheme that has gone through this House and through the Seanad, which has been approved by Government, is an effective scheme that will work. The Deputy obviously has a lot of technical questions and I am very happy to get him a note on it from the Department of housing, which will hopefully address some of his concerns or at least clarify a number of his questions which he can then affirm or disagree with, if necessary.

Deputy Charles Ward: I am aware they are technical but it is very important we get this right.

Recommendations for option 1 can be subject to additional scrutiny by the Housing Agency. Where it is not equivalent relates to engineering and safeguarding for options 2, 3, 4 or 5, where homeowners and tenants must have confidence that remediation recommendations are subject to the same evidence and engineering standards regardless of outcome. Does the Minister accept that the current approach risks creating a perception that option 1 recommendations are treated differently in the social housing scheme? Furthermore, will he commit to publishing the review protocol in full, including criteria applied, circumstances in which the Housing Agency may challenge or seek reconsideration of an engineer's recommendation, and whether such a review can ultimately influence remediation option approval?

Deputy James Browne: We are satisfied that these proposals are fair and balanced. While I would like to have seen them done before now, at least now we have a proposal that can start to affect the necessary supports and remediation in social housing schemes. As I say, I will take note of the Deputy's questions and get him a response.

Housing Schemes

98. **Deputy Gillian Toole** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the housing assistance payment scheme will be extended to include the housing asset-owning parents of persons with additional needs and disabilities. [69734/26]

Deputy Gillian Toole: It is estimated that there are approximately 100,000 people with varying disabilities in need of planned living arrangements, yet only 2% are on social housing lists, which is a prerequisite for the provision of State-supported accommodation. There are older parents with prior Government-encouraged properties that could be shared by groups of adults with intellectual disabilities with appropriate wraparound services. Will the housing

assistance payment scheme be extended to include the housing asset-owning parents of people with disabilities?

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Toole for her important question about housing supports for persons with additional needs and disabilities. The housing assistance payment scheme is a social housing support, so an assessment of housing needs must be completed in order to qualify for HAP. Any household with an identified housing need is eligible for HAP. For housing assistance to be provided, the housing authority must be satisfied that the tenancy is or would be a tenancy in good faith. Where there is a family relationship between the tenant and the landlord, the housing authority may seek evidence of a previous landlord and tenant relationship in respect of the property. This evidence may include proof of rent and payments, a lease or tenancy agreement for the property and RTB tenancy registration. In order for a housing authority to be satisfied that a tenancy is or would be in good faith, the onus is on the applicant and the landlord to prove what is being proposed is a bona fide tenancy. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the housing authority to make a decision in each individual case.

HAP payments cannot be made on homes acquired by family members solely to provide a housing solution to a particular HAP applicant or member of their household. Disabled people can access social housing support through all the available routes, namely, standard local authority housing rental assistance schemes, approved housing bodies and HAP. Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority and the allocation of dwellings is a matter for the local authority concerned in accordance with its allocation scheme.

The National Housing Strategy for Disabled Persons 2022-2027 implementation plan set out the vision for the co-operation and collaboration of Government Departments, State agencies and others in delivering housing and related supports for disabled people. Our work is also advancing on the mid-term review of the implementation plan for the national strategy, with the intention of publishing a revised plan later this year. I work closely with the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, on these matters.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I understand the rules of the HAP scheme and I understand the efforts that are being made and the reporting that local authorities will need to provide. The core problem here is that the majority of families are not aware that they should place their loved one on the social housing list. We have six different methods and metrics for recording, according to HSE officials speaking at a committee yesterday. It will be five years before we have one health identifier scheme. We have a massive black hole caused by an absence of data. In the interim, we have 2,000 parents over the age of 75 who are caring for a loved one with varying abilities. In the interim, an amendment to the HAP scheme would provide an interim arrangement until appropriate stock becomes available.

Deputy James Browne: I met Before We Die and I met local groups and individuals in my own county, Wexford. I am very much aware of the very understandable worry and concern of older parents for their children with disabilities as those parents age and maybe get to the later end of their own lives. That is why I have had multiple meetings with the Minister, Deputy Foley, devising a proposal and a plan to be implemented in my Department on delivering housing for people with disabilities, whether they require residential support or to be able to live independently with a disability. The Department is moving to directly deliver those

properties because my sense of it before now and my experience as a TD is that there can be an awful lot of back and forth between a local authority and the HSE about who is on a list, who is not on a list, and whether a property is needed or not. We know we need the properties and homes. We are determined to deliver those at a national level.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I will press the Minister on this. I appreciate the great efforts that he, the Minister, Deputy Foley, and their support teams are making in this regard but we have a serious time lag here. We are talking about probably 30 or 40 years in which there has been a complete lack of forward planning. Given the five-year lead-in time for the amalgamation of six different data sets into one health identifier, which will then link in with the local authority process, I suggest the Minister consider having a pilot of what I am suggesting for HAP during that five-year period. Stock simply is not going to come on stream. We do not have a statutory requirement or a breakdown of what percentage of the Part V requirement will go to older people and people with disabilities, or what the balance will be for those who have other medical needs. Would the Minister consider a five-year pilot? That would dovetail with the gathering of data and the necessary building of universal design plus or plus plus homes in consultation with developers.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Toole again for raising this important matter. In some ways, what we are doing in the Department of housing is intending to lead with the drive to deliver the necessary homes, both for independent adapted living and also for community residential living. While it certainly will not take five years, it will take a lead-in time to start getting those homes delivered. I certainly have heard the Deputy and will take her concerns and proposal into consideration. I will come back to her on the issue.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Departmental Policies

99. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures his Department is taking to ensure that the delivery of large-scale housing developments is matched by the guaranteed provision of essential community infrastructure, including community centres, libraries, childcare and other local amenities; and whether additional funding or supports will be provided to areas experiencing significant population growth such as Belmayne and Clongriffin. [69336/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I will always support housing and building it, but in my constituency, the communities need to be built at the same time. Belmayne and Clongriffin have been developing for 20 years, yet residents are still waiting for basic infrastructure and services to catch up, and building is continuing at pace. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that major housing delivery is matched and funded with timely delivery of community facilities, healthcare, childcare, transport and other essential services?

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Heneghan for his important question about community supports for housing delivery. Planning for the provision of infrastructure and

amenities is a core element of the statutory plan-making process. National policy objective 105 of the revised national planning framework sets out that the planning authorities and infrastructure delivery agencies should focus on the timely delivery of enabling infrastructure to priority zoned lands. At local level, the local authority development plan set out relevant objectives, policy support and development management standards for specific forms of development. All existing development plans are required to include objectives for the provision of infrastructure and the integration of the planning for sustainable development of the area with the social community and cultural requirements of the area and its population. The development plan's guidelines for planning authorities further specify that every development plan should include an objective to prepare a community, social and cultural infrastructure audit for areas likely to experience significant development.

Under the Planning and Development Act 2024, when preparing a new development plan, planning authorities will be required to prepare a strategy relating to creation, improvement and preservation of sustainable places and communities. This strategy must include objectives for the provision, improvement, extension and preservation of amenities, facilities and services to meet the social, community, recreational and cultural requirements of the area.

Planning authorities are required to consult with infrastructure and service providers as part of the plan-making process to help ensure that future infrastructure and service requirements are identified at an early stage. Furthermore, a planning authority may attach a condition to a grant of planning permission requiring the payment of a contribution in respect of public infrastructure and facilities that it is intended will be provided by or on behalf of a local authority. The provision of funding to support the delivery of community facilities and infrastructure falls within the remit of a number of Government Departments.

My Department has also established a housing activation office to accelerate the delivery of infrastructure required to support housing development. The office supports infrastructure development through initiatives such as the housing infrastructure investment fund. I also launched a towns and cities regeneration investment fund, which replaced the urban regeneration and development fund, to support such proposals.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Is é an fhadhb ná go mbíonn daoine ag bogadh chuig na háiteanna seo, ach níl an t-infreastruchtúr iontu. People are moving into these houses now, but those things are not there. They are told the infrastructure will come five or ten years down the road, but they are in their homes right now. In Clongriffin alone, hundreds of additional apartments are coming, which is brilliant because we need apartments, but the Land Development Agency also has 408 homes under construction in phase 1, with a further 711 proposed for phase 2. I and, I imagine, other local representatives have people contacting our offices who cannot get buses because they are full. The DART service is already under pressure and childcare provision is not keeping pace. I welcome the news, following engagement with the Minister for Transport, that changes are being made to the DART service. What mechanisms are in place to ensure that, when homes for thousands of people's are delivered, which I look forward to, services for the residents will be delivered at the same pace? The people who have contacted my office are not opposed to housing. They are asking that we build sustainable communities.

Deputy James Browne: I hear Deputy Heneghan's concerns in relation to supports for communities where significant housing is being delivered. The provision of funding to support the delivery of community facilities and infrastructure falls within the remit of a number of different Departments. My Department established the housing activation office to ensure we accelerate housing delivery and also the necessary infrastructure required to support housing development. To that end, we are also providing significant funding for urban regeneration within communities to support regeneration infrastructure, public realm projects that facilitate housing delivery, and sustainable community development. A number of the issues touched on by the Deputy Heneghan, for example, in the area of transport, fall under other Departments and Ministers. I will relay the Deputy's concerns to the relevant Ministers.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: We need to build healthcare centres and community facilities, but that will mean very little if we cannot adequately staff the services they provide. The Land Development Agency says Clongriffin, Belmayne and the neighbouring Stapolin lands have the potential for thousands more homes. Will the Minister work across government to ensure that the planned population growth is linked directly to funding for the workforce and planning for healthcare, gardaí, childcare, libraries and community services? My ask is very straightforward. The people of Belmayne and Clongriffin in the area I represent, after more than 20 years of development, are entitled to know where the other half of the bargain is. That means transport with enough capacity, childcare that is actually available, healthcare, community facilities and policing. I welcome that we are pushing housing. One of the biggest things we need to do is build more homes, but I ask that we plan the services needed in order that people can live sustainably and the services the residents have been waiting for are provided.

Deputy James Browne: I hear the Deputy's concerns. It is very important that, where we are delivering housing, infrastructure and regeneration to support housing, community supports are also put in place, along with the additional supports that are required from other Departments. I will ensure we have a cross-government approach to this.

Housing Schemes

100. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the income eligibility limits for social housing in Cavan and Monaghan will be increased. [69157/26]

128. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on the review of the social housing income eligibility thresholds. [69383/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the Minister's comments in response to Deputy Gillian Toole's very important question on ensuring we have adequate provision for persons with additional needs and disabilities. We had a detailed discussion on this at our parliamentary party meeting on Tuesday night. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, was with me in Cavan on Monday when this particular issue was discussed and he heard at first hand the determination of HSE officials at local level and Cavan County Council to make progress in the matter.

With regard to the income eligibility limits, it is time they were revised upwards. They are extremely low in Cavan and Monaghan. We need a radical amendment to ensure that people who cannot buy their own home can qualify for social housing.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: This is a matter the Minister and I have discussed on a number of occasions. When does he hope to bring forward the promised increase in thresholds? As part of that, will he also consider abolishing band 3, which leaves a number of counties, particularly rural and western seaboard counties, in an exceptionally disadvantaged position, even with an increase? Can he also give the House an update on his Department's consideration of index-linking social housing eligibility thresholds to some sensible index in the future to ensure that, as he has said, it will not be left to a Minister of the day to make an arbitrary decision on what the limits should be and that, instead, decisions will be based on some rational and credible publicly available criteria?

Deputy James Browne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 100 and 128 together.

I thank the Deputies for their questions in relation to social housing limits. Deputy Brendan Smith raised the issue of social housing limits in Cavan and Monaghan and asked when those limits will be increased. As the Deputies will know, applications for social housing supports are assessed by the relevant local authorities in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated social housing assessment regulations of 2011. The 2011 regulations prescribed maximum net income limits for each local authority in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard household means policy. The policy provides for a range of income disregards. Local authorities also have discretion to disregard income that is once-off, temporary or short-term in nature, and which is outside the regular pattern of a person's annual income. The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10% and, separately, a 2.5% allowance for each child.

The baseline social housing income thresholds are €40,000, €35,000 and €30,000 for bands 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Cavan and Monaghan are in band 3, with €30,000. These thresholds are net income, for example, gross household income less income tax, PRSI, universal social charge and additional superannuation contribution. Income is defined and assessed according to a standard household means policy. The policy provides for a range of income disregards and local authorities also have discretion to disregard income that is once-off, temporary or short-term in nature and which is outside the regular pattern of a person's annual income.

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

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. He will have heard me raise this particular issue on many occasions, both in written correspondence to him in parliamentary questions and within our parliamentary party. I welcome the very substantial funding provided to Cavan and Monaghan county councils since January 2025 to continue a very impressive and comprehensive house-building programme throughout both counties. Houses are being delivered, and that is very welcome.

The Minister visited County Cavan a few months ago at my request. He met with senior councillors and council officials from the housing division. One common theme in all of those contributions was the urgent need to improve the income eligibility limits. As the Minister knows, we all meet constituents at weekends. Every weekend, I have people with me who are working hard in low-paid jobs and whose income is still above the limit for social housing. These people have no chance of getting a mortgage or home loan. We cannot condemn them to renting for life. I know the Minister wants to make progress on this matter. We need that to be achieved as soon as possible. Since the 1930s, when Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh began the major house-building programme, there has been a very successful social housing programme in this country.

We want to continue it, with a mix of people in housing estates.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: For every week or month that passes before a decision is made on this matter, a significant number of people will lose their position on local authority housing waiting lists. I have constituents who became homeless from their HAP tenancy, went into emergency accommodation and are marginally above the thresholds of my own local authority. Because income is now reassessed for eligibility as part of the annual review, they were removed for the social housing waiting list. They lost nine years on the list. They have no possible exit from emergency accommodation because they cannot afford private rental, if they could find it, and do not have family to stay with. As the Minister's party colleague has rightly said, there are also thousands of people who have no hope of renting or buying privately. In many counties, particularly the ten counties that are in band 3, there is no cost rental. They would not be able to afford that, and they are excluded from the list. I am asking the Minister to inject some urgency into this. The increase needs to be significant. I would make the very strong case that those ten counties in band 3 should all be in band 2 at a minimum. I urge the Minister to proceed with his suggestion of index-linking the increases, so that annually they keep track of the economy, wages and the cost of housing in the private market.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputies for their questions on the social housing limits. There is very much a recognition that those limits need to increase. We are working on that proposal. In my view, they absolutely do have to increase. They should be reviewed on a more frequent basis rather than when certain pressures have built or a certain amount of time has passed. I am conscious that social protection payments have increased since the last limit was set. Incomes have increased as well. I do not want to have people waiting to get homes on housing lists. If increasing the limits means the numbers go higher, that in itself is not a concern for me. My concern is getting those people housed.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Absolutely.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I very strongly welcome the Minister's concluding remarks. As he has heard from me on numerous occasions, and as I have heard from our councillors in Cavan and from all the officials at all ranks in the housing division in Cavan County Council, it is a big issue that we deal with on a daily basis. Good, genuine, hard-working people are coming to us who are above the income limit. They are not in well-paid jobs. They are working hard, rearing families. We have to ensure that they are given the opportunity to get their own home. We cannot emphasise strongly enough how successful social housing policy has been for decades in this country. We want to continue that. We need a good mix of people in every community and every estate, whether private or public. I sincerely hope the Minister will be able to put additional momentum into this to ensure that the limits are adequately increased at the earliest possible date. I thank him for his work in this area.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputies again for raising this matter. I assure them it is being given very serious consideration. There will be announcements on this in the near future.

Housing Provision

101. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures being considered to increase the number of affordable-to-buy housing units provided by local councils. [69263/26]

102. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the plans to increase the number of cost-rental units that will be provided in schemes by local authorities. [69265/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: The question I have for the Minister is about increasing the number of affordable housing units that can be bought and provided by local authorities. We need that affordable housing scheme. Deputies have referred to people who are working hard. I have them coming to me; I suppose all TDs and councillors have people coming to them. We need to get housing solutions for these people who cannot get on a local authority housing waiting list because of the income threshold, and who cannot obtain a loan from a private lending institution. We need to fix this problem.

Deputy James Browne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 101 and 102 together.

I thank Deputy Stanley for his questions on the increase in the number of affordable-to-buy housing units provided by local authorities, and plans to increase the number of cost-rental units that will be provided in schemes by local authorities as well.

Providing affordable and high-quality homes for purchase and long-term rental is at the centre of the Government's housing policy and our housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. The housing plan reinforces and expands the range of existing affordable housing measures being implemented by the Government. In particular, a new starter homes programme, which is a central component of the plan, aims to deliver an average of 15,000 affordable housing supports annually to 2030, including starter purchase homes and cost-rental homes. To underpin the delivery of the starter homes programme, the Government is investing

an unprecedented level of funding by way of a package of direct Exchequer-funded affordability measures, additional investment through the Land Development Agency and lending by the Housing Finance Agency.

In terms of delivery, starter purchase homes and cost-rental homes are being delivered at scale across the country, in partnership with the local authorities and the Land Development Agency and the approved housing bodies. It is through this ambitious network of partnership that the Government was able to deliver almost 9,300 starter purchase and cost-rental homes in 2025, and is on target to exceed this in 2026. Total Exchequer capital investment in starter homes in 2025 was just over €1 billion, with a further €1.2 billion available this year. This is a huge level of investment.

To support the delivery of starter homes by local authorities specifically, the affordable housing fund is open to applications and available to support all local authorities to deliver starter purchase and cost-rental homes in their local area. The affordable housing fund subsidy is also available as a direct subvention on local authority housing development costs, at rates of €50,000, €75,000 and €100,000 per starter purchase home, depending on the density of housing units per hectare on the development and its location. In addition, a higher rate of affordable housing fund subsidy of €150,000 per home is available to support the delivery of cost-rental homes in the five cities. Some 95% of the approved subsidy is met from Exchequer funds via the affordable housing fund scheme, and the remaining 5% subsidy is paid by the local authority concerned from its own funds.

To date, funding of over €766 million has been approved from the affordable housing fund and its precursor, the serviced sites fund, for 27 local authorities to support the delivery of over 8,400 affordable purchase and cost-rental homes. This includes the approval of 30 starter purchase homes in the Deputy's own county of Laois, with all of these homes to be delivered by the end of 2026. Overall, from 2022 until the end of quarter 1 of 2026, over 3,100 local authority starter purchase and cost-rental homes had been delivered. The local authority starter home delivery programme continues to expand as new opportunities for affordable housing delivery are identified and developed. To further support the expansion of starter home delivery nationwide, since the beginning of 2026, Roscommon, Cavan, Donegal and Tipperary have received approvals to deliver their first local authority starter purchase home schemes. The approvals support the commitment under the programme for Government, and action 7.5 in Delivering Homes, Building Communities, to work with local authorities to bring forward affordable housing fund proposals in areas that do not currently have projects in place.

In addition to Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030, local authorities have commenced the updating of their housing delivery action plans for review by my Department, setting out how the starter homes programme will be implemented within their area. Each housing delivery action plan will be informed by identifiable affordable housing needs within the local authority area and will include the collaboration with its delivery partners, including the Land Development Agency and the approved housing bodies, as applicable. These plans will be completed and published by local authorities later in the year. They will help determine what is needed and help drive delivery out to the end of the decade. Furthermore, measures such as the first home scheme, the help to buy scheme, vacant property refurbishment grants and ready-to-build schemes are also available.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I submitted two separate questions. There are significant differences between the affordable-to-buy homes and the cost-rental homes. I ask that we take them separately.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have grouped the questions together but we are dealing with the content of both questions.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The median price of a house in Laois has gone up. According to the property price register, it has gone up 16.8% in one year. The Minister gave out a lot of figures, but the reality is that the target given by his Department, which I have here, is 38 affordable-to-buy and cost-rental homes to be done in Laois over a five-year period. It is minuscule and would not even make a dent in the numbers that we need. The demand is massive. Laois County Council directly delivered over 90 homes. The Minister was down at the launch of some of them. There are 62 more in the pipeline. The Minister was at the launch of Dargan Woods, which are good houses.

I want to raise a point about that. The scheme needs to be expanded to meet the demands of households whose incomes are over the threshold for social housing but do not qualify for or cannot get a mortgage. These workers and households are the real squeezed middle, typically trapped in private rented accommodation and paying sky-high rents. I gave the Minister the median price. There was an increase of 16.8%. In Laois, one-, two- and three-bedroom homes now cost €348,000. The scheme needs to be expanded.

This is not about being parochial. The Minister attended the launch of Dargan Woods. Due to the way the scheme was advertised, people could apply from anywhere. People moved from Dublin to cost-rental accommodation in Dargan Woods. They are now commuting to Dublin. Some local workers who work in County Laois applied but did not get in first and missed out. They are unable to get a house in the locality. We need to reduce commuting times and get people to live where they are working. Not to be parochial, but we need to open the schemes to people in the county in the first instance. I ask that the Minister's Department consider that.

Deputy James Browne: I again thank the Deputy for his important questions on affordable homes to buy and cost-rental units. As he knows, Laois has an excellent record of delivering homes. It is one of the stronger counties. It is benefiting from taking the lead in delivering homes. It will benefit in the medium and long term economically as well as enjoy the key benefit of providing roofs over people's heads. I wish every local authority would deliver homes at the rate of Laois. Nonetheless, we know we have an awful lot more to do. We need to work harder in collaboration with Laois because people in the county continue to be under pressure to get a housing solution for their needs.

I very much hear the concerns, proposals and ideas of the Deputy. We want to ensure that everybody can access a home they can afford, be that social, affordable or private delivery. It is important that people are able to stay in their local communities. The Deputy referred to people commuting. I want people to be able to stay in their local communities. That is why, for example, we are changing the rules for rural one-off housing. The Deputy provided examples of people living in towns because they cannot live in the rural areas where they grew up and where their families are, and drive to work on farms or to look after their family. I

acknowledge that we have more work to do, but we are making significant changes and differences and will continue to work on that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister saw the good-quality houses in Dargan Woods. The council exceeded the Government's target by nearly 250%. The Government needs to increase its targets for both affordable and cost-rental housing. There have been a huge number of inquiries. Cost rental is the only option for a lot of workers and households. People aged in their 40s, 50s and 60s may have broken relationships or be separated. They cannot get a loan due to their age and do not qualify for a council house because of their income. Low-paid workers in their 20s, 30s and 40s who are above the limit but are unable to get a mortgage to buy a home need to be helped with cost rental. We cannot condemn them to a full lifetime, including their pension years, in private rental accommodation. That is not fair in a balanced society.

Some of us advocated for the cost-rental scheme ten years ago when it was not on the radar. Others have come to it now, which I welcome. It removes the profit element and is a sustainable model. The finance is repaid and there is no long-term hit for the State. It is a good scheme and provides good-quality housing. People will say many such units are apartments or small houses. I lived in a 56 sq. m house. It was fine. It did the job for the 12 years I lived in it. People refer to small houses in Drimnagh, Cabra or wherever else. We do not want to go backwards. Modern houses can be compact and still meet people's needs.

We need to provide affordable and cost-rental housing at scale. That is the message I am trying to convey. The Government needs to increase its targets. It also needs to reduce prices. The Government needs to dust down the Kelly report, or produce another report, and implement it in order to reduce land costs and bring down the price of housing.

Deputy James Browne: I hear the Deputy's concerns for his constituents in being able to have a housing solution they can afford. He is correct; we need multiple housing solutions for people. People of a certain age will not be able to get or will find it extremely difficult to get a mortgage, even with the mortgage supports available because repayment times are squeezed as people get older, repayments go up and it becomes harder and harder to get a mortgage. I very much hear the concerns of the Deputy for his constituents. We will continue to work to ensure those solutions are put in place in every constituency. People need to be able to stay in their local communities.

Question No. 103 taken with Written Answers.

Grant Payments

104. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide additional funding to Sligo County Council to enable the housing adaptation grant scheme to reopen to priority 2 and priority 3 applications, which have been paused for a number of months. [68949/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): My Department provides funding under the suite of housing

adaptation grant for older people and disabled people to assist those in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable for their needs. The suite of grants, which include the housing adaptation grant for disabled people, the mobility aids grant and the housing aid for older people grant, is funded by my Department with a contribution from the local authority. The detailed administration of the scheme, including assessment, approval, prioritisation and apportionment, is the responsibility of local authorities.

The Exchequer funding available for these grants in 2026 increased substantially by €30 million to €129.5 million, or over €152 million when accounting for the local authority contribution of 15%, continuing the year-on-year increases since 2014. During 2025, my Department approved two requests for additional funding, totalling €453,670, from Sligo County Council and over €2.14 million was drawn down by the council in 2025. Sligo County Council received an allocation of over €2.3 million in Exchequer funding for 2026, an increase of 30% on the original allocation in 2025. The county council submitted a request for additional funding of €500,000 earlier this year and this was approved in full. No further requests have been submitted. The council has confirmed to my Department that no further funding will be sought for the remainder of the year.

We want to encourage local authorities to seek additional funding. It is something the Deputy might take up with Sligo County Council. If it wishes, it can apply for additional funding. That is the update I have from the officials in my Department. I have met all of the officials in the local authorities who deal with housing adaptation grants to encourage them to seek additional funding if they require it.

My Department works closely with local authorities to monitor spend and to achieve a full drawdown of available funding. This means that any underspends that arise on the part of any local authority can be redistributed to other authorities that have high levels of grant activity. My Department makes every effort to redistribute such funding throughout the year. It is actively engaging with local authorities to facilitate the redistribution of any such savings identified as early as possible.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I thank the Minister of State. I have raised this issue a number of times. The position in Sligo is critical. Sligo County Council received €2.3 million in Exchequer funding for 2026, an increase of 30%, and I want to recognise that. In fairness, it was very much needed. Priority 2 housing adaptation grant applications, however, remain paused and new applications are being returned. The council has, I am told, sought additional funding, but the Minister of State said it has not. I fully accept that the most urgent, priority 1 cases must come first. However, we cannot have a situation whereby funding is sufficient only to deal with priority 1 cases when many of those in the priority 2 category also have substantial needs and are unable to apply.

Earlier this year, a total of 89 priority 2 applicants had been on hold since 2025, representing an estimated cost of €859,000. These grants make an enormous difference. They enable older people and those with a disability to remain safely in their homes, maintain their independence and, in many cases, avoid the need for more costly hospital or long-term residential care. I ask the Department to urgently approve Sligo County Council's request, which it has not put in, for an increased Exchequer capital allocation, including additional funding to reopen the scheme to priority 2 applicants.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It must be acknowledged that Sligo County Council did apply for additional funding of €500,000, which it received. Obviously, the Deputy will be making contact with Sligo County Council, and I encourage the council to make an application for additional funding, if it is required. I will also ask my officials in the Department to reach out to Sligo County Council to find out what the position is. Where local authorities wish to provide additional funding and where there is a need, we want to ensure we can redistribute funding to them. We will address this issue on both fronts - Deputy Scanlon will be in contact with Sligo County Council and I will also ask my officials to reach out to Sligo County Council in this regard. As of now, my understanding from officials is that no additional application has been received from Sligo County Council on top the €500,000 it applied for and received earlier this year.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: It is important that we help these people before their circumstances deteriorate to the point where they become a priority 1 case. The whole purpose of the housing adaptation grant is to intervene before someone reaches crisis point, not afterwards. Priority 1 cases must always come first, but being a priority 2 case cannot mean having no priority at all. There is a human cost to delaying these adaptations, as well as a cost to the State, because people lose their independence and require greater levels of health or residential care. That defeats the whole purpose of the scheme.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I know the Deputy has raised this issue and advocated for it before. On practical measures, as he mentioned, initial funding to Sligo County Council increased by 30% this year to €2.3 million. It received a further €500,000 in additional funding that it requested earlier in the year, bringing total funding to €2.8 million. I ask the Deputy to inform Sligo County Council that if it has an additional request, it should be made to the Department. In a practical way, I will ask my officials to reach out to Sligo County Council in this regard to determine the exact position. The money is available. Housing adaptation grants, as the Deputy stated, make a huge difference, particularly to the daily lives of older people. The Government, the Minister, the Department and I are keen to promote them.

National Monuments

105. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has responded to a letter sent to his Department by An Taisce about a proposed housing development (details supplied); and whether he intends to exercise the powers outlined in the letter by An Taisce. [68197/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Has there been a response to, or a decision made on, the letter sent to the Minister's Department by An Taisce about a proposed housing development? People may have read about this development, particularly online. It is the housing development located close to what is known as Cú Chulainn's Castle in Dundalk. An Taisce laid out its fears about ensuring that this national monument is looked after. It spoke about particular legislation that could be employed in this regard. I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for asking this important question. A response was issued from my Department to the correspondence received from An Taisce on this matter. As outlined in that reply, Dún Dealgan, which is also known as Cú Chulainn's Castle, is a national monument - national monument No. 388 - in ministerial guardianship and, therefore, already has a high level of protection under the National Monuments Acts 1930 to 2014. Such statutory protection will continue to carry over to the Historic and Archaeological Heritage and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 when the relevant aspects of that Act are commenced.

In recognition of its national importance and by reason of the historical, archaeological and architectural interest attached thereto, Dún Dealgan Motte, in accordance with the provisions of the National Monuments Act 1930, as amended, was brought into the guardianship of the Minister for heritage in 1940. As such, the national monument is afforded the most robust statutory protections under the National Monuments Acts 1930 to 2014.

On the basis of its legal status as a national monument, any works to Dún Dealgan Motte can only be lawfully carried out with the written consent of the Minister, which is granted following consultation with the National Museum of Ireland under section 14 of the National Monuments Act 1930, as amended. The requirement for such consent also extends to any ground disturbance around or in proximity to any such national monument.

The presence of recorded monuments, such as a standing stone, LH007-118006, and a souterrain, LH007-118008, in proximity to Dún Dealgan further underpins the significance of the site. I confirm that these recorded monuments are also afforded statutory protections in accordance with section 12(3) of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister for his answer. One of the requests from An Taisce suggested that an archaeological investigation and test would be carried out before the application was granted permission. The application has since been granted permission, albeit with some changes by Louth County Council. I understand that it is now with An Coimisiún Pleanála and that a number of observations have been submitted. There will be people who fall in a number of places on this issue. We know the importance of this site. We are talking about a Norman motte and bailey castle. We know it goes right back and is connected to the mythology of Cú Chulainn. It is known as Cú Chulainn's Castle or Byrne's Folly. Over many years, however, there has been a failure to consider this entire area a proper heritage site. Work needs to be done in that regard.

An Taisce stated that the buffer zone of 5.2 ha of open space around the castle cited by Louth County Council is totally inadequate to maintain the ambience of the complex of monuments. It spoke about the special powers the Minister has under legislation in this regard. While I understand that An Coimisiún Pleanála is going to go through this process, there is a need to look at this from the point of view of ensuring that we do what is best, which has not been done previously by Louth County Council and others, to protect this site so that it can be enjoyed in a far better way than has been the case to date.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy touched on an important aspect of what our heritage section does, ensuring our heritage sites are both protected and accessible and not put away or wrapped in bubble wrap. Rather, they will be accessible for this generation and future generations to appreciate, understand and enjoy.

Notwithstanding the statutory protections afforded to Dún Dealgan under the National Monuments Act, the Department, in its submission to the respective local authority, recommended a suite of archaeological conditions for the proposed development. The recommended archaeological conditions were informed by a further archaeological assessment provided in May 2026, which was reviewed by Department officials and included results of test excavations carried out in 2020 and 2026. Additional archaeological assessment provided in May 2026 was requested by Department officials in January 2026 following a review of the initial archaeological assessment, which summarised the results of the archaeological test excavations and a geophysical survey.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am not taking away from the work that has been carried out from an archaeological due diligence point of view. A number of people are worried about this. I have already made the argument that there has been a failure to look after Cú Chulainn's Castle in general. Work needs to be done in that regard, whatever the outworkings of this case.

I understand that the zone of 5.2 ha is slightly greater now following the changes Louth County Council introduced, but people are still worried. They talk of both the area and the views that will be impacted. I have also heard a number of people say that they do not want to see houses go by in the midst of a housing crisis. Will the Minister promise that his Department will look at aspects of this development, such as the 50 m buffer, to determine whether they are sufficient? Many say that buffer needs to be extended.

I accept there is an issue with the building of houses. There will be people who will be utterly opposed to building houses that impact them personally, but that is not where I or many of the people who have contacted me are coming from. It is about protecting the structure, doing what we can and ensuring that all the necessary sight lines are maintained.

12 o'clock

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy is correct. A buffer area of 50 m should be implemented. That was a recommendation and condition of the local authority to ensure the continued protection of the archaeological setting. It was also recommended that no groundworks, including boundary works, landscaping or ground reduction are to be carried out within the buffer area, and the area should be fenced off and protected during construction and should not be used for storage or vehicular access, for example. In addition to the buffer zone of 50 m, additional archaeological conditions to ensure the continued preservation of other objects of archaeological interest within the proposed development were also outlined.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy David Cullinane: There have been encouraging reports since yesterday from the talks aimed at resolving the very serious situation on the Garvaghy Road. I would imagine that everybody in this House, and indeed outside it, hopes that these discussions lead to a breakthrough. The people of the Garvaghy Road and this community have shown

extraordinary integrity, dignity and resilience throughout this period. They have stood together as a community, calmly but firmly, in defence of their right to live in peace and without an unwanted march being imposed upon them. Their strength and dignity have resonated far beyond Portadown. They have received solidarity and support from across this island, while events on the Garvaghy Road have attracted attention far beyond Ireland. This community has carried the scars of Drumcree for decades but which has nevertheless built and protected nearly 30 years of peace. Their strength and dignity throughout these difficult days deserve acknowledgement in this House. What is needed now is sustained engagement at the most senior level in this State to ensure that a positive way forward is secured.

This cannot be treated simply as a dispute over an Orange march through the Garvaghy Road community because what has happened over recent days has reopened one of the most sensitive and dangerous wounds in our modern history. A co-ordinated campaign has been pursued to push an unwanted sectarian and triumphalist march through a nationalist community which has lived without that confrontation for almost three decades, and the consequences extend far beyond the Garvaghy Road. It risks deepening division, destabilising politics across the North, and damaging confidence in the agreements and political relationships which have sustained peace for almost 30 years. It could also place at risk the accommodations that have developed around Orange Order marches across the North, where nationalist communities have shown enormous generosity and restraint in accommodating marches with which they profoundly disagree.

This is why both Governments must be fully and directly engaged. The British and the Irish Governments are co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement. Indeed, the people of the Garvaghy Road look to the Irish Government for leadership, and at moments of serious political difficulty in the past, progress was made because Governments engaged intensively and at the highest political level. While progress in talks is welcome - and we are all watching what is happening - there can be no ambiguity about what a sustainable solution must achieve. It cannot leave the community under the continuing threat of an unwanted Orange march being forced down the Garvaghy Road because for almost three decades this community has lived without an Orange march being imposed upon it, and this peace has to be maintained.

What direct political engagement has the Irish Government had with the British Government over the course of this crisis? Have the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach spoken with the British Prime Minister or with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland? Has the Government made clear to its British counterparts that any durable, sustainable resolution must mean that no Orange march is forced down the Garvaghy Road? Will the Tánaiste give a commitment in the House that the Irish Government will remain actively and intensively engaged at the highest political level until a peaceful and a lasting resolution is secured?

The Tánaiste: I will start with the Deputy's final point and say, yes, the Irish Government will be involved at all levels and at the highest level in relation to this ongoing, tense and concerning issue. I think everybody in the House would agree that we have come much too far to ever go back, when it comes to the North. We all agree on that. In many ways this is not simply a Green versus Orange issue. It is actually an issue of whether people want to go forward or backwards, and we all want to move forward. I believe there are significant majorities across communities in the North, across the island of Ireland and across these islands that want us to move forward together and never return to the past, despite the fact there is

enduring hurt from the past, which I want to acknowledge. I met residents from the Garvaghy Road in Leinster House last Thursday. I was struck by two things when I met them. First, I was struck by the really good work that has gone on in that community over a sustained period. I was particularly struck by the commentary around youth work. Later in the week I heard residents from the Garvaghy Road on radio talking about how communities now mix and how children play and move around in their lives regardless of political tradition or religious background. Real progress has been made.

I was struck by something else, though. When I met the residents last Thursday, it was before the Parades Commission's decision, and there was still a hope at that time that the decision would not go the way it went. The residents told me in no uncertain terms that there had been a level of trauma and re-traumatisation caused over the course of those days, even if the Parades Commission had ruled that the parade could not go ahead. That is real too and we will have to return to that as a government, as a country and as a people.

Now is the time for all of us to be very calm and for people like me to be careful in what we say. There is that history of hurt around Drumcree. It is an extraordinarily sensitive and painful situation. We all want to protect the gains that have been made through the peace process for people across the island and there is a responsibility on everyone to contribute positively to finding a way through this situation.

I welcome the exploratory discussions that are taking place with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Like the Deputy, I have read and heard some positive feedback in relation to that in recent hours. My colleague, the Minister for foreign affairs, Deputy McEntee, has been in daily contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as well as meeting him in the North in recent days. The Taoiseach has been in regular contact with the British Prime Minister. Both of them and both Governments share the commitment to upholding the Good Friday Agreement and the immeasurable gains that have been made through that agreement over the past almost three decades.

At an official level as well, as the Deputy and his party will know, there is ongoing contact with a number of stakeholders, including residents from the Garvaghy Road residents' coalition. I have had a number of discussions with the Deputy's party leader. The Taoiseach and I met the Deputy's party leader as well as vice president earlier this week. We should all continue to keep in contact.

I am conscious that a further appeal against the Parades Commission decision is listed to be heard in the Court of Appeal tomorrow, I believe. This is a submission by the Garvaghy Road residents' coalition. I will not comment on any matters before the courts other than to say I think we all share the view that it would be desirable if the talks got us to a point where we could find a way forward. Huge progress has been made over many years. Northern Ireland is in such a different and better place and a return to the divisions of the past is unthinkable. There is a responsibility on all of us in positions of leadership to make sure we find a way through this together.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Orange sectarian state of the past is gone, and is not coming back, not today, not tomorrow or not ever. The peace obviously must be maintained. The nationalist community is strong, confident and resilient, as are the people who live on the Garvaghy Road, and they simply want to live in peace. A generation has lived without

confrontation and without sectarian marches being imposed on them. Obviously, it was the wrong decision in the first place to allow that parade to go ahead. Many people from across nationalist Ireland, and I would say some within unionism, are looking on and saying, "Who are these people who are trying to bring us back to the past?" They have to be faced down and it cannot be allowed to happen.

As I said, there are talks ongoing. I want those talks to succeed but we also have to send very strong signals of solidarity with the residents of that community that the dark days of the past, and those images and the murders and all that happened, are never ever going to happen again. What will the Irish Government be doing over the next number of days in relation to its engagement with the British Government and the Secretary of State?

The Tánaiste: In all fairness, I think I have very clearly answered that question. We will be continuing to stay involved at the highest levels, and at all levels political and official, with counterparts and interlocutors in the British Government and the Secretary of State, with the community and residents, and with political parties and political leaders in the North, including Deputy Cullinane's party leadership as well.

I have been very clear, as has the Taoiseach, in our view regarding the decision of the Parades Commission. We have a very clear view on that. I do not want to say anything at this moment in time when people are endeavouring to try to find a resolution in good faith in the talks, and those talks need to continue.

It is important in any shared future and any shared island that we all respect each other's cultures. Of that there is no doubt and Deputy Cullinane has said that too. Every single year, thousands of parades take place across the North and most of them pass off, thankfully and rightfully, without incident. We must all respect each other's cultures. We all know, though, that when it comes to Drumcree there is a very particular sensitivity, hurt and trauma and we cannot allow the retraumatisation of the community. That is the context. It is not about parades being good or bad or who can celebrate or commemorate their tradition or culture. There has to be a place for all cultures. We all know, and Deputy Cullinane knows it well, there is a particular history attached to Drumcree that everyone is aware of in the North across traditions. That is what cannot be lost in the conversations in the hours and days ahead.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is now four days since the CHI scoping inquiry was published and the serious concerns of the families have not been addressed. Worse, they have been ignored. I want to reiterate why the families have these concerns. Their children, who have scoliosis and spina bifida, were repeatedly failed by the health service and the Government. Critical surgeries were delayed, sometimes for years. In some cases the delays were so long that the children became inoperable. Children were left in excruciating pain as the curvature of their spines reached dangerous levels. For some, their tiny bodies were twisted so much that their internal organs were crushed and damaged. They had difficulty breathing, were unable to sleep and spent nearly every waking moment either uncomfortable or in pain. Children missed out on school and time with friends, and their parents had to watch them suffer, helpless and unable to do anything to alleviate their trauma. Some families suffered the biggest loss imaginable with the death of a child.

The word "scandal" can sometimes be overused in Irish politics but the word feels inadequate to describe what these children and their families have endured. It involved repeated failures that lasted for years and potentially thousands of children. This is why the Tánaiste must get the public inquiry right. After everything these children and their parents have gone through, surely it is the least they deserve. What has been proposed this week simply does not cut it. Surely the Tánaiste can see that. The proposal is for an inquiry primarily to be held behind closed doors, which uses 2019 as the starting point when we all know this goes much further back. In 2014, for example, a report found serious failures in special services including neurology. Three years later, in 2017, the Tánaiste made the infamous promise to these families and their children that no one would wait longer than four months for surgery. The events leading up to this and the Tánaiste's broken promise will now be erased from the record of the inquiry. This is wrong and the Tánaiste knows it.

The Government has one chance to get this inquiry right. These children and what they have suffered cannot be airbrushed out of the record, which is what the families fear most. They have no trust in the Government, in CHI or in the proposed inquiry. Will the Tánaiste ensure their concerns are addressed? Will he ensure this inquiry is not primarily held behind closed doors? Will he expand the terms of reference so it begins before 2019 and, crucially, covers the time when he was the Minister for Health?

The Tánaiste: If we are to have an honest debate around this it would be helpful if we listened to each other. It would be very helpful if Deputy Rice had listened to what the Taoiseach said in the House yesterday when this issue was raised. It is not helpful to the many parents who engaged with Mr. Farrell's scoping inquiry. He is a very eminent senior counsel, which I am sure Deputy Rice would accept, who has done a very comprehensive piece of work. He has listened to so many people and read so many documents. It is he, not me and not Deputy Rice, who has come to the view in his independent scoping inquiry. Deputy Rice would probably be asking a lot more serious questions if we decided to ignore the independent scoping inquiry and what the independent senior counsel has said.

It is utterly wrong, and legally wrong, to suggest that a commission of inquiry is all or mainly held in private. The Taoiseach as the head of the Government was very clear yesterday on this issue and let me make it very clear again. The Leader of the Opposition yesterday rightly, accurately and fairly acknowledged that there may well be parents and others who wish to co-operate with a statutory inquiry in private, as is their right. There may well be, and will be, others who will want to give their evidence in public as, in my view, is their right. The mechanism of a commission of inquiry allows for this latitude. It allows for parts of an inquiry to be held in public and for parts of an inquiry to be held in private. We have to respect both because there are families who have gone through hell and back and the most unimaginable agony. Some of the families are known to people in the Oireachtas because they have felt the need to speak out and speak up, as is their right. There are other families whose names none of us know and they have as much right to be heard.

We have got to get this structure right. What we have said very clearly is the lengthy scoping inquiry report, which is about 134 pages or thereabouts, from Mr. Farrell has been published. There will now be engagement on the terms of reference through the Minister for Health with the advocacy groups. This should happen. The terms of reference will then have to be put before this House. This House has to ratify them so everyone here will have a role. We have

to be very clear in giving effect in this process to what the Taoiseach said yesterday, and I am now paraphrasing him, on the latitude the chairperson will have in terms of the timeframe. There should be no rigidity around 2019 or anything like that. This is about getting it right. We know, and those of us who have been in the House for quite a period of time know too, that getting the terms of reference right matters and getting the chairperson right matters, as does making sure there is ongoing engagement. The trust of the advocacy groups in the chairperson will be absolutely key.

The Government has agreed, and has been crystal clear, on the need for a statutory inquiry. We put in place Mr. Farrell who, I am sure Deputy Rice will accept, is completely independent. He is a very robust and competent senior counsel. We have published his report for all to see and we will now see that there is engagement. The Department of Health will work closely in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General, and there will be a call for input from advocacy groups on the terms of reference. I really do want to say that. The final terms of reference will come back to the Government for approval.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I read Mr. Farrell's report from start to finish-----

The Tánaiste: Me too.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: -----and I spent the past couple of days talking to parents and families who are furious. They say this is worse than they feared. They feel unheard. They said this has the potential to be a farce. The Tánaiste has to listen to them. I also listened to the Taoiseach yesterday, who said there would be more consultation. Meanwhile, the Minister for Health said she accepts the recommendations in full. Which is it? Will there be more consultation and change to what is proposed or is the Government accepting it in full? The Government has to get this straight because we are hearing different things from the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health. Yesterday the Taoiseach said there will be discretion around the timeline. Will this be locked into the terms of reference? Is it guaranteed? Are we going to look at the period when the Tánaiste was Minister for Health back in 2017 when he made the commitment?

Families feel like an afterthought and they want more transparency. The Tánaiste knows that the vast majority of the families pulled out of the scoping inquiry because they were not given the information they wanted. The report mentions eight reports. Three of them remain unpublished and have not been provided to the families. They have said they need to see them. Will the Tánaiste change tack? We need to go back further than 2019 and this primarily needs to be held in public as the families demand.

The Tánaiste: When we talk about families we have to accept there is a diversity of views. There are absolutely some families and advocacy groups-----

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The majority.

The Tánaiste: Allow me to speak. They have a view that this should be held fully in public.

There are also some who do not believe that. No matter what the number is, everybody has a right to be heard. When we are talking about the medical information of a person or their child, they have a right to be heard in a way that works for them. We do not need to be adversarial on these issues. People can choose to be if they want to, or we can try to get a flexible structure in place based on the expert legal opinion of a very eminent senior counsel.

We are very clear. We have published the Remy Farrell report in full. It is important to do that from the perspective of transparency because he was asked to do a job and we should not impugn his reputation and the job he did. We will then have engagement with the Attorney General's office and, as we said very clearly, there will also be engagement with the Department of Health and the advocacy groups on the terms of reference. The terms of reference will have to come back.

The Deputy is making fair points that I think merit consideration as to how we ensure that latitude is reflected because I agree about the rigidity around 2019. There is also the idea of making sure that those who wish to give evidence in public can do so too. I agree with that as well, but we have got to have those conversations about how to do this right. I do not believe it is beyond the ingenuity of this House to get this right. I share the Deputy's view that it is very important to get the structure of this right.

Deputy Ged Nash: We are days away from the announcement of budget 2027 and it looks like everything will be leaked in advance, or will the Tánaiste be able to keep a few morsels in his back pocket for budget day? Later today, the Labour Party will publish its alternative budget. We will set out our plans for a future we can all afford. To take on the cost-of-living crisis, our plan is unapologetically and relentlessly focused on three key issues: energy, incomes and child poverty. By taxing wealth sensibly and putting windfall taxes on soaring energy and bank profits, it shows how we can widen and deepen the tax base, and that we can build better public services and support the PAYE workers and households that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil left behind last year. It also shows that Ireland can afford to provide targeted energy credits worth €400 to over 1.2 million homes that need them, that as a country that remembers what it was to be poor, we can afford a second targeted rate of child benefit and, as a wealthy and highly unequal economy, we can afford to increase social welfare payments by €15 a week, increase public sector pay and index income tax to help workers.

I do not need to tell the Tánaiste that people across the country are worried sick about how they will pay the bills this winter as grocery and energy prices rise higher and higher, and as the Government puts up the cost of public transport. When people read the news today, however, they will also be angry. They will be angry about the waste of public money outlined in the report from the Comptroller and Auditor General covering 2025. We can take our pick of the issues uncovered across Departments and agencies by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

We need to know what the Government is doing about irresponsible spending and how it will budget effectively and responsibly for next year and beyond. Last year, a €600 million hole was left in the budget of the Department of education, but there is also a growing overspend in the Department of Health of close to €1 billion. Can we expect there to be cuts of that magnitude next year to the budgets of other Departments to protect essential healthcare, or will the Government, like we do, present honest, fully funded budgets?

The publication of existing level of service, ELS, estimates from the Parliamentary Budget Office yesterday shines a light on the dilemma and realities faced by the Government. It reckons that when all the known demands on the available pot of money are factored in for new spending, just €1 billion would be left next year for new measures, new public services and new innovations. That money will be to cover the promises that the Tánaiste and his colleagues have already made on childcare, the cost of disability, carers, education and so on. That €1 billion is also about the same size as the predicted health overspend. How is the Government going to fund it all? Will there be up to €1 billion of cuts in other Departments next year to fund overspends in health, or will the Government be responsible and increase taxes on wealth to fund the scale of public services and income supports our country needs?

A Deputy: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy very much. There is certainly no fear of Labour's alternative budget being leaked anyway. I look forward to it being published later this afternoon and having a chance to read it and engage constructively on it in the time ahead. At the outset, let me say that while we will all come at this from different perspectives and points of view, I do not doubt that every party in this House, Government and Opposition will be endeavouring to explore ways in which we can all assist people with the cost-of-living challenges. I share the view that one of the largest challenges families, businesses, farmers, households and the country in general face is the energy situation.

There is a balance that we have got to get right here between helping people in the here and now and helping to accelerate the transition. In fairness to the Deputy's party, I know it is taking this seriously, and we have to take it seriously. We need to help people in the here and now, but we also need to see how we can assist people who are genuinely full of common sense and trying to do the right thing by their own families, businesses and farms, but need us, as the Government, to make sure that grants and other means can help to bridge the gap and make that a viable proposition for them. We saw some measures in that space this week from the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. I think 11 more measures were announced around sustainable energy grants, such as a boiler scrappage scheme. We need to build on this in the time ahead.

In relation to the issue of the health service, I know well that there is a demand. It is a demand-led service and there are legitimate pressure points that occur throughout the year. Demands can also come from the Government and the Opposition sometimes to purchase new drugs or buy new things, and these are legitimate things that can happen outside the budgetary cycle. The Minister for Health and the Minister for public expenditure and reform are working very closely on making sure we have an adequately funded budget, as well as a realisation across the health service that budgets matter too. Good work is going on in relation to that.

I will look at Labour's proposals in relation to what it means by taxing wealth. I do not mean that glibly. We do not have enough conversations in this House about how we grow the wealth of our country so we can take in more revenue and then divide it up across our people. I would never wish to do anything and neither, I believe, would the Deputy, that would have any sort of chilling effect on enterprise or investment in our country.

Turning to the broader point the Deputy made, making sure we get value for money for taxpayers is an important one. We are in a rare position as a country of being able to deliver a budget next week that will see us being able to reduce some taxes, including taxes on work, and that is serious about sitting down with our public service unions and negotiating a new public sector pay deal because work must always pay, including work in the public service. We also aim to increase public expenditure. When governments across the European Union are not in a position to be able to do those things, there is an even greater responsibility on us to make sure there is delivery, outputs and outcomes from that additional level of investment. The budget, in all its parts, will be delivered to the Oireachtas next Tuesday. I look forward to debating its contents with the Deputy then.

Deputy Ged Nash: We will have overspends in health this year. We have had overspends in education this year, and we will have overspends in other Departments as well. The principal reason for the overspends in health and some other key spending Departments is that this Government and its immediate predecessor decided to engage in fictional, fraudulent budgeting.

I will give an example. Last year, the Minister for education made it very clear to the Department of public expenditure that she was at least €600 million short in respect of the special education services and transport services that her Department needed to provide. There was an understanding this time last year with the Department of public expenditure that it would be back knocking on the door this year and, lo and behold, €600 million plus was delivered this year. That is no way to manage an economy, no way to run a country and no way to run public services.

It is beyond time that we had an honest debate in this House about tax and spending and the real challenges we face as a country. We have not had that and we will not have it next week. What we will have next week is another effort at a budget that will involve a little bit here and there for everyone. That is not sufficient for an economy of this scale and a society that has the ambitions we have. We need that honest debate and we need honest budgeting.

The Tánaiste: I love honest debate and I welcome it. I look forward to honest, robust debate on our proposals and Labour's proposals in a constructive spirit to try to get the best outcome for the people that we are all elected to serve. I will make the point that just because the Department says it needs more, does not mean that a Government should say "Grand, here is another cheque".

Deputy Ged Nash: It does, though.

The Tánaiste: We have got to a level of public spending now, and I do not mean this smartly, that was almost unimaginable when the Deputy's party was in government. We are at a level of public spending now that does merit the question. It is one thing to ask people to do more with less, but it is quite another thing to ask State agencies and Departments to try to do more with more. I do not buy into the idea, and I am not saying that the Deputy does either, that every challenge in the public service can be addressed with another cheque and more funding. We do have to ask how we can reform things.

If we look at what the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is doing, to take the example of the health service, that is exactly what we should be seeing from Ministers. It is that we are willing to negotiate new contracts but there will be a need to reform the way people work and hospitals will have to function as busily on a Saturday as they do on a Thursday. That is the sort of ambition we need for the health service. We will have a chance to debate the detail of all of this at great length and appropriately so from next Tuesday.

Deputy Paul Lawless: It has emerged that a whistleblower made a very serious protected disclosure to the Minister for justice in September 2023. It alleged that the gun holsters being used by An Garda Síochána were faulty and dangerous. The whistleblower said that the warnings about the unregulated gun holsters had been ignored. The faulty gun holsters are alleged to have contributed to the murder of one garda because it was so easy for the killer to slip the garda's gun from the holster, and the serious injury of another because the holster effectively triggered the trigger when it was being pulled.

The disclosure alleges that Drew Harris stopped an independent safety review into the holster from taking place. As this disclosure directly implicated the Garda Commissioner, it was legally routed to the Department of justice. The Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner ruled that the Department of justice was the appropriate body to investigate the disclosure. However, the then Minister for Justice, Deputy Helen McEntee, directly intervened and told her officials to send the matter back to An Garda Síochána to investigate. We have documentary evidence to show she blocked the Department from investigating.

When this was returned to An Garda Síochána, the whistleblower himself was named. The Minister for justice broke the law in relation to this. The whistleblower's identity should have been protected. Instead, the whistleblower was exposed to the same employer against which he was making the allegations and, consequently, his life became hell. When the matter was referred back to An Garda Síochána, the two people responsible for looking into it were so outraged that they themselves blew the whistle and subsequently submitted protected disclosures. The Garda Commissioner responded by effectively shutting down the protected disclosures unit, leaving the new whistleblowers without a job.

This is a massive scandal and, in many ways, it is even worse than the Maurice McCabe scandal a number of years ago. Does the Tánaiste accept that the Minister for justice broke the law in her handling of the situation? When the Tánaiste was Minister for justice, a protected disclosure landed on his desk in relation to faulty ammunition. What role did he play in the decision to refer that disclosure back to An Garda Síochána?

The Tánaiste: As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows, the Oireachtas must always uphold the laws within which we all operate. The legislation passed by this House in 2014 was very clear. It was to remove politicians from the investigation of complaints surrounding wrongdoing in the workplace of State agencies. This resulted in the passage and signing into law of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014. The Act puts in place measures to support and protect people with concerns about actions or omissions in their workplace who wish to speak up and to do so confidentially and safely. It is very important that robust legislation is in place in relation to that because whistleblowing plays an important role in our democracy and in democracy more broadly.

A review of the operation of the Protected Disclosures Act is due to take place in the coming year. This will begin with a public consultation in which I would encourage all stakeholders and wider society to participate. When we passed the law in 2014, it specifically committed to a review of the legislation. That is timely and important.

As the Deputy alluded to, a number of concerns expressed in the RTÉ programme are subject to the legislation and have been subject to actions under it. This restricts what can be said, despite the ability of complainants to openly outline their concerns. We have legislation that seems to openly allow complainants to speak, which is absolutely appropriate, but there are restrictions on what officeholders can say in response. In light of the comments made in that programme, and some of the comments the Deputy has reiterated here today, as is his right, the current Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has sought legal advice in relation to the restrictions imposed under section 16 of the Protected Disclosures Act. This is helpful. The Minister will consider the advice on receipt of it. It is important that anything that can be said and shared should be said and shared.

There are robust structures, policies and procedures in place across the criminal justice system to ensure the effective management of protected disclosures and to provide support to people who make disclosures under the Act. I am very confident that all Ministers in the Government, and all Ministers in governments, follow advice from officials and legal advice in relation to these matters.

In relation to due process and fairness, where critical processes are ongoing in response to a protected disclosure, they must be allowed to progress and conclude. This includes matters currently before criminal courts, civil courts or the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, or which are the subject of current investigations by Fiosrú, the Office of the Police Ombudsman. I understand that this applies to many or all of the matters raised either in the RTÉ programme or here today. The people concerned may choose to comment on a range of matters, as is their right, but it is very important that nobody else says anything that puts at risk the integrity of those essential processes. If there are matters before the courts, the WRC or Fiosrú, we as an Oireachtas should be conscious of that in our commentary.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I am very disappointed with that response. I have met the whistleblowers and noted the moral courage they have demonstrated in raising really important issues, such as defective ammunition and holsters that have possibly contributed to the murder of one member of the force.

I am asking a very simple question. It is very clear from the evidence I have seen that the Minister for justice referred this issue back to An Garda Síochána and did not follow proper protocols. As a result, the individuals were jeopardised and their lives were effectively made hell. The identities of the individuals concerned were not even concealed. That is unacceptable. The question is very simple. Did the Minister, in the Tánaiste's view, break the law in relation to it? The identities of the individuals were revealed and the matter was sent back to the very force, the very same employer, that the individuals were making the allegations against.

The Tánaiste: It nearly seems as if the Deputy is endeavouring to be the investigative body himself on the floor of Dáil Éireann. The House – it is not my decision – took a decision in

2014 that this should not be how this works. There are robust structures in place. People can and should highlight information in relation to wrongdoing in a workplace. That then has to be investigated robustly.

Deputy Paul Lawless: It has not been. That is the point.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Lawless.

The Tánaiste: That is the Deputy's view and opinion-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: No.

The Tánaiste: -----which he is perfectly entitled to have.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Is it not yours?

The Tánaiste: What he is not entitled to do, in my humble opinion, is be judge, jury and executioner, deciding everything according to what he believes to be the case. You either accept that in this country we have criminal courts, civil courts, the WRC, the Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner and Fiosrú, the Office of the Police Ombudsman, and that they are carrying out investigations-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: They are not, though. That is the problem.

The Tánaiste: -----into a number of these matters, or you do not. If the Deputy wants to introduce amendments to the legislation-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: This is not happening. That is the point.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless is out of order.

Deputy Paul Lawless: That is the point.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste must be allowed to conclude.

The Tánaiste: I would be delighted to conclude. If the Deputy wants to introduce amendments to change the laws in this country in relation to the Protected Disclosures Act 2014, he should please do so. In the absence of that, the Government is committed to reviewing the full legislation and making sure it is working robustly. If there are areas where it needs to be improved, let us address them. I have full confidence that not just the Minister in question but also all other Ministers in the Government comply fully with the law and advice of officials.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have to rise again to ask about assistance for the construction and civil engineering sector and the cost of green diesel. I raised this two weeks ago with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. He said the scheme was being worked on but that he was not responsible for it, and that the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, was not responsible for it either. In all the signals the Tánaiste has been giving lately about the budget, he seems to have been talking about everyone and every sector except the construction sector. Surely it will not be left out again.

All the construction and civil engineering companies, and even small sole traders, are struggling owing to the savage increase in the cost of green diesel. These contractors and operators are involved in building houses and roads, sewerage and water schemes, industrial units and factories, and in energy projects involving wind, solar, the provision of electricity and connectivity. They work in the maintenance of our roads, water systems and all the services.

With all the housebuilding and everything else that is to be done, we do not have enough construction and civil engineering contractors. We must mind what we have. The Tánaiste said he did not want housing provision slowed down. That was back in May.

Every kind of mechanical vehicle used in construction guzzles green diesel. JCBs, large track machines, dumpers, concrete mixers, cranes, teleporters, rollers and graders all use green diesel. The average price was 94 cent per litre in 2025 and it is €1.78 per litre today.

The Tánaiste also mentioned last May that quarries would be included in the financial package. They provide material for construction and the different grades of stone for road building. He did not include them, but he must now be fair and honour what he said last May. The Taoiseach promised construction would be included, when he was sitting in the benches opposite last May. The Tánaiste mentioned to the media that it would be included and even the Minister, Deputy Heydon, said that, while it was not in his remit, the Government was considering it and would have a scheme for it as well.

In recent times, the Tánaiste promised to do something on the cost of home heating oil. I welcome that. It is needed and it was left out. It only got 2 cent last May. The Government promised the agri-contractors - they were in the audiovisual room yesterday evening - and agriculture-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am disappointed that there is no word about the construction sector or civil engineering and I ask the Tánaiste to ensure it is included now.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I am conscious that he knows a lot about this industry and machines. It is an area the Government is committed to endeavouring to assist people with because I am conscious that the energy costs are real, for everyone. They have an inflationary effect on the economy and therefore affect everyone more broadly.

However, I am also conscious that, beyond that, particular sectors of the economy are particularly badly effected and they are crucial sectors, not just for the jobs they create, although that is important, but also from a supply chain point of view. As the Deputy correctly said, they do the construction of our homes and critical buildings and the production of our

food. That is why we are working across the Government in the here and now to see what we can do further to assist in the budget next Tuesday. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, is working intensively on issues related to agriculture. I met farmers at the ploughing championships who are looking to make improvements to their buildings with solar panels and the like. They need a bit of help. There is a view that we need to ensure the farm support scheme that was in place is extended because the crisis certainly has not abated. I met hauliers recently as well as the Irish Farmers' Association, IFA and the Irish Creamery Milk Supplier Association, ICMSA. The diesel rebate scheme is in place to the end of the year and, as the Deputy said, we are giving consideration to the issues of home heating oil and gas. There are limits to what any government can do. There are fiscal limits and limits in terms of having to work within EU directives.

The Deputy specifically asked about construction workers. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I had a good meeting with the Construction Industry Federation recently. The Taoiseach and I have discussed this too and the Government will bottom out how best to bring forward support to the construction sector. The Deputy referenced previous comments of the Taoiseach on the matter. We will do that shortly.

More broadly, while cost pressures on people are real and many of them are materialised through energy costs - there is no doubt about that - there are a number of ways the Government can try to help. One is by doing direct things we can do to help with energy. We are looking at all of them. However, there are other levers we can also pull because for farmers, hauliers, construction workers or workers in any part of the economy, if we can reduce tax on their take-home pay and improve what their payslips look like at the end of the week or month, that is a way of helping. If people are dependent on childcare services and we can drive down the cost of childcare, that is a way of helping. If people are at particular risk of fuel poverty - almost 500,000 homes receive support - and we can do more to help them, that is a way of helping. For older people who live alone trying to heat the house, there are other ways through the social welfare system that are also ways of helping.

I am not saying the Deputy is saying this, but I just make the point. We cannot look at how to help with the cost of energy only through energy policy. We have to look at all the levers available to the Government to try to reduce costs in general for people, because they do not look at it through Departments or silos; they look at their bottom line and we will endeavour to do as much as we can to help next week.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I welcome the packages the Government has given, but it must remember a lot of the money being given back is only being given back to the people the Government took it from in the first place. When the base goes up, extra tax is taken in carbon tax and so on. The Government must remember that and at least give back what it has taken. It has taken from the construction sector as well. The Tánaiste must remember that a lot of the construction industry had entered into commitments, tenders and contracts from the start of the year, before things got bad, in other words before the war started. People have to honour those commitments and they are losing their shirts on them. The types of vehicles I mentioned for construction are guzzling green diesel and the price has gone up. The construction and all those things will not carry on. Last year, the average was 94 cent and it is €1.78 today and the Government only gave 3 cent in whatever package it gave last May. That is not fair. I ask him

to look at it seriously and it must be given retrospectively, back to January when it was given to the rest of the sectors, to be fair about it.

The Tánaiste: In the interest of fairness - and I appreciate the Deputy's elevation of my powers of influence - the reason energy prices have risen rapidly in this country and around the world is that the Strait of Hormuz is closed. That is not my fault. What I can do is look at the policy levers the Government can pursue and not just comment on what is going on in other parts of the world. Any objective analysis of the situation will show the Government has put in place - the Deputy can argue about the composition of the package, but not the quantum - one of the largest packages of support, if not the largest, in the European Union.

The package we put in place in Ireland, adjusted for head of population, is around eight times larger than the one of our nearest EU neighbours in France. Our friends in the UK have had to put in place a much smaller package and does the Deputy know what they had to do? They had to borrow for it and got charged nearly 5% on the market.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am not interested in them at all. I am interested in Ireland-----

The Tánaiste: No, but I am-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----and Kerry.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae.

The Tánaiste: I am interested because people in Kerry need to know that, despite the way the Deputy presents things, the Government is doing a lot to help and will continue to help. It is not fair to say the packages only had an impact of this, that and the other. The package we put in place has suppressed inflation by 0.6% across the economy. That means, when people do their shopping in Kerry today, the cost of their grocery basket is 0.6% lower than it would have been if it were not for Government action. I want people to know that further help is on the way in the budget next week. I heard what the Deputy said about particular sectors of the economy and we are examining all of them.

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

Deputy David Cullinane: It has been almost ten years since the Tánaiste made a promise to children with scoliosis and spina bifida that they would not have to wait longer than four months for treatment. As he will be aware, many parents see that as a broken promise and they do not want any more broken promises, which is why they are concerned about the Remy Farrell report, which was published a few days ago, and its recommendations.

The starting point for everyone in the House is that we need to get this right, that we need to have an inquiry that is fit for purpose and has the confidence of advocacy groups and parents. I think the Tánaiste said today on the floor of the Dáil that the start date of 1 January 2019 is too rigid. I have been saying that. It has to go beyond that. I understand that the Scoliosis Advocacy Network and Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Ireland have written to the Tánaiste

seeking a meeting. My understanding is that they have not received a response. I urge him to meet them and others to ensure he hears their concerns. Let us ensure we have an inquiry that is fit for purpose, that can answer the questions, that there is no hiding place-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You should conclude, Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: -----and that we establish the truth and accountability for all involved.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the constructive way in which he is engaging on this. I do not doubt the bona fides of anyone in this House and I ask that no one doubt the bona fides of people on this side of the House in terms of wanting to get this right. There are diverse views and what Deputy Rice said earlier may be right, there may be a significant view that it should all be in public, but some people will want to give information in private. We all understand that. The Sinn Féin leader said that yesterday.

Getting the structure right matters. Getting the terms of reference right matters. In my experience, and I am sure in that of the Deputy, getting the chairperson right matters, so the chairperson has an understanding of the terms of reference, not just what they mean in black and white, but what they mean in effect and the spirit to be given to them.

There will be engagement with the advocacy groups. The Taoiseach was clear about that yesterday in the House and I am clear on that too. It is appropriate for that engagement to take place through the Department of Health and the Minister for Health. The Government will consider all that. There will be engagement and the terms of reference will have to come back to the House for the statutory inquiry to be established. Let us all work to get this right.

People have different views, but I think the Remy Farrell report is an important piece of work and should be considered in that context. However, there is always room to engage and consult.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Last week, I asked the Tánaiste about special education in this country in advance of Virgin Media's documentary airing on Monday. On Tuesday, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan asked the Taoiseach about the documentary and the stark things outlined within it. The Taoiseach said that he had not seen it and that it would only give one side of the story. Those words really hurt people. It is one side of the story where we are seeing children being educated in cupboards and undertaking regulation in bathrooms. That is one side of the story. One of the most heart-breaking moments was when we saw that one side of the story where a mother said, "Why is it always the children who have the least time who have to wait the longest?" When the Tánaiste answers me, I ask him to please not tell me how much money the Government has spent on special education. I know all of those numbers very well. What is most important is not how much you have but what you spend it on and how effective it is. I also want to know whether the Government can do an audit of all special schools and special classes to ensure they are fully resourced and staffed and have everything they need to support the children they educate.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy very much. I know of her interest in this area and her work on it. I have seen the programme. I told the Deputy last week that I would watch it. It is an important programme because it gives a visual insight into the real lived experience of parents and schools. I know the Taoiseach is also very committed to this issue. I will ask the Minister for education to reflect on the point the Deputy has made regarding an audit. To add another point, what we mean by "inclusive education" is a debate we should get right in this House too. If some good is to come from the very large investments being made, which I will not go through, we will need to look at the model of inclusive education. One of the exciting structures the Minister, Deputy Naughton, has put in place is the new forum on inclusive education. There needs to be a way for everyone in this House to have input if we are to get that right. If we are spending a vast sum of money and still seeing many kids not getting the education they are entitled to and need, we have to look at bringing those two things together.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Will the Tánaiste provide us with an update on the work under way to change regulations here to allow for plug-in solar panels? We were previously told that this work would be complete by September. There are over 1 million plug-in solar panels already in use in Germany. Regulations in the UK have recently been updated to allow for the sale and installation of such panels. This is a simple and cheap solution to help households bring down their energy bills, particularly for people living in apartments. They are absolutely brilliant. You just pick them up in a supermarket, bring them home, put them on your balcony, plug them in and away you go. It is an easy win. I hope Deputy Nash will not mind me leaking that we have a costed proposal in our alternative budget to provide up to 1 million free plug-in solar panels to households that would also qualify for targeted energy credits. It just gives lower-income households access to solar power without the upfront cost of rooftop installation. It helps to permanently lower their energy bills. Will the Tánaiste do something similar?

The Tánaiste: I have a professional affection for Deputy Nash and I reassure Deputy Ahern that, in my experience, he is pretty good at media management, so I would not worry about him. The issue of plug-in solar that the Deputy has raised is a serious one. It is a much more practical option for people in a whole variety of household settings, including apartments and the like. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is giving the matter serious consideration. Work is under way on it. I will have to get the Deputy a detailed update from the Minister. I welcome the part the Labour Party's alternative budget will play in feeding into the debate on next week's budget. There will be a lot of focus on what we can do to reduce fuel costs. We should absolutely do our best on that but there are big savings to be had if we can help households to sustainably reduce their own bills. I accept that plug-in solar could play a very important role in that. I need to get an update as to where the Minister is on that.

Deputy Charles Ward: As the Tánaiste will know, over 100,000 public sector workers, including teachers, SNAs, healthcare workers, council workers, civil servants and people who work in this building, are now on a work-to-rule because the Government has refused to offer them a pay rise that would allow them to keep up with the current cost-of-living crisis. I fully support them. Over the past few days, I have talked to many public sector workers in Donegal, including members of the Inishowen and Letterkenny branches of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation. I was struck by how downhearted they are at the fact that they feel the Government is not willing to engage. They feel it demonstrates a lack of respect. They are

under severe stress in this crisis and are struggling to pay bills. They deserve respect. Will the Tánaiste intervene and ensure the Government comes to the table with a decent offer that keeps up with the pace of inflation so that public sector workers can get through the current cost-of-living crisis?

The Tánaiste: I have nothing but respect for public sector workers. The political and economic philosophy of this Government is that work should always pay. That includes those working in our public services. Let me be absolutely clear, crystal clear, and beyond any doubt. Please let every public sector worker hear this. The Government wants to sit down with their representatives without precondition to engage on a new public sector pay deal. I know there is hurt and pain out there and that people are under pressure. I get that. However, the way to get to a new public sector pay deal is to go into a room and get around a table with no preconditions on either side in order to make progress. We will make an allocation in next week's budget that shows we are very serious about getting a good, sustainable and affordable public sector pay deal that makes sure work, including work in the public sector, always pays. We need to get in that room, however. We on the Government side are willing to turn up without precondition. I respectfully ask the unions to consider that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Yesterday, I met with a group of women who have benefited from the three-day wait. These women attended their first abortion appointment but subsequently changed their minds and, as a result, had their babies. Indeed, their babies were with them in the room yesterday. The legislation to abolish the three-day wait is currently before the Committee on Health but that committee is strategically blocking the voices of these women. These women are the one section of society to have had their voices ignored by the HSE, by the O'Shea report and now by the Committee on Health. These women have benefited and have children today as a result. Does the Tánaiste agree that the really important voices of these women should be heard before the committee concludes its deliberations? Will he meet these women? It is a wonderful and powerful story. I want to ensure their voices are heard as we discuss this really important legislation.

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge and accept that there are very sincerely held views on all sides of the issue in this House. There are a variety of views within my own party and within the other Government party. The Government approaches these matters with a free vote. They are treated as a matter of conscience and people can vote in accordance with their own views. That happened in this House, and the legislation is now with the committee, as the Deputy rightly says. I do not want to interfere in the committee's work. I would take that approach on any issue. It is not for me to tell a committee who to hear from but, in general, the more inclusive discussions can be and the more voices that can be heard, the better.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I recently had a very interesting meeting with the chairperson of Wexford Macra na Feirme, Cliona O'Leary, and Sean O'Brien. We had a lengthy discussion on a wide range of subjects but high on their agenda was the issue of succession. Will the Minister update us on the status of a clear succession scheme to encourage and support the transition of the managerial role to the younger farmer? What are our plans to deliver a comprehensive national generational renewal strategy and to act on the commission on generational renewal's report to deal with ageing within farming? There is currently a three-year requirement for

succession farm partnerships. This is seen to be acting as a barrier to farm transfers rather than as an incentive. I have no doubt that the concerns of the Wexford Macra representatives are replicated throughout farms across Ireland. Young people are the future of Irish farming. It is essential that there are clear succession plans in place.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy Brennan for raising this point and for his engagement with Macra in Wexford. We deal with Macra and with all of the farm organisations across the board. Generational renewal is one of those key issues that are at the forefront of my mind in every decision I make as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is not just about one scheme at the end, although it is my ambition to include generational renewal schemes as part of the new CAP, should we be able to design it in that way. Right now, I am implementing the 31 recommendations of the commission on generational renewal. In developing last year's budget, I had asks in respect of supports for elements of generational renewal. On the tax side, the Tánaiste and I have discussed existing schemes that can be improved and how we can work together to address issues in this area. Generational renewal was foremost in my mind when I was negotiating an extension to the nitrates derogation last year, when I was implementing a new bovine TB action plan and when I was looking at additional supports in the area of TAMS. I want to continue to put record amounts of money into TAMS because that capital investment supports farmers taking over farms. Generational renewal is a key priority for me and for the Government. Working with colleagues across Government, I hope to be able to continue to make progress and deliver in this area.

Deputy Máire Devine: Dublin South-Central is experiencing huge levels of antisocial behaviour around the inner city. Shootings and petrol bombings have become more common in the past fortnight. I have been working on this, particularly in the Fatima Mansions area but also in other areas, for the past six years.

I o'clock

The last straw was when little ones were told to feck off back to their apartment and they were not to come out when they hear the sound of the ice cream man in the van. It is unsupportable. I ask the Tánaiste to meet the local representatives. An Garda Síochána is asking for extra resources in this area. We had a fantastic meeting last week that I arranged and all stakeholders came to it. We are really serious about tackling this. We need support, encouragement and the Tánaiste's say-so.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and highlighting in the Dáil the concerns of the community around the Fatima Mansions area and other parts of her constituency, along with the need for resourcing. On foot of the Deputy raising it, I will raise the issue with the Minister for justice. I am sure the Deputy has done this but she can share that stakeholder engagement piece with the Minister. We need to continue to invest more in communities along with supporting the Garda in terms of its numbers. We will endeavour to do both in the budget next week. If the Deputy wants to send that information on to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, I will also contact him on foot of this.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Several times this year, I have raised the hot school meals programme for St. John's and St Paul's schools in Drogheda, including with the Taoiseach back in March. These schools have an in-house canteen providing affordable daily hot food options for children. The Department of education saw its value and importance. It has been lauded as a best practice model for school meals and it has been cited in various publications as a good guide for school food initiatives. Despite providing the first breakfast club of its kind in the State, meeting all of the recommendations and ticking every box for what the Government says it is trying to achieve with school meals, the schools now apparently do not fit the Government model for hot school meals. I ask the Tánaiste to make this make sense to me.

Both these schools are at the heart of a proud community in Drogheda that has felt the brunt of organised crime feuds. The breakfast clubs, school meals and canteen are a lifeline for the whole community. The schools need clarity from the Minister and the Department. I ask the Tánaiste to ask the Minister to now visit the schools, provide the funding, ensure they do not lose their staff and endorse the model so that they do not lose the ability to run their breakfast clubs and continue to provide hot, nutritious meals to their students.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue about St. John's and St. Paul's schools in Drogheda. I will ask the Minister to visit next time she is in Louth and certainly to engage with the Deputy on that. As the Deputy will know, a review of the hot school meals programme came to Cabinet a couple of weeks ago. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, will now consider how we give effect to that. I will ask that he also take a look at the fact that there is another model in place in Drogheda as part of that.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Since I have been elected to this House, I have heard little or nothing from the other side of the House on job creation. It never seems to feature. It is all about eating the size of the pie, eating the pie that we have and how we are going to cut up the pie. It is never about how we will make more pie. I went to college in 1990 when unemployment was 18%, just coming out of the 1980s. I remember 2012, when we were at 16% unemployment after the crash. Commissioner Hoekstra visited this week and he highlighted the made in Europe narrative and intentions within the European Commission. That provides a real opportunity for Ireland to further develop our domestic economy and build high-value jobs. However, we have to square up and keep job creation at the top of our agenda. What is the Government doing to maintain and develop job creation as a top priority?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question. In my time taking Leaders' Questions in this House, and let somebody fact check me if I am wrong, I do not ever recall being asked a question about job creation by an Opposition Member during the Leaders' Questions slot, which is interesting. At the moment, the political and often the media discourse just takes full employment for granted. It is a case of "We are at full employment, and sure is that not all grand." Of course, there are people who went to bed last night and lay awake looking at the ceiling wondering how they are going to pay the wage bill at the end of the week or the end of the month. Many of us in this House can say they have done it in past lives and many of us have never had to do that. The first thing we need to do in here is stop coming up with good ideas without working out how small businesses are going to pay for it. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that the Government can help in two ways. It can help in practical ways, whether that is through improved grants, through improving the research and development tax credit or improving the tax system itself by reducing income tax to have some positive effect on both purchasing power but also on wage growth pressure. Sometimes, the Government can also help by getting the hell out of the way if there is too much red tape and too much bureaucracy. The cost of doing business advisory forum has provided well over 60 recommendations that can really help and support.

The first thing we have to do in the budget next week is protect what we have as a country. The conversation about how to divide up the national pie is really important and speaks to our values. How much do you give to education? What about health? All of that is important but what if one day the pie is smaller? That conversation then becomes much harder. We remember those days and we can never forget them.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Yesterday, the staff at the CCTV operation centre in Moyross were issued with a protective notice because no funding commitment has been provided from the Department of justice, the Department that should be funding this project. Let us be clear: this is a vital service established in the aftermath of the Limerick feud in the early 2000s, a dark period of Limerick's history that none of us ever want to see repeated. These 300-plus cameras cover not just our regeneration areas but the whole of Limerick. Comments made to my colleague, Councillor Sharon Benson, by An Garda Síochána indicated that 100 additional gardaí would be needed should these cameras cease operating. Gardaí also said these cameras play a critical role in crime prevention and detection and making our communities feel safe. Closing this vital project would be completely counterproductive. I call on the Government to immediately commit to multi-annual funding to keep these cameras operational and protect the jobs of the staff who are now on a protective notice. Allowing 300-plus cameras to go dark on this Government's watch would be a serious failure of public safety for the people in Limerick by the Government.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. My thoughts, and I am sure the thoughts of everyone in the House, are with the workers and families affected by the protective notice. I am sure this is a very stressful and worrying time for people. We also want to see an expansion of CCTV in general in terms of public safety. I am not across the detail of it in the way Deputy Quinlivan is but, on foot of him raising the issue today, I will make contact with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and ask that he and An Garda Síochána look at this and come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I met with a number of equestrian centres in north Tipperary this week. They raised serious concerns with me about the commercial rates financial burden they are facing. Equestrian centres require large areas for stables, indoor and outdoor arenas, yards and car parks but the size of those premises does not mean that all of those spaces gather commercial activity. The valuation of these premises can therefore create a significant rates burden. I have also been told of inconsistencies in how car parks and outdoor areas are treated.

These centres provide sport and physical activity for children and young people, opportunities for people with disabilities and important facilities for rural communities, as well as access to the sector and sports for children of all backgrounds who otherwise might not get

a chance to do so. I ask the Government to examine the relevant legislation and consider whether genuine riding schools and equestrian centres should have a specific agricultural or equivalent rates classification. If we want our children to be more active and spend less time on screens, why are we putting commercial rates barriers in the way of them accessing these very facilities?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue with riding schools and equestrian centres and how the commercial rates legislation interacts with them. I agree from a policy and public health perspective on the benefit of these centres at a time when we are trying to encourage our young people to be more active and have less screen time. I know this issue was also raised with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, in his engagement with equestrian centres. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has responsibility for our valuations legislation. I will talk with him and ask that he liaise with the Deputy on this matter. I know from memory that at the moment, if you reduce rates in one area - once again, we go back to our pie analogy - the pie stays the same for the county. Obviously, no one wants to move that burden to another place. Let me ask the Minister to take a look at that and engage with the Deputy to see if there are creative ways we can make progress.

Deputy Colm Burke: As the Tánaiste is aware, the Defence Forces have confirmed that they intend to dispose of armoured personnel carriers. These are vehicles they no longer require. Has a decision been made in respect of inviting tenders to be submitted to facilitate the sale? Would consideration be given for a charitable organisation to acquire same, to be used for humanitarian purposes? One of the groups interested has already sent over 200 all-terrain vehicles to Ukraine, providing support to people who are injured and getting them out of the war zone. What is the process in relation to the tender and will serious consideration be given to making those vehicles available for use for humanitarian purposes?

The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Obviously, we want to do all we can to support Ukraine and stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. In that context, we have what is called a light tactical armoured vehicle fleet. It was procured through a competitive process and provided an important operational capacity to our Defence Forces from 2010 until its withdrawal from service in 2023 at the end of its planned service life. There was a detailed technical assessment on its withdrawal from the service and the Defence Forces concluded that the fleet could be made available for donation for potential restoration and operational use by the armed forces of Ukraine for the humanitarian purpose the Deputy highlighted. The Ministry of Defence of Ukraine expressed its sincere gratitude and thanked Ireland for its continued support but ultimately on that occasion, it did not accept the vehicles. That was an operational decision for the Ukrainian authorities.

However, the future of the fleet will now be considered by the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces. A board of survey will be convened by the Defence Forces in accordance with the Defence Forces regulation and it will make a recommendation on the future disposal of the vehicle.

Preparatory work for the board of survey is currently under way. We need that to do its work first, and that will come up with various options. I can confirm that any proposals

received regarding it will, of course, factor in our Department's assessment of the options that are available.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I recently completed my doctoral studies in youth work. I conducted research with youth workers around the country, having been a youth worker myself for 15 or 16 years. Simply put, being a youth worker is the best job in the world. It is as simple as that. Youth work changes lives. Youth workers change lives.

However, there is a concern within the sector with regard to the implementation of opportunities for youth, which is the national youth work strategy. Will the Tánaiste liaise with the Minister for education to publish not only the very important workforce data that was collated by the Department, but also the next series of actions that will come from that strategy to inform the workforce with regard to future planning and the precarity of contracts but also the dissatisfaction levels within the sector?

The Tánaiste: I congratulate Deputy Dr. Farrelly on the completion of his doctorate in youth studies and for being able to share that insight that he has professionally with the House. I join with him in acknowledging the important role that youth workers play in all communities and maybe the even more vital role that they play in communities at times of particular challenge, trauma or societal difficulty as well. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will talk with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, in relation to that national youth work strategy and those concerns and issues he raised here today.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish to raise the ongoing industrial action or work to rule by the public service unions and the impact it is having on many aspects of our economy, especially in Cashel town, where two wonderful special schools, Scoil Aonghusa and Scoil Chormaic, provide outstanding support to children and young people with additional and complex needs. The staff in these schools are dedicated and hard working and they do their utmost.

I fully support the right to industrial action and to try to be recognised, but I want the Tánaiste today to give a commitment that the Government will meaningfully engage with the unions and try to avert this because, as I said, these young people need a routine. It is so vital to them, and I think the Tánaiste himself knows that. Even the change of a bus route or bus time affects them. This would have an enormous effect on the daily lives of these young special children and their families. In the interest of humanity, I ask - there are many other sectors but in this area, in these wonderful schools in Cashel and around the country - that we try to avert any prolonged action.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGrath for raising the issue in relation to Cashel. I do not doubt the importance of that service provided and the people who very much depend on it. Let me reiterate, and I say this to be helpful, that the Government wants the public sector unions to engage with our representatives in talks without precondition. We could not be clearer about that. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, has confirmed that view to the public sector unions. Every dispute, every discussion, gets resolved in sitting around a table. There is no advantage, tactical or otherwise, for either side to delaying that engagement.

We need a new public sector pay agreement. The unions in this country have always been responsible, constructive partners in standing up for those they represent. We have a job to do as well. We will make an allocation for a new public sector pay deal, or an indicative one, in our budgetary figures next week. The sooner the talks can begin, the better.

It is important that both sides, including the Government, approach those talks with no preconditions. We are willing to engage without precondition. I would ask in the interest of everybody, including public sector workers, that unions would do the same.

Deputy John Clendennen: Today I would like to raise the provision of diabetes care and services for the people and families of Offaly and the midlands. The HSE acknowledges the importance of timely access to appropriate diabetes care, yet waiting times for this service at the Regional Hospital Mullingar, RHM, are over two years. I have had a number of constituents in touch with me. One individual, diagnosed at childhood, cannot apply for a mortgage or get on the property ladder because he is awaiting an insulin pump. Another constituent has been a patient of Mullingar for ten years. Following half a dozen appointments, he is still awaiting an insulin pump. It is simply not good enough.

I acknowledge the work the Minister in her efforts to reform the way the HSE works, but the HSE is now issuing letters to patients advising that diabetes day care services in Mullingar are suspended due to staff shortages. We spoke about small businesses here a minute ago. There is no small business in this country that would close its doors because of staff shortages, regardless of the expert levels required, and we have to see the same level of resilience and imagination in the HSE. I would ask that the Government look at reversing this decision and give peace of mind to patients because there is a level of dismay and concern out there in regard to the circular from the HSE.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clendennen for raising this issue and for the real, practical examples he has given of the adverse impact when this service is not in place on people in their daily lives. I am informed that the diabetes day service in Mullingar is delivered by four whole-time equivalent nursing staff and one dietician, but I am also informed that currently there is only one staff nurse available for the team. Clearly, we have a recruitment issue here that needs to be addressed. I am reliably informed by the Minister and the HSE that every effort is being made to fill the vacancies as soon as possible. Existing patients will continue to be managed through the consultant diabetes outpatient clinics.

However, the Deputy is correct that the diabetes day service has been temporarily suspended from 1 October. I understand why this is not satisfactory to the Deputy's constituents. This must be temporary. It must be kept as brief as possible. I am told that they are making every effort to fill the vacancies but they also are looking at other solutions, as the Deputy suggested they need to do. Redeploying staff to reduce pressure on the service could, indeed, be one. Patients currently attending the diabetes day service are advised to continue following their existing care plans but also to attend consultant outpatient appointments as arranged. The impact of this needs to be minimised. Recruitment needs to be progressed quickly. I will ask the Minister for Health to keep Deputy Clendennen informed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I commend the community of Garvaghy Road on their courage and resilience against what we hope is one of the last pangs of Orange supremacism and triumphalism. Political unionism really needs to take a look at itself. Is this the road it wants to go down? None of the rest of us want to see that. I would include in that many within the unionist community and even probably many within the Orange Order.

We think of the realities of this march. We have seen and heard from the families of Michael McGoldrick, Robert Hamill and Rosemary Nelson and that makes it very real. I also think about the likes of Sean Brown, Philip Allen and Damien Trainor at Poyntzpass, and Elizabeth O'Neill. I do not think any of us can forget the Quinn children, and that is what it took to stop the march in 1998.

There are questions for the Parades Commission on its disgraceful action. The PSNI has questions to answer in relation to its security assessment, which was found to be-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Conclude, Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It was found to be farcical. I ask that the Tánaiste would continue his engagement with the British Government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am always afraid about a new Administration. At times, I am not always sure that they understand the entire history.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, you are past the time. The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have commended the Tánaiste before on his roadmap for Irish unity.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú, you have gone way over your time.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I believe we need to keep that work going. I would ask about that and also about how the Tánaiste can put that into action in government because that is necessary and I do not think enough has been done.

The Tánaiste: It is rare the Deputy commends me.

I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising, obviously, a very serious issue. The issue in relation to Garvaghy is receiving, as it rightly should, attention at all levels of government, right up to the most senior levels, and at all levels across officialdom as well, including the engagement of Irish officials on the ground, including engagement with the Deputy's party and others.

I would just repeat the call for everybody to work towards calm and a resolution. Nobody wants to see the progress that has been hard won go backwards or be lost in any manner or means, and the Deputy has highlighted and reminded the House of the very serious trauma and loss of life that has been experienced in the past. The North is at a very different place, a much

better place. We never want to go back and I hope the talks that will recommence today can make progress.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I too want to raise the issue of the fuel income support scheme with the Tánaiste this afternoon, specifically the issues of plant hire operators and quarrymen who were excluded from the initial scheme earlier this year. At that time, many people in leadership indicated that these sectors would be included in the original scheme. Obviously, that did not transpire.

These operators have the same costs. They face the same increases in the price of green diesel that people in the agricultural sector have, and many of them are small one- or two-machine-operated businesses. With the upcoming budget, and particularly since the initial scheme was not fully drawn down, will the Government consider them for inclusion in any updated scheme?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this issue in relation to how we support plant hire operators, quarry workers and others in that kind of construction sector space with fuel costs. We have been clear as a Government that we want to do this. There is work going on across a few Departments to work out the best modality, but both I and the Taoiseach have been clear that we want to get this done and have a proposal to the Government shortly. We are discussing it, obviously, in the context, as the Deputy says, of the budget next week too, and we will keep him updated.

The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I met the Construction Industry Federation recently and I know this is an issue of concern.

It is also very important for the vital work these sectors are carrying out in construction across our country that we need to keep going, so I hope we can bring this matter to a resolution quickly.

Deputy John Connolly: I raise an issue that has been touched on already here today and was raised by my colleague, Deputy McGrath, yesterday as it relates to Cork.

A number of newly qualified nurses and midwives have contacted me in recent weeks because they are unable to secure employment, despite having completed their training, registration and clinical placements. Reports suggest recruitment restrictions are preventing appointments from being made where staffing pressures continue to exist. We are all aware Ireland continues to rely heavily on international recruitment of nurses. I think one in every four nurses is now recruited internationally. Their contributions are invaluable and deeply appreciated and I am not sure what we would do without them. However, if newly qualified Irish nurses and midwives cannot secure employment here, they will obviously seek opportunities abroad. It makes little sense to me that we would be exporting nurses on the one hand while on the other, recruiting internationally to fill the positions these nurses cannot get.

At the same time, a 2026 ESRI report projected substantial growth in healthcare workforce requirements across every region to 2040 and that there would be a focus on front-line deployment. What actions are being taken to ensure newly qualified nurses and midwives can enter the workforce without delay?

Deputy Máire Devine: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The word "front-line" is very important here. As the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in working closely with Minister, Deputy Chambers, prepares for the health budget 2027, we need to make sure we grow our front-line health professionals. The Deputy makes a valid point about the people going through our own universities and colleges who want to be able to work here and are actively looking to do so. They need to be met with an open door; we need them. Therefore, we need to make sure the HSE is prioritising the recruitment of front-line staff. Having seen some very large increases in staffing in the HSE recently, I am not sure it is fair to say most of them have been in the front-line. There is a real need to focus on that.

We have a growing and ageing population, so we need to make sure we have jobs for these young graduates. I know the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is conscious of this and is preparing as part of the health budget for the months and year ahead. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy when she has clarity on that.

Local Government (Control of Horse-Drawn Carriages) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Máire Devine: I move:

That leave be given to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the law relating to the control of horse-drawn carriages and other horse-drawn vehicles within the former Dublin Metropolitan Police District, as provided for by the Dublin Carriage Act 1853, the Dublin Amended Carriage Act 1854 and the Dublin Amended Carriage Act 1855, that equates to most of the administrative area of Dublin City Council and parts of the administrative areas of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and South Dublin County Council and, for that purpose, to repeal those Acts so as to enable the making by any of those Councils of bye-laws under the Local Government Act 2001 in respect of horse-drawn carriages or other horse drawn vehicles, to amend section 199 of that Act; and to provide for related matters.

Horse carriages in Dublin city are presently governed by three Victorian-era Acts, while the rest of the country is not. These Acts effectively prevent Dublin City Council from making and enforcing modern by-laws to regulate carriage operators, licensing, safety and insurance, placing passengers, pedestrians and motorists in peril. Carriages to let or hire operate mainly around heavily trafficked tourist areas like St. Stephen's Green up the road and my area in the Liberties. The Department of Transport has been aware of this legal lacuna for at least seven years but nothing has been done. Stakeholders, including the reputable carriage operators, animal safety advocates, local residents and An Garda Síochána want this sorted.

Sinn Féin's Bill will repeal the Dublin Carriages Act with a 90-day period for Dublin City Council, DCC, to enact new by-laws, enabling DCC to ensure carriage operators are reputable, and most importantly, safe. Additionally, this legislation will allow local government to introduce by-laws to deal with the disposal of dung. The constituents in Dublin South-Central and the at least 1.5 million visitors to the Liberties area are dealing with streets full of dung, as DCC stopped accepting it last year for disposal. These simple changes are long overdue. It is

dangerous. Residents are not just frustrated by the dung but also by the antisocial behaviour and mistreatment of horses by unlicensed operators.

The Department has been aware for years that the rules and enforcement around Dublin's horse carriage industry are conflicting, outdated, inconsistent and inadequate. Dublin's inner city needs this legal gap to be closed, which our Bill will achieve.

Deputy Mark Ward: Dublin has a long-standing cultural tradition of proper urban horsemanship. Horse-drawn carriage rides are a well-known part of the south inner city and in and around the Liberties. It goes back centuries. In fact, I was going through the 1911 census and I was very surprised but delighted to see I had relations back then who were horse-drawn carriage drivers in and around Dublin. It is disappointing to see this tradition being undermined by gaps in regulations and archaic Victorian legislation.

Right now, we have licensed carriage drivers who meet Dublin City Council's standards and requirements under the old by-laws working alongside unlicensed carriage drivers. This has led to a Wild West situation, where unregulated, irresponsible carriage drivers are operating in our city. We have all seen the terrifying video of a terrified horse going down O'Connell Street during rush hour. We have also seen tourists being ripped off by unscrupulous carriage drivers overcharging them. It is not uncommon now to go into Temple Bar at 2 a.m. - not that I would be in Temple Bar at 2 a.m. but I have seen the videos of it - and see a horse bringing drunken tourists from one part to another. This does not sit right with me on many levels. There have also been reports of illegal activity, including drug dealing on these horse-drawn carriages.

Right now, if you want to drive a horse in Dublin city and pick up passengers for a fare, all you need is a horse and carriage. You do not need a licence, there are no regulations around horse welfare and nobody checks on the condition of the carriages. We need regulations now to put manners on these cowboys. Without proper oversight, both animal welfare and the upkeep of our city will suffer. I and Deputy Devine have met with responsible horse-drawn carriage drivers who want to be regulated. They care for their horses and are supported by animal welfare groups. I meet with them regularly and they tell me they fear a pedestrian, passenger or horse will be killed on our streets if action is not taken.

Dublin City Council also has a lot to answer for. It has allowed a lacuna to develop. Instead of supporting the responsible horse-drawn carriage drivers, DCC has made things more difficult. It has placed planters on the road where carriage drivers park on St. Stephen's Green. Next time you walk around St. Stephen's Green, you will see where the horse-drawn carriage drivers are and the planters put there to make things more difficult for those drivers. Our councillor on DCC, Kourtney Kenny, is working hard to resolve this.

Government committed to regulating this industry back in 2019. It is now 2026, and nothing has happened. That is why Sinn Féin has introduced this legislation today and seeks Government's support. We want to see proper governance of horse welfare, Dublin city streets and safeguarding of Dublin's culture.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): 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 Ward: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Railway Safety Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to introduce this Bill for the consideration of the House. It addresses two separate areas. First, the Bill contains proposals to enshrine the organisation and main functions of the Railway Accident Investigation Unit, RAIU, in primary legislation. Second, the remainder of the Bill contains amendments to update and modernise the Railway Safety Act 2005 and consequential matters. I will address each of these briefly.

The background to the proposals in Part 2 of the Bill for the RAIU is as follows. The RAIU is an independent statutory body that carries out railway accident investigations in the State. The objective is to identify the causes of these accidents. They are also a means to improve railway safety and prevent future accidents from happening. I am sure the Deputies will agree that in the operation of the State's railways, safety is paramount. To enable this, it is essential that the RAIU has a strong statutory basis to underpin its role in regard to reporting and investigation of accidents and incidents on our railways. A railway incident unit had originally been set up under the Railway Safety Act 2005 as a unit within the then Railway Safety Commission, which has since been renamed the Commission for Railway Regulation. Subsequently, it became mandatory under the EU railway safety directive of 2004 for each member state to establish an independent national investigation body. To that end, the present RAIU was established under national secondary legislation in 2014. The RAIU was conferred with powers and functions under the regulations of 2014 in respect of all railways. This includes heavy rail, that is, the railway operations on the Iarnród Éireann network and light rail, which includes the Luas tramway in Dublin. Those powers and functions also covered metros and other railways, such as heritage railways, of which there are a number throughout the country.

There was a change in the law at EU level when a replacement recast EU railway safety directive came into operation here on 31 October 2020. That recast railway directive has a reduced scope and it expressly excludes light railways, metro and other local railway systems. In the context of the railway systems in Ireland, it is only heavy rail, basically the Iarnród Éireann network, including DART, that now comes within its scope. The European Union (Railway Safety) (Reporting and Investigation of Serious Accidents, Accidents and Incidents)

Regulations 2020 transposed the recast railway safety directive from 31 October 2020 and provided the RAIU with investigation powers and functions in respect of the heavy rail system. These regulations are referred to in the Bill as the regulations of 2020. The Railway Safety (Reporting and Investigation of Serious Accidents, Accidents and Incidents Involving Certain Railways) Act 2020 was enacted and came into force on 31 October of that year as a solution to prevent a gap in arising in the legislation that would leave the RAIU without a statutory basis to investigate accidents involving any of Ireland's other railways, including Luas and Heritage Railways.

It is important to note that there is no legislative gap for the RAIU to be covered in this Bill. Since October 2020, the RAIU, with the combination of the regulations of 2020 and the provisions of the Act of 2020, has a complete statutory basis. It will carry out investigations in respect of accidents and incidents involving heavy rail, the Luas light railway in Dublin and other heritage railways. It was also the intention that the legislative solution provided through the operation of the Act would be an interim measure. The objective for the longer term now being delivered in this Bill was that a stand-alone statutory basis would be provided for the organisation of the RAIU in primary legislation and to cover the investigation of accidents and incidents on railways that were outside the scope of the EU railway safety directive.

I turn to the content of the Bill. It consists of six Parts and 71 sections. Section 1, as the Short Title, section 2, as the interpretation of the Act, and section 4, laying of regulations, are all standard provisions. Section 3 sets out the definition of Part 2. Twenty-three definitions in all, except one, are in use at present under the regulations of 2020, and indeed the Act of 2020. The only new term that is being introduced is specified railway. This applies to the types of railways to be prescribed in regulations under section 6. Part 2 sets out provisions for the investigation of accidents and incidents by the RAIU and spans sections 3 to 28, inclusive. The purpose of Part 2 is set out in the main statutory framework for the organisation and operation of the RAIU in primary legislation. The provisions that cover this and underpin the operation of the RAIU are contained at present in the regulations of 2020.

The policy being pursued in the Bill is that all common functions of the RAIU are set out in the Bill. I will refer to these as overarching, and these are the powers and functions that are common to any accident investigation, whether carried out under the regulations of 2020 for the Iarnród Éireann network or under Part 2 of the Bill for specified railway, which includes light railway, Luas, metro and heritage railways. The goal of this policy approach is to streamline the legislative framework for the RAIU in primary legislation. The overarching investigation powers and functions for the operation of the RAIU are set out in Part 2 to apply to all railways in conjunction with regulations that will be made by the Minister for Transport under section 6 of the Bill and regulation of the EU-based measures for the Iarnród Éireann network, which continue under the regulations of 2020. The overarching provisions of the RAIU in Part 2 that apply to railways include section 5, which is the core provision of the organisation of the RAIU, including the appointment of a chief investigator and of investigators.

Section 7 includes core provisions for investigation. Section 8 covers notification and reporting of accidents and incidents. Sections 11 through to section 13 are the status of the RAIU investigators and comprehensive statutory powers in carrying out investigations and to have access to the scene of an accident and to records. Section 14 covers powers of entry and

search warrants. Section 15 covers provisions of records and other information to the RAIU. Section 16 is about provision of an offence for obstructing or impeding an investigator from performing a statutory function. Section 17 states that a member of an Garda Síochána may arrest without warrant a person who obstructs or impedes an investigator under Part 2. Section 18 covers provisions for prosecution and offences. Section 19 covers provision for offence by a body corporate. Section 20 covers the standard immunity from claims or damages for investigators in carrying out investigations. Section 25 covers the conditions of copyright in RAIU reports. Section 26 covers saver provisions and continuity safeguards to provide for a seamless continuity of work of the RAIU under the regulations of 2020 and under the Act of the same year as regards investigations that are under way at present or reports in preparation or existing reports and safety recommendations. Section 27 contains provisions for the repeal of the Act of 2020 and the transitional provisions for saver and continuity of functions performed by the RAIU. These overarching provisions mirror the content that is in the regulations of 2020 for the Iarnród Éireann network and applied through the Act of 2020 to other railways.

Part 2 also contains some provisions that only apply to the RAIU and its investigations functions in relation to specified railways. Section 6 covers powers for the Minister for Transport to make regulations to prescribe specified railway and for matters for carrying out the investigation of accidents and incidents. Section 9 contains requirements for railway entities to provide information to the RAIU on the commencement of an investigation. Section 10 means that it may investigate relevant decisions of the Commission for Railway Regulation. Section 21 contains provisions in relation to the RAIU investigation reports for specified railways. Section 22 contains provisions to confer functions on the Commission for Railway Regulation in relation to safety recommendations that are issued by the RAIU. If Part 2 is enacted and the overarching provisions come into operation, it will be necessary to amend the 2020 regulations to revoke the duplicate provisions therein that are being restated in this Bill and on the same date to commence the repeal of the Act of 2020 that is provided for in section 27 of the Bill. The net effect of Part 2 provisions of section 6 regulations and the amendment of the regulations of 2020 will be that the *status quo* will be maintained in relation to the statutory powers of the agency for investigating and reporting of railway accidents.

As I stated at the outset, the second purpose of the Bill is to introduce amendments to update and modernise the Railway Safety Act 2005. The most significant amendments for updating the Act of 2005 are in Parts 4 and 5 of the Bill and relate to railway safety, critical workers and intoxicants. In the Act of 2005 are certain provisions in Part 9 operated by railway organisations for sampling of safety critical workers in the workplace for intoxicants in line with the code of conduct. The Bill contains some amendments in Part 4 to facilitate the implementation of those measures. The Act of 2005 contains provisions in Part 10 in relation to intoxicants and sets out functions for an Garda Síochána and the Medical Bureau of Road Safety for testing for alcohol and presence of drugs. The policy in 2005 was to align the provisions enacted in the Act of 2005 regarding the statutory limits for alcohol, blood breath and urine for a safety-critical worker with those provided for a driver under the then Road Traffic Act. Likewise, the statutory functions and procedures of An Garda Síochána and the Medical Bureau of Road Safety mirrored the provisions that were in the Road Traffic Act back in 2005.

The provisions in relation to alcohol and drugs and associated procedures for An Garda Síochána and the bureau have been significantly amended and updated in road traffic legislation since 2005. The policy being pursued in this Bill is to update and align Part 10 with the current provisions in the Road Traffic Acts. The amendments proposed will align the statutory limits for safety-critical workers for alcohol and blood, breath and urine with the limits that apply to a specified person. This covers professional drivers, including drivers of a bus, heavy goods vehicles or a taxi. The relevant alcohol limits in section 49 of the Bill are significantly lower than the present values in the 2005 Act.

I will now go through some of the details of the amendments proposed to the 2005 Act. Section 25 amends section 2 to update definitions and terminology. For example, the use of the word "doctor" replaces "medical practitioner".

Sections 30 to 32 contain amendments to streamline some of the administrative processes and functions of the Commission for Railway Regulation.

Section 33 updates terminology throughout the Bill to have the text refer to "railway organisation" instead of "railway undertaking".

Section 34 provides for the repeal of section 41, an obsolete provision.

Sections 35 and 36 provide timeframes for the Commission for Railway Regulation to carry out a two-stage process for safety assessment of new works under section 42 and safety assessments of new rolling stock under section 43.

Sections 37 to 40 are all technical amendments to update terminology.

The purpose of Part 4 of the bill is to amend and update Part 9 of the 2005 Act on intoxicants and railway safety critical workers in the workplace.

Part 9 requires railway organisations to have codes of conduct in the workplace in relation to alcohol and drugs, and the roles of authorised persons and analysis of samples. Part 9 has effectively operated since 2006. Section 41 updates definitions that were used in Part 9. Section 42 expands the application of Part 9 to include heritage railways which operate train services on railway infrastructure of another railway organisation. This would apply to heritage or passenger tourist trains that occasionally run on the Iarnród Éireann network. There is no change for any other heritage railway.

Section 43 contains some minor amendments to update administrative functions of the Commission for Railway Regulation.

Section 44 amends section 89, which relates to sampling procedures in the workplace for intoxicants. The amendment to subsection (1) will provide that an authorised person may require a safety-critical worker to provide a sample of "breath, oral fluid, blood or urine" in accordance with sampling procedures. The expansion to include breath and oral fluid gives railway organisations more options to include in Part 9 on conduct. The broader term "intoxicants" also includes alcohol as substituted for "drug". The amendment of subsection (2) provides that only a doctor or a nurse who has been designated by an authorised officer can take a specimen of blood from a worker.

Part 5 of the Bill contains proposals to amend and update Part 10 of the Railway Safety Act of 2005. Section 45 updates the definitions that are used in Part 10.

Section 46, which inserts a new section, 93A, is a key provision. It provides an enabling power for the Minister for Transport to make regulations to provide for a matter referred to in Part 10 as prescribed or to be prescribed. When the Bill is enacted, secondary legislation must be made to support the implementation of Part 10 to enable An Garda Síochána and the medical bureau of railway safety to carry out their statutory functions.

Section 47 expands the application of Part 10 to include a heritage railway.

Section 48 amends section 96 to set out the functions to be performed by the medical bureau for road safety to carry out analysis in respect of blood or urine samples that are forwarded to An Garda Síochána. The equipment or apparatus provided, supplied, approved or tested by the bureau under Part 2 of the Road Traffic Act 2010 shall be deemed to have been provided, supplied, approved or tested by the bureau for the purposes of enforcement by An Garda Síochána.

Section 49 reduces the statutory limits for concentration of alcohol, blood and urine in the breath for a rail safety critical worker in respect of criminal offences. The changes are: that the existing limits for alcohol in the blood of a concentration of 80 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood are reduced to 20 mg; the existing limit for alcohol in urine of a concentration of 107 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of urine are being reduced to 27 mg; and the existing limit for alcohol in the breath of a concentration of 35 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of breath will be reduced to 9 mg. The proposed new limits align with the maximum levels that apply at present under the Road Traffic Act for specified persons. These persons include professional drivers, such as holders of licences to drive small public service vehicles or taxis and holders of licences to drive categories of heavy goods vehicles, buses and coaches.

Section 49 amends section 97 to provide for the insertion of four new subsections for five specified drugs, including cocaine, heroin and cannabis. These provisions mirror the corresponding provisions in the Road Traffic Act 2010.

The purpose of sections 50 to 57 is to update the Act of 2005. The provisions mirror the powers and procedures for An Garda Síochána in the roles of designated doctor or designated nurse that are set out in the Road Traffic Act 2010.

Section 50 amends section 98, which is the obligation to give a specimen of breath to test for the presence of alcohol and expands it to provide that a member of An Garda Síochána may make a requirement of a railway safety critical worker to provide a specimen of oral fluid to test for the presence of a drug.

Section 51 updates section 99 in relation to the powers of An Garda Síochána for arrest without warrant and the power of entry for that purpose.

Section 52 is an amendment of section 100 of the Act of 2005 and substitutes section 100 on obligation to provide a specimen of blood or urine following arrest.

Section 53 substitutes a new section for section 101 on obligation to provide a blood or urine specimen while in hospital.

Section 54 inserts a new section 101A to introduce a new measure to provide an oral fluid specimen following arrest.

Section 55 inserts a new section 101B to introduce a new measure for obligation to provide a blood specimen where suspects of an offence involve a specified drug.

Section 56 inserts a new section 101C to introduce a measure for requirements to undergo a medical examination at a Garda station or hospital.

Section 57 updates references in section 102 to the cross-reference to the Road Traffic Acts for detention of intoxicated persons where a danger to themselves or others.

Section 58 updates section 103 on procedure following provision of a breath specimen under section 100.

Section 59 inserts a new section 103A to provide procedures that apply where a specimen of blood was taken from a person by direction of a member of An Garda Síochána under section 101(5) and that is to be done in a hospital.

Section 60 amends section 104 on the procedure to be followed relating to specimens taken or provided and for forwarding specimens to the medical bureau of road safety.

Section 61 amends section 105 on procedures regarding specimens to expand the existing procedures to provide that the medical bureau of road safety may determine the concentration of a specified drug or drugs in a specimen of blood forwarded to it.

Sections 62 and 63 update the Act of 2005 in relation to prosecution of offences and evidential requirements in prosecutions.

Section 64 inserts four new sections, which are sections 107A to 107D, into the Act to provide for evidential requirements in prosecutions. These mirror provisions in place in the corresponding circumstances from the Road Traffic Act of 2010.

Section 65 amends section 108 on defences for a defendant and expands the provision in line with the measures available under the Road Traffic Act and includes offences in relation to oral fluid.

Sections 66 and 68 update provisions in relation to penalties and prosecution of summary offences.

Section 69 inserts a new Schedule into the Act of 2005 of specified drugs. This is the same as the Schedule in the Road Traffic Act 2010.

Section 70 updates section 126 to provide consequential amendments to reference provisions that are proposed in Part 2 of the Bill.

Section 71 in Part 6 of the Bill provides for amendment of Schedule 1 to the Freedom of Information Act to insert a reference to the Railway Safety Act 2005 at paragraph (u). The effect will be that certain records of the Medical Bureau for Road Safety arising under the Act of 2005 would have the same partial exemption status that applies at present to those corresponding certain records that may arise under the Road Traffic Acts of 1961 to 2024.

The Bill will ensure that the Railway Accident Investigation Unit and the Railway Safety Act 2005 are underpinned by a robust and appropriate legislative framework. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister and his staff, who provided such a comprehensive and clear background and analysis of the Bill. As we are speaking about road safety, I remember Eoin Doyle, who died in the tragic incident near Kiltybo in County Mayo. There is an investigation going on, so I am not going to comment too much but I know people from the area. The reports I read about the funeral were really heartbreaking. I offer my sympathies to his parents, Declan and Elaine.

While Sinn Féin will support this Bill to the next Stage, we must be clear that nothing the Government will do here today will address the real issue in relation to railway around this country, which is that our rail network is one of the weakest and least developed in western Europe. While Europe was building high-speed rail, electrifying lines and connecting regions, successive Irish Governments were closing railway lines and managing decline. Not surprisingly, rail accounts for only approximately 3% of passenger transport in Ireland. That reflects the lack of investment over many years and the lack of attractive rail alternatives outside of the Dublin area.

Communities in Kerry, Donegal, Mayo and across the west are paying the price for decades of transport policies that prioritised roads and took people off the railways. In my county alone we had the Dingle line, the Reenard line to the ferry for Valentia Island and other railways, particularly the line from Listowel through Abbeydorney and Lixnaw and up to Limerick, which, of course, was ripped up as well. Roads were prioritised and the railways were closed.

If countries across Europe can deliver, Irish people are entitled to ask why we were left behind. The real scandal is not that we lack high-speed rail, it is that many communities today have less rail connectivity than previous generations. This Bill does not do anything to address the issue. This legislation is not about investment or expansion. It is not a Bill that will deliver any modern rail network that communities across the island have been promised for years. As was comprehensively outlined, it is technical and regulatory. It updates safety procedures and accident investigation arrangements. These measures are important and necessary, but the bigger issue in rail is the failure to deliver the infrastructure fit for the 21st century. Safe railways matter, but also people need railways that actually exist and provide services. Communities cannot board a safety regulation or commute on a statutory instrument or a Government press release. We need trains, tracks, stations and services. That is where this Government and previous Governments have consistently fallen short. No new services were provided this year due to lack of investment.

The Bill places the Railway Accident Investigation Unit on a statutory footing. It strengthens investigation proceedings and modernises provisions relating to intoxicants and railway workers. These provisions are all sensible. I do not think anybody in the House will argue against maintaining railway safety standards to the highest level possible. Public transport must be safe and reliable and it must be trusted. However, people across Ireland are asking a different question. Where is the delivery? Where are the rail projects that have been promised for years? Where is the ambition that successive Governments continually tell us is just around the corner? When we look at this legislation, we see one of the weakest railway systems in western Europe. We have had more reviews than new railway lines.

The Government constantly points to the all-island strategic rail review as evidence of a commitment to rail. Minister after Minister has referenced it. We have seen the launches and the announcements, but communities are entitled to ask what has actually changed. The review

sets out a vision for transformational investment in rail. It is recognised that Ireland needs a major expansion of its rail network, additional lines, electrification and stronger regional connectivity. It acknowledges that the network must grow significantly if we are serious about balanced regional development and meeting our climate targets. However, a plan on paper means little if there is no ambition for delivery.

The gap between what the Government is saying and what it is doing is impossible to ignore. The clearest example of this is the western rail corridor. For decades, communities in Mayo and Galway and throughout the western region have been hearing promises, hoping for a line that will continue from Limerick through Ennis, all the way up to Sligo and maybe beyond. For decades, they have been listening to studies. They have been told to wait. The latest is they have been told that construction on the Athenry to Claremorris section is targeted for 2028. After all these years, communities are still being asked for more patience. We do not need any more plans, strategies or consultation exercises. We need shovels in the ground and a railway line which will deliver all the way. The reality is that a project recognised as strategically important is moving painfully slowly. Every year lost means more families are forced into car dependency, more congestion, higher transport costs, greater emissions and fewer opportunities for regional growth. The clear message sent to the west is that people there must wait for the next review or the next announcement. It is welcome that a new railway line has proceeded from Limerick out towards Foynes in the past few years, but it is incredible that there is no provision to have passengers. The line is solely for freight, for whatever developments are going to take place in Foynes, an Amazon building or whatever. That the foresight is not there to build on the increased appetite for passenger transport on the railways is almost unbelievable. That millions are being spent on a new, temporary platform at Adare for the Ryder Cup says it all.

We will have to wait for the next programme for Government for any more developments there. In the meantime, project after project is jumping the queue. The west must not wait to be treated as an afterthought. People outside the M50 contribute to the economy too and deserve access to modern public transport. A network designed on the basis that all roads lead to Dublin is destined for failure. In Kerry, we know too well what happens when regional transport is treated as an afterthought. We are not asking for luxury, but we are asking for basics and reliable rail services, better connectivity and investment that recognises the south west is no less deserving than any other area of the country. For example, the Tralee to Dublin transport artery is the longest rail journey in the country, connecting families, students, workers, business and tourists to the rest of the island. Passengers cannot buy a cup of tea on a four-hour journey. Many of the people who are travelling on this journey, and I see it myself, are attending medical appointments in Dublin and may be older or frailer. They do not want to have to transfer trains; they want a direct journey. However, on the direct journey, they do not have any access whatsoever to a trolley or a shop. This might seem like a small thing, but with the surplus and with all the investment that is going on, it surely is not too much to ask. People travelling from Tralee to Dublin, sometimes with children also, and students heading to college are paying fares which were reasonable until the latest hikes. They should not be expected to undertake such a long journey without basic refreshments. The attitude that some routes warrant investment and others will have to make do is going to have to change.

We hear frequently about climate action. This is one of the most effective climate measures available to any Government. We cannot persuade people out of their cars if there is no train

available, or achieve modal shift if communities have no realistic public transport alternatives. We cannot lecture people about reducing emissions if we fail to provide the infrastructure that will allow them to do so.

Railway investment is not simply a transport issue. It is about housing, climate, economy and balanced regional development. It helps people access employment, education, healthcare, tourism and investment and enables balanced growth rather than endless concentration around Dublin. Areas of the west and north west are rail deserts. They have weak rail connectivity or no service at all. We have to push on and get a rail line up through the west, through Navan and on towards Tyrone and Donegal. The network is heavily Dublin-centric, making travel between the regional cities very slow, and that deficit is not inevitable. It is caused by a shortage of demand, acknowledged by the Government's own reports.

The Government can move quickly when it chooses to, but when the communities ask for actual rail infrastructure, investment and construction, they are left waiting indefinitely. We need action now. We need the Government to be clear that public transport policy cannot begin and end with reports that are gathering dust. We support measures contained in this legislation providing for railway safety and independent accident investigation. Public confidence in rail travel depends on this robust safety regime, but that alone will not build a modern rail network. The true test will be whether the projects like the western rail corridor will be finally delivered, whether the ambition contained in the all-island strategic rail review is translated into construction on the ground, and whether rural and regional Ireland finally receives the infrastructure that has been promised for decades. Communities deserve more than announcements and reports. It is time for the Government to get on and deliver.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The National Bus and Rail Union has described the Cork to Dublin train as a hotspot of antisocial behaviour in recent years. There have been 120 complaints of antisocial behaviour on trains to and from Cork in the last 12 months. I thank *The Echo* newspaper in Cork and Amy Campbell for her work in highlighting this. These incidents include times where people feel unsafe, intimidated and scared. There is no way to exit a train once it is moving. Volatile behaviour can be particularly scary for people travelling by train when they are next to a person who is behaving like this.

There need to be clear rules and legislation to protect people on trains. The trains are packed. They are full of families and younger and older people who need to feel safe on trains. I appreciate there are some positive aspects to the Bill, but in reality we need real funding to introduce transport police and keep people on trains safe.

Having said that, I want to take a moment to commend those working on the railways. I get the train every week from Cork to Dublin and back again. The staff are excellent, especially in Kent Station. I know a lot of the staff personally and they take the job very seriously. They are very understanding and accommodating to people. In Cork, we have taken particular care in recognising the importance of the railway station, named Kent Station after Volunteer Thomas Kent who was executed for his role in the 1916 Rising. The staff have done huge work to commemorate and remember Thomas Kent. His bust is maintained immaculately. It is a great reminder for those in Cork and those visiting of our history. I would like the Minister to engage with Kent Station and other railway stations to see what more could be done to remember Thomas Kent and educate people. We have a proud history. The workers would

engage with the Minister because they are very proud to have the station named after Thomas Kent.

While Kent Station will always be the main railway station in Cork, there are now planning applications for two new stations in my constituency. They are welcome, but we need them to be delivered quickly. They will open up travel to huge parts of the population in Cork, but they should be delivered alongside park-and-ride facilities in Blackpool and Glanmire, which are needed so that people can use the new stations. I would love to see the stations continue in the proud tradition of Kent Station and be named after Cork's patriot dead. Delaney station should be considered as a name for the Kilbarry station. It would be a fitting reminder of the Delaney brothers, who were executed in their beds the night of the burning of Cork. The Dunkettle station is another substation. The First Cork Brigade, many of whom are railway workers, used the railway lines in Glanmire to transport messages and ammunition during the War of Independence. Commemorating and preserving our history should go hand in hand with progress. The new railway stations are welcome and it is progress.

More and more people want to use the train. They want to be able to access trains, but the reality for many people in my constituency is that there are no trains or the train service is infrequent. We need a significant increase in the frequency of the trains to Mallow. More and more people are using the train to commute to and from work in Cork city, and that should be encouraged. We want to get people out of their cars, hit our climate targets and reduce emissions. They should be able to socialise in the city and get a train home. That is why we would like more trains running at later hours.

The last train to Cork out of Dublin is at 9 p.m., which means many people use their cars to travel to Dublin, which causes emissions. I ask the Minister to consider extending the train service to Cork, especially at the weekend. Expanding train services to Cork would connect every other station on the line to a better and more frequent service and increase access. I engage with Iarnród Éireann when there are big events in Dublin and Cork teams are playing. They tell me every carriage is being used and every bus is being used by Bus Éireann. We need to increase capacity so that people can get to those events. The best way to do that is by train. I ask the Minister to consider whether it is possible to add additional train services at night.

The purpose of the Bill is ensuring trains are safe. Services do not exist at the moment. Until 1973 there was a daily Cork to Youghal service. In the 1970s, the service was reduced to the summer months and weekends. There is now a train service to Midleton, halfway to Youghal. That should go all the way to Youghal. Many people think Youghal is a destination for people who are going to the beach and tourism, and it is, but a significant number of people live in east Cork and work in Cork city, Ringaskiddy and Little Island. That is why we need the train service to be reinstated. There is no greenway on the tracks at the moment, but I think it is possible to have both.

Workers in east Cork and people travelling need a train service. During the summer months, there are a large number of cars travelling the roads to east Cork and a railway line that has not been used for years. It is shocking to see the lack of foresight on the part of Governments who ripped up railway lines right across the country. I want more people to travel by rail.

The Minister mentioned light rail. There is a light rail plan for Cork, from east to west, but nothing from north to south. This is a fundamental flaw. The Minister might say the

Government does not have the money to deliver that now, but it needs to be planned. If it cannot be delivered right now, the Government at least needs to plan for it. There is no planning to connect light rail to the airport. Where is the connectivity when we are trying to get people from the northside to the southside? There are many areas such as Mahon Point, Carrigaline and Douglas and Ballyvolane and Blarney on the northside of Cork city, which are not served by public transport. People cannot depend on buses, which means they then get into cars. We want more people to use public transport.

We support many aspects of the Bill, but there is nothing in it about investment and delivering better public transport. That is what we would like to see from this Government.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on the Railway Safety Bill 2026, which is important legislation aimed at modernising our railway safety framework, strengthening accident and investigation procedures and ensuring that the highest standards of safety continue to apply across Ireland's rail network. At its core, the Bill provides a primary legislative basis to ensure the Railway Accident Investigation Unit can continue to perform its important function of investigating railway accidents and incidents. Changes at a European level mean that it is necessary to ensure that the unit continues to have the appropriate statutory basis and powers to carry out that work effectively.

The Bill comes at a time when more and more people are choosing rail. It is great to see that Iarnród Éireann had its strongest ever year last year, carrying more than 55 million passengers across Intercity, DART and commuter services, which I believe was a 9% increase on the previous year. The Westport line in my county experienced significant growth, with passenger numbers reaching approximately 773,000 in 2025, an increase of more than 8% on the previous year. They are great numbers. The Luas also celebrated a record-breaking year, with more than 55 million passenger journeys across the red and green lines.

Those figures are positive, but as passenger numbers grow, so too does the responsibility on all of us to ensure that our rail network is safe, reliable and properly resourced. As a Deputy from Mayo, I approach the Bill with a particular appreciation of the importance of rail services to regional communities. The rail services that connect towns like Westport, Castlebar, Claremorris, Ballyhaunis and Ballina with the rest of the county are a vital link for our county. Workers, students, tourists and families avail of rail transport and for them it is not a luxury; it is an essential part of our transport infrastructure.

As we encourage greater use of public transport and seek to reduce our emissions, we must maintain confidence in the safety of our railways. I cannot speak about railway safety without acknowledging the recent tragedy in Kiltybo near Ballyhaunis in my county where a collision between a train and a car claimed the life of 12-year-old Eoin Doyle who was on his way home from GAA training. The loss of such a young life has devastated Ballyhaunis and all the people right across Mayo. Before I continue, I wish to say that my thoughts remain with Eoin's parents, sister and wider family, as well as with the whole community in Ballyhaunis, as they continue to come to terms with such a profound loss. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Tragedies bring into sharp the focus the critical importance of robust safety procedures, appropriate protections at level crossings and the continuous reviewing of safety practices across our rail network. It is a stark reminder of why the highest standards of railway safety must always be maintained. I particularly welcome the provisions in this Bill that reinforce the

principle that safety investigations are about establishing what happened, learning from an incident and preventing similar incidents from occurring again. Public confidence depends on knowing that when a serious incident occurs, it will be examined thoroughly and independently and that lessons will be learned. This is fundamental for passengers and railway workers and operators alike.

While I support the objectives of the Bill, legislation alone cannot guarantee railway safety. We must ensure that continued investment in railway infrastructure, signalling systems, track maintenance, technology, staff training and recruitment remain essential. Safety standards are strongest when good legislation is matched with adequate resources and investment on the ground.

From a Mayo perspective, investment in rail remains critically important. We must continue to strengthen regional connectivity and ensure that communities in the west receive the same level of ambition for public transport as communities anywhere else in the country. Safe, reliable and efficient rail services are essential for balanced regional development. They support tourism and local economies, provide sustainable transport choices and help our towns and communities remain connected. The Government has rightly emphasised increased public transport usage as part of its climate, economic and regional development objectives, but achieving that requires public confidence. Every passenger boarding a train in Westport, Ballina, Castlebar or at any train station or stop across the country must be confident that safety comes first and that we have a system capable of investigating incidents, learning from them and continuously improving our standards.

Another significant element of this Bill is the modernisation of Parts 9 and 10 of the Railway Safety Act 2005, which relate to intoxicants and safety-critical railway workers. We can all agree that this is an area where, frankly, reform is overdue. When the Railway Safety Act was enacted in 2005, the statutory alcohol limits applying to train drivers reflected the limits applied in road traffic legislation at that time. Road traffic law has subsequently changed and the limits for professional road drivers were reduced. A category of "specified persons" was introduced covering professional drivers, such as bus drivers, taxi and HGV drivers. The railway legislation, however, simply did not keep pace, and the consequences are quite extraordinary. Under the existing legislation, train and tram drivers can have an alcohol concentration of up to 80 mg per 100 ml of blood. This is compared with only 20 mg for specified professional road drivers and 50 mg for an ordinary motorist. In other words, the statutory limit applying to a safety-critical railway worker can currently be four times that of an equivalent professional road driver. That discrepancy was identified years ago. Indeed, when these proposals were brought forward in 2018, the then Minister for Transport, former Deputy Shane Ross, said the changes would bring consistency between the safety standards applying to train drivers and equivalent professional drivers on our roads. That was in 2018. Obviously, we have had a pandemic since then, but it is reasonable to wonder why it has taken us this long to get this legislation before us. If we identified a gap in safety so long ago, particularly one concerning intoxicants and people entrusted with the safety of hundreds of passengers, we should not need this long to close that gap. The thousands of citizens and visitors who board our trains and Luas services every day need to know that the standards applying to the people carrying out safety critical work are rigorous, modern and consistent. They should simply be able to assume that the person responsible for operating a train carrying hundreds of people is subject to at least the same rigorous safety standards as other professional drivers. This Bill addresses that

anomaly and modernises the provisions around testing, sampling, analysis and enforcement. That is welcome. It supports the wider objective of ensuring our transport safety legislation remains coherent and fit for purpose as Ireland's transport network continues to evolve. It is my hope that this now moves and becomes law as quickly as possible.

I cannot speak about rail in Mayo without also taking a sidestep to talk about its future. This week, I met the CEO of Iarnród Éireann and I was delighted to hear that the trolley service trial on the Galway to Dublin line is progressing well. I always talk about the fact that passengers on the Mayo-Dublin line are often on the train for three and a half hours without access to water, tea or food. Genuinely, that is more than an inconvenience, especially for people with disabilities who might not be able to go to the shop and bring a hot cup of tea with them as easily as other people. We also must think about the number of tourists who use that line. If they are on the train for three and a half hours, they expect to have access to catering. My message to the passengers on the Galway-Dublin route is to please drink as much tea and coffee and eat as many bags of crisps as they possibly can in order to help build a business case for extending this service to Mayo and other intercity routes.

We also need to be much more ambitious about our rail freight. It is particularly important when we look at major employers in regional Ireland. Recently, I visited Vantive, which is a fantastic employer in Castlebar. It is competing in global markets and must demonstrate that its operations are as sustainable as possible. Currently, we have a good freight service and hub out of Ballina, but there is a good business case to have one in Castlebar as well so we do not have trucks driving an hour from Castlebar to Ballina to get onto the rail line. I want to see us build on that freight service in Ballina and examine the potential for additional rail freight infrastructure to serve Castlebar and the wider county. If we are serious about balanced regional development, decarbonisation and supporting major employers outside Dublin, rail cannot simply be about moving passengers; freight must form part of that ambition too.

I will finish by talking about the western rail corridor. I do not know if Members saw the TikTok video this week, created by AI, that made very handsome Irish-looking men in nice coats. If we could get the train to Knock Airport as quickly as AI could, it would be wonderful. That video has rallied concerns about the potential 35 km greenway coming into Sligo. We must ensure that we are competing with AI videos that can be produced at the drop of a hat to ensure people there that if the greenway goes ahead, the railway will be preserved as promised to reinstate rail on that line in the future. The Athenry to Claremorris route is, hopefully, due to start in 2028 and open in 2031. That would be a good business case to get all the way to Sligo. We want to see rail all the way from Limerick to Mayo, onto Sligo and into Donegal to ensure the west of Ireland is connected.

This Bill is fundamentally about maintaining confidence in our railway system, confidence that passengers and workers will be protected, accidents and incidents will be properly investigated, outdated anomalies in our law will be corrected and confidence that, as our rail network grows, safety will remain at the centre of that growth. I support the objectives of this Bill and I look forward to its progression.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I welcome the Bill, which the Labour Party will be supporting. While it is largely technical in nature, it is important. It is kind of crazy that it has taken this long to get around to aligning the statutory limits for drugs and alcohol for rail workers and

train drivers with those in road traffic legislation. Deputy Wall will be raising some serious health and safety concerns about overcrowding on commuter lines between Kildare and Dublin.

The current system of self-regulation when it comes to safety on our railways is not fit for a modern rail line or system. Therefore, we welcome these changes. As the Minister knows well, we talk about road safety frequently in this House, and rightly so given the near decade-high figures for deaths on our roads. There are tragedies every day on our roads. Thankfully, rail safety is not something we have to talk about too often in this House.

3 o'clock

Thankfully, rail safety is not something we have to talk about too often in this House. Like Deputies Keogh and Pa Daly, I want to say that we are thinking about Eoin Doyle, the 12-year old boy who tragically lost his life, in early September, in a rail collision near Ballyhaunis in County Mayo. As I said, collisions involving trains and other vehicles are thankfully pretty rare, which makes Eoin's death all the more tragic. My understanding is that visibility at the crossing where the incident occurred is poor. I am aware that the CCR is investigating the circumstances around the accident. I hope that some measures are taken at that crossing, and elsewhere across the country where there are issues, to improve visibility and safety at these crossings. On behalf of the Labour Party, I extend our sincere condolences to Eoin's family and friends.

As I said, the Labour Party will be supporting this Bill. I will not dwell on the Bill itself because it is pretty straightforward. I do want to touch on our rail infrastructure more broadly. In this House we all know the importance of investing in rail. Projects like DART and Luas have been game changers for Dublin. Back in the day they had their detractors. Some of them still darken in the door of this building but I think we would be hard pressed to find anyone nowadays who would say we should not have built them. They have been enormously successful. I have every faith that future rail projects will be equally successful for Dublin and other cities and towns across the country. They will help to tackle congestion, reduce emissions, improve health, support housing development, connect cities and regions, give people in rural Ireland, in particular, a much-needed alternative to the private car, and help with the cost of living along the way. We all get that. It is in that context that we find it bewildering that Government has been so slow to move on some projects that are literally ready to go. In some cases, they have been actually pushed back and delayed. DART+ South West received planning permission almost two years ago, in November 2024, but funding still has not been released. This is a service that could bring 20,000 people in each direction every hour. Imagine the difference it would make to the likes of Clondalkin, Lucan, Adamstown and Celbridge. At a time of huge construction in Clonburris and other areas, it would be enormous. Yet, the Government's NDP review has pushed construction beyond 2030, which is six years after it got planning permission. This is not just a transport issue. If we are serious about building homes and new communities, which we have to and want to, then we have to have the infrastructure to support them.

The same issue applies to the Luas extension out to Finglas. Planning permission has been granted. Judicial reviews were withdrawn earlier this year. Yet, we have been given a date of 2029 before construction will get under way. TII has said that if the Government moves quickly on a funding decision, construction could be brought forward to 2028. I urge the Minister to do everything he can to accelerate that. I know it is on his desk. The Finglas Luas is a great

example of an interconnected transport service, with links to heavy rail and bus at Broombridge and the park-and-ride facility at St. Margaret's Road. We must encourage the use of more park-and-ride facilities across the country. We need more of them, and we want to incentivise people to use them. My Labour Party colleagues, Deputy Robert O'Donoghue and Councillor Mark Boland, have proposed that tax-saver tickets could be extended to park-and-ride parking costs, to put a little more money back into the pockets of hard-pressed commuters who are trying to do the right thing and avail our rail services rather than driving. It is exactly the sort of public transport infrastructure that we want to see more of, one where these sort of links to other services exist. It is the type of project that deserves to be expedited insofar as is possible. The Government cannot tell us on the one hand that infrastructure delivery is an urgent national priority, and on the other hand, allow major public transport projects to move repeatedly between dates and phases and funding envelopes and so on. Public transport infrastructure is tied up with how we address so many of the other major issues we face as a country, whether it is housing, congestion, climate change, and so on. There are economic, environmental, and social costs associated with failing to urgently deliver on public transport projects.

I will finish on a positive note. I commend the Minister on his progress so far in getting MetroLink over the line after all these years. It is a big cost but we know the benefits of MetroLink will far outweigh the price of building it. As has been said on numerous occasions, the cheapest time to build it was 20 years ago and the next cheapest time is now. It will be transformative for Dublin, particularly those in north County Dublin. As I always do when discussing MetroLink, I would appeal to the Minister to begin planning an extension south of the Grand Canal through Dublin South-West, out to Tallaght. The Minister has told me before that the greater Dublin transport strategy review will commence next year, and a new feasibility study will be carried out as part of that. Any feasibility study is welcome but I would ask that it be carried out independently so that mistakes we feel were made in a previous study are not repeated. My understanding is that the previous feasibility study will form part of the evidence base for the next one, so that is a little bit concerning. I would like the Minister to watch out for that. Obviously, we have not seen the terms of reference yet but I would hope that a more holistic approach could be taken to this feasibility study. The business case for deciding on an extension of the line to Dublin South-West should not necessarily be considered only in terms of current passenger numbers. It should also look at the opportunities that this would open up in terms of housing and development as a city-building project for that part of the city. Overall, of course, we welcome that the MetroLink line extension will be a priority focus of the transport strategy review that is long overdue but I strongly urge the Minister to have it carried out by an independent body.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the House. I want to take the opportunity to discuss the Railway Safety Bill 2026. Rail safety is becoming a massive issue for commuter counties like Kildare. In particular, it is impacting commuter towns like Athy, Newbridge, Kildare town and Monasterevin. Hundreds of people have contacted me this week alone outlining their concerns regarding Irish Rail. The majority of these concerns were primarily due to overcrowding on a number of Irish Rail services on a number of lines, including the Waterford, Limerick and Portlaoise lines. This also extends to the Luas services, which Kildare South commuters are using as a means of onward travel into Dublin city centre. Overcrowding on Irish Rail services is presenting a very serious health and safety issue for these commuters. People are standing in aisles, by entrances and near bike racks just to get on the train. They are

packed in like sardines. I have had a number of constituents share what can only be described as horror stories of overcrowding on Irish Rail services. Only last week I highlighted one case of an elderly couple who were extremely unsteady on their feet, standing in between carriages because there were no seats left.

I want to highlight to the House more examples from my constituents. Katie said:

I'm currently writing this email to you standing in the middle of a coach on the 5.25 Limerick to Heuston train that I boarded in Kildare town. The train serves enough towns including Portlaoise, Portarlinton and Monasterevin. Upon boarding the train, there was already a significant number of people standing. The next train leaving Kildare town is 7.23, serving Newbridge and Naas also. It is very likely that the same scenario as the one I find myself in will be presenting itself on that train.

Jamie, a student commuting from Kildare town to DCU said:

Every morning I get the 6.44 train to Newbridge, then the 6.56 train to Drumcondra. This morning, like every morning, I witnessed something extremely dangerous. By the time the train got to Hazelhatch and Celbridge the train was rammed. No one could get on or off. No one could move. By the time I got to Drumcondra, it took me ages to get off the train, going past multiple people.

Shane, another commuter travelling from Newbridge to Pearse Street, said:

The train is 70% full leaving Newbridge. By the time it leaves Sallins, it's standing room only and then it has to stop at Hazelhatch, Adamstown, Clondalkin and Cherry Orchard, all of which are busy, as they also have exceptional population growth. The trains are unsafe. Most of the time with people standing down the aisles. Even people trying to get off at times can be problematic, as there's often 20 people between them and the door, and nobody wants to step off for fear of losing their little spot on the carpet.

Like me, the Minister is young enough that standing for half an hour to Heuston is okay but many of the trains coming through Newbridge start much earlier and much farther afield and have frail and vulnerable people who are forced to travel into Dublin for hospital appointments. It is not uncommon to see these people precariously make their way along the overcrowded walkways and have to step over people sitting on the floor, etc., while the train is moving, just to get to the toilet. Often, the toilets are in such a state they have to go farther along the train. It is also not uncommon to see frail and vulnerable people trying to get on a train at Newbridge and then not managing to get a seat, because people do not offer or because they simply cannot make it to seats to ask somebody to move. It is only a matter of time before someone gets seriously hurt because of all this overcrowding.

As other colleagues have done, I raised these concerns with Irish Rail recently and was extremely disappointed with its response to addressing this issue. I was informed that health and safety on Irish Rail services is done by self regulation, according to the organisation. That is not an acceptable answer to addressing the serious health and safety concerns on rail services and is simply not good enough.

What does self-regulation mean? I was told that we only had a train driver on these trains and that nobody was operating from the stations. Is it up to the person getting onto a train to self-regulate when they see a crowd on it? Somebody might explain what exactly is meant by

that comment. The Bill should address this immediate concern as it is unlikely that commuters are going to see any expansion of frequency or capacity on the Waterford line until 2027, and hopefully no later, which means the only other solution is to continue with overcrowding.

The Commission for Railway Regulation is the national safety authority charged with overseeing safety on Ireland's rail services. It is mentioned throughout the Bill before us. Do many in the House know exactly what this commission is? I will, as my party colleague and spokesperson has said, work with the Minister to bring real measures that will address the poor and inadequate health and safety provision on our rail services to ensure that commuters get the proper public service they are praying for and which so many of them need.

The Bill is about rail safety. It is about addressing crashes and injuries after they happen. I am putting it to the Minister that we have to deal with these situations before accidents happen, and I ask that the Bill in its entirety set out to address this and the overcrowding for commuters along the three lines I mentioned because it could come too late and nobody in this House wants such a thing to happen.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Bill is very technical and I welcome the Minister's clarification that Parts 9 and 10 do not apply to private heritage railways. That is very important. There are a few of them around the country. It is important that onerous regulation is not placed on them. In many cases they are privately run and located on private ground. They are mainly volunteer driven and do an awful lot of fundraising to keep themselves going, and I am glad the Minister has clarified that they will be exempted from this.

I also welcome the fact the RAIU is going to be put on a statutory footing. That is very important. We are very lucky in this country that we have, in general, an extremely safe railway system. It is safer than the European average. Nevertheless, we have to be cognisant of the potential for extreme weather and extreme heat. We have seen a number of frightening incidents across the water in the UK, with continuous welded rail bending during the heat. Our temperatures were not that far behind those in the UK this summer and we are going to have more extreme heat. The RAIU, and for Iarnród Éireann as the operator, should make sure they have a proper national plan in case speed restrictions are required.

When we are speaking about safety on the railways, it is important to talk about the continual need for investment, particularly in fleet renewal. Iarnród Éireann's fleet is completely maxed out. It will get some carriages back in the short to medium term when the new DART fleet is rolled out but, unfortunately, that has been slightly delayed. After that, there really is nothing else coming. My party colleague Deputy Wall made an important point on this issue. One of the scariest experiences I have had on an overcrowded train was in his area. I got on the train to Newbridge at Grand Canal Dock. This train goes through the Phoenix Park tunnel and is dangerously overcrowded at peak times in the morning and evening. To be honest, certain trains down my way, particularly the Limerick to Galway line between Athenry and Galway and between Limerick and Ennis, are overcrowded. That is really limited by the fact that Iarnród Éireann does not have additional fleet capacity.

It is important to note and reflect that when the western rail corridor was reopened, there were pessimists among us who said the line would be a white elephant. It has been extremely successful and it proves the mantra that if you build it, they will come. My city of Limerick really needs the Minister to commit to a feasibility study on the Shannon Airport railway link.

I know it is not an immediate, short-term concern but we need a feasibility study because it needs to remain on the table. It is part of the longer term strategy for rail in Limerick and the wider mid-west.

We are so lucky in Limerick that none of the railway lines were ripped out. Limerick has the best potential for rail outside of Dublin and that needs to be noted. I am somebody who spends the best part of his time on the Kerry border. A piece of railway infrastructure called the Kerry curve, which runs under Carey's Road in Limerick, links the Foynes line to Limerick Colbert Station and would cost €35 million to reopen. That proposal was submitted to the Department of housing under the housing activation fund. It is a pity the Minister has had to leave because, unfortunately, the project was unsuccessful. It needs to be submitted again and it needs to be funded.

We will have the Ryder Cup next year, which I welcome. We will have a temporary railway station in Adare for the Ryder Cup, which will take people from Adare to Limerick Junction but they will not be able to go from Adare to Limerick city. That is very short-sighted. It would cost €35 million to open up the line from the Adare and Foynes direction to Limerick city. The N20 is one of the most congested roads in the country outside of the greater Dublin area. An active, working commuter railway service between Adare and the hinterlands of Limerick would be transformative for the potential for rail in Limerick and the wider mid-west.

In tandem with that, we need to make damn sure that when the LDA puts in an application to develop housing around Colbert Station, it will not build over or disturb this alignment. I want to state on the record that this would be detrimental because that alignment needs to be preserved, as do the capacity and the space. We need to see funding forthcoming from the Government for sectoral investment in transport and commuter rail in Limerick and elsewhere in the mid-west. With the benefit of figures such as the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Taoiseach, Cork is getting significantly more than Limerick for commuter rail. Cork is effectively getting a DART station. Limerick is getting a double track to Limerick Junction at some stage but nothing is forthcoming in terms of investment in commuter rail. We have a blueprint and plan. We just need the Government to support it.

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Railway Safety Bill, which seeks to strengthen our railway safety framework, place the railway accident investigation unit on a clear statutory footing and modernise aspects of railway safety legislation, particularly in relation to safety-critical workers and accident investigations. These are sensible, practical and necessary measures and I am very pleased to see them included in the Bill. I particularly welcome the provisions relating to safety-critical workers, including the updated framework governing alcohol and intoxicant testing in railway workplaces. The travelling public must have confidence that those responsible for operating and maintaining our railways are held to the highest safety standards. Equally, rail workers themselves deserve the protection that comes from clear rules, robust procedures and a strong safety culture.

Safety on the railway depends on people as much as infrastructure and it is right that this legislation reflects that reality. Railway safety is one of those areas where we can never stand still. Public confidence in our railway network depends on knowing that the systems, procedures, infrastructure and oversight mechanisms in place are robust, independent and continuously improving.

Recent events have reminded us why that matters. Only weeks ago, the country was shocked by the tragic collision at the level crossing near Ballyhaunis in County Mayo, which resulted in the tragic death of 12-year-old Eoin Doyle. First and foremost, my thoughts remain with his family, friends, classmates and the wider community as they continue to deal with the unimaginable loss. That tragedy serves as a stark reminder that railway safety is ultimately about protecting lives. It is not simply a regulatory framework or a legislative exercise. Behind every accident statistic is a person, a family and a community.

The lesson for all of us is that safety must remain at the centre of every decision we make regarding our rail network. Whether we are talking about level crossings, signalling systems, infrastructure maintenance, operational procedures or workforce safety, there can be no room for complacency. Every train passenger should have confidence that the network they use is safe, and every railway worker should be able to carry out their duties knowing that robust safeguards are in place. Equally, every motorist, cyclist and pedestrian who encounters railway infrastructure should be confident that the crossings, signalling systems and operational procedures meet the highest possible standards. That is why I welcome the strengthening of the independent accident investigation arrangements contained in this Bill.

One of the hallmarks of a mature safety culture is the willingness to investigate incidents thoroughly, learn lessons and implement improvements before problems recur. Independent investigation is critical to maintaining public confidence and ensuring that safety improvements are driven by evidence and experience. However, if we are serious about railway safety, we must also urgently improve our railway infrastructure. Safety is not just about examining what happens after an incident occurs. It is also about preventing incidents from occurring in the first place.

As a TD representing Fingal, I regularly hear from many commuters who rely on the northern commuter line. Many, including myself, have experienced repeated disruption arising from signalling failures and infrastructure issues. For people travelling from Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk, reliability is not simply a matter of convenience. It determines whether people get to work on time, whether students get to school and college, whether parents make collection time and whether families can depend on public transport as part of their daily lives.

Too often, commuters find themselves standing on platforms waiting for services delayed by signalling faults. While any individual incident may seem minor, the frequency with which these problems are occurring points to a broader challenge. Parts of our rail control infrastructure are ageing and increasingly strained by growing passenger demand. I very much welcome that Ireland's rail network is carrying more passengers than ever before. We are rightly investing in new train carriages and new services, expanding our capacity and planning for growth in rail usage over the coming decades.

We talk regularly in this House about housing growth, population growth, climate action and sustainable transport, but every one of those ambitions depends upon a railway network that is capable of carrying significantly more passengers safely, efficiently and reliably. While this legislation strengthens the regulatory and investigative side of railway safety, we must ensure that Iarnród Éireann is supported by the Minister, the Department and the NTA, as well as being funded to urgently modernise the operational side of railway safety.

In particular, we need to accelerate the delivery of modern train control and signalling systems in the greater Dublin area and across the wider national rail network. Commuters on the northern line have experienced frequent disruption because of signalling and infrastructure failures. The long delays in delivering the national train control centre project have raised serious concerns about the pace at which critical rail modernisation is being delivered. An expanding railway cannot continue to rely on infrastructure that is obsolete and at the end of its life.

We need urgency, accountability and delivery. Modern train control systems are not simply a convenience. They form an essential part of our safety infrastructure, improving oversight, reducing operational risk, increasing network capacity and helping to prevent incidents before they occur. This is especially important in places like Fingal, which is one of the fastest-growing parts of Ireland. Communities like Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk continue to expand and thousands of people rely on rail every day.

Government policy is to encourage greater use of public transport and that means passengers must have confidence that the service is safe, reliable, efficient and resilient, but public confidence in rail is hard-won and easily lost. We have seen in places such as Balbriggan that passenger numbers can decline, even though it is a growing community. When service reliability came under pressure and fares increased in 2025, we saw a 5% decrease in passenger numbers at Balbriggan train station. This makes absolutely no sense. Balbriggan is the youngest town in the country and one of the fastest growing. We really need to consider the decisions we make and how they impact public transport usage. If we are serious about modal shift, we need a railway that people want to use. That means not only safe infrastructure and modern signalling systems but also reliable services, competitive fares and a passenger experience that encourages more people to leave the car at home, not the opposite. Every investment we make in safety and capacity should ultimately be about growing rail usage and strengthening confidence in public transport.

I very much welcome the investment that we will see in the coming months and years, in particular in new train carriages on the northern commuter line and transformational projects such as DART+, which will significantly improve railway services for communities across Fingal and the wider Dublin area. Looking further ahead, the planned four-tracking on the northern line has the potential to be absolutely transformative, unlocking additional capacity, improving reliability and supporting the continued growth of communities such as Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk.

From the perspective of commuters on the northern line, however, delivery is what matters. Passengers need to see improvements on the ground and they need confidence that long-standing signalling issues and capacity constraints are being addressed with urgency. The objective should be clear: a railway network that is among the safest, most reliable and most modern in Europe. This Bill is an important contribution towards that goal. It strengthens oversight and investigations and updates important elements of our railway safety framework.

It also needs to be viewed as part of a broader railway strategy that combines strong regulation with sustained investment, modern infrastructure and expanded capacity. The recent tragedy in Ballyhaunis reminds us why safety can never be taken for granted. At the same time, the experience of commuters on the northern line reminds us of the importance of continuing to invest in and modernise our rail network. I am confident that through projects

such as DART+, the provision of new rolling stock and signalling upgrades, once delivered, as well as the delivery of a modern train control centre and future capacity enhancements, we can build a railway that is safer, more reliable and better equipped to meet the needs of our growing population.

For those reasons, I welcome the Bill and look forward to supporting its passage through the House. Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Green Party welcomes this legislation and we will support its progression through the Oireachtas. We know that rail is one of the safest, most sustainable and most climate-friendly forms of public transport. As this country continues to invest in public transport, expand our rail services and plan major new projects, such as MetroLink and DART+ in Dublin and metropolitan rail in other cities, it is essential that the safety apparatus we have in place keeps pace with those developments. At its core, this Bill is about ensuring that Ireland has that modern, robust and independent system for the investigation of railway accidents and any other incidents that occur. Putting the railway accident investigation unit on a statutory basis is an important step. Independent investigations are crucial, not only for determining what happened after an accident, but also for identifying the lessons that can prevent a recurrence in future and increasing public confidence in the wider rail network.

The Green Party particularly welcomes the extension of the investigation regime across the wider rail sector and ensuring that all rail systems in the country are subject to appropriate oversight and safety scrutiny. We also support the strengthening of powers relating to accident reporting and investigations.

A safety culture really depends on transparency, accountability and a commitment to learning from incidents, and it is good to see that reflected in the shape of this legislation.

The provisions relating to alcohol and drug testing, particularly for safety-critical rail staff, are safe, sensible and proportionate. Passengers and workers alike are entitled to expect the highest safety standards across the rail network, and aligning railway safety legislation with modern road traffic standards provides greater consistency. It also reflects best practice that we see in transport safety regulation internationally.

The Green Party, as a party committed to encouraging greater use of public transport, recognises that increasing passenger numbers and expanding services must go hand in hand with maintaining the highest levels of safety. Public confidence in rail depends not only on reliable services but also on strong regulatory oversight.

While supporting the Bill, we will examine its provisions carefully on Committee Stage to ensure the new arrangements provide sufficient independence for accident investigations, that safety recommendations will be acted on effectively and that the implementation of these changes will be adequately resourced.

We would welcome clarification from the Minister of State on how recommendations arising from investigations will be monitored and reported on and whether there are sufficient resources available to support an expanded remit for the Railway Accident Investigation Unit.

Overall, however, this legislation represents a necessary modernisation of Ireland's railway safety framework and is a constructive measure that supports both public safety and the continued development of a modern rail network.

I wish to make a couple of other points on the topic of rail while I have the Minister of State's attention. He is probably familiar with this map of the Irish rail network from 1906. As we know, we once had a network of 5,000 km of railway across the country, with over 1,000 stations. Every corner of the island was connected to rail. Nowadays that the network is just a fraction of that. When we talk to people, particularly commuters, we note there is a real demand, passion and desire to reopen rail lines and stations around the country. We have that opportunity now with the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, published in 2024. What is proposed in it is still a far cry from 5,000 km but it would provide a dramatically enhanced level of service and, importantly, would link in with services across Northern Ireland, recognising that we are one island and that there is a desire in large parts of the Republic for rail connectivity. Some of that can be delivered through Northern Ireland as well.

The all-island strategic rail review is a realistic plan. It is costed and meets the clamour and desire for greater rail services. My concern is that we are not seeing the implementation of the plan take place with the necessary speed if it is to be delivered by 2050, which is the end of its lifetime. We are seeing a couple of the smaller aspects, such as passing loops being installed in various parts of the country. That is all good stuff but it really is at the most basic level.

I would cite the decision taken a year and a half ago not to go ahead with the reopening of the Waterford-Wexford-Rosslare line and to push that back. Steps like that are highly retrograde. I am sure a few others in the Chamber might agree with me on that as well.

Yesterday, I had a very useful meeting with representatives of Irish Rail. They were holding a briefing in Buswells and discussing some of the key projects Irish Rail is looking to advance at the moment. As a Dublin West TD, DART+ West was number one on my agenda. The project is advancing well. My colleague, Eamon Ryan, when he was Minister for Transport, prioritised its advancement. It has planning permission and we expect it to move through the next decision gates shortly. It is going to be vital for the area. We have seen huge growth in Dublin 7 and Dublin 15, and into Kildare, and that growth need to be supported by new public transport. It is important that some of the steps concerning how it will be rolled out be taken now as well. I was chatting to the Irish Rail representatives yesterday about having community engagement officers who will deal with the small issues. Issues will crop up in a project of this scale but we would like to see those community engagement officers put in place as soon as possible.

There is another big decision coming for the Government now, and that is on DART+ South West. The funding is not in place for DART+ South West. It has planning permission. It is pretty much on track with DART+ West but it does not have the funding right now. A decision is coming up for the Government soon, and I appeal to it not to drop the ball on this. DART+ South West is ready to go. The two DART developments working in tandem would enhance the efficiency of delivering both. This would enhance the overall financial viability of delivering both. It would be a huge missed opportunity for public transport, particularly for the thousands of people who have bought, or have been sold, homes along the south-west line in Adamstown and Clonburris on the basis that they would have enhanced public transport and who have been left waiting up to this point.

I genuinely believe that, when we consider how many homes are needed in this country to solve our housing crisis, we must realise that building them in tandem with new and enhanced public transport is crucial. That is the argument I am making in relation to the proposal Fingal County Council has recently brought forward for development at Dunsink, beside the old landfill. It is a very ambitious proposal for 16,000 or 17,000 homes. That could work but it will not work unless new public transport is put in place.

There is a proposal to extend the support an green line from Broombridge through the Dunsink lands to the sports campus and then on into Tyrrelstown and Kilmartin Grove. This part of Dublin is another huge growth area. Thousands of additional houses have been added in the past five years and the area could really benefit from public transport. The Dunsink plan cannot work without a new public transport link.

Right now, the Luas green line extension to Tyrrelstown has been put back beyond 2042. That cannot work. There is a review of the greater Dublin area transport strategy next year. I will be campaigning to make sure the Luas extension to Tyrrelstown is prioritised. It will benefit constituents of mine in Tyrrelstown and Kilmartin Grove but it will also allow the successful development of Dunsink in the years to come.

Deputies from Limerick raised the issue of the extension of the line there to support the Ryder Cup. I was at Adare station two or three weeks ago. It is great to see it there. It will facilitate the short-term movement of people for a major sporting event. It is absolutely right, however, to call out the missed opportunity if we do not see the investment linking Limerick city to Adare and then Foynes. There is significant growth within the outer suburbs of Limerick. Putting railway infrastructure in place, much of which is not new but involves using and refurbishing existing rail infrastructure, will deliver high-quality public transport that will support the development of new homes.

I have a final point. In the context of the major capital works we are talking about, it might seem small but it is very important for any commuter who uses Connolly Station. It concerns the intercom in Connolly. There are not very many calls but there is no way to hear the intercom. Connolly is our major station for the north and west and, if there is a delay or change in times, people cannot hear what is being announced for love nor money. I have spent many hours sitting there waiting to get proper information about what is happening.

This is a small thing but it speaks to the public transport experience. We know that 1 million journeys are taken every day on public transport in this country. Hundreds of thousands of commuters are trying to get to and from work, and the State should make that journey as easy as possible.

I have been very vocal in my critique of the increase in fares that is coming in January. I will not go into that today. Basic things, such as people being able to hear what is happening with their train, why it is delayed, when it is coming and what platform they need to move to, are important. If we cannot get those basics right, it becomes harder to encourage more people to make the change, leave the car behind and use the services we are investing in, albeit not quickly enough. We have to make that journey a palatable one for commuters.

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the Railway Safety Bill 2026, which strengthens and modernises Ireland's railway safety laws to protect passengers, workers and everyone who

relies on the rail network. It gives the Railway Accident Investigation Unit a clear statutory basis in primary legislation and updates the rules for reporting and investigating railway accidents and incidents. It provides for investigations, including into incidents on Luas, future metro lines and heritage railways, ensuring safety legislation keeps pace with Ireland's developing transport network. It modernises alcohol and drug testing for railway staff carrying out safety critical duties, including procedures for taking and analysing samples, gathering evidence and enforcement. It brings railway testing enforcement rules into closer alignment with road safety legislation, supporting a consistent approach across the transport sector, which is positive. All these changes are important because effective investigations help to identify risks and prevent similar accidents while robust testing helps to protect lives.

While I have the Minister of State's attention, I will talk about DART+ West. As I am sure he is aware, the people of Dublin West are hugely supportive of DART+ West. It is a hugely important project for our community and it is long awaited. It represents transformative investment in the electrification of our rail network, doubling capacity at peak hours and extending DART services across Dublin 15 and Dublin 7, to Maynooth, the M3 parkway and Kilcock. My understanding is that procurement is advancing with pre-qualification questionnaire notices for the design and build works having been issued in May 2025 and the tender documentation now in its final drafting stage. The compulsory purchase order, CPO, process has commenced with notices having been issued to more than 200 affected landowners on the route. As long as there are no complications, I think I am right in saying the tender documentation for DART+ West is expected to be issued before the end of the year, which is positive, with the objective of early works on the line commencing by the end of 2027 and main works commencing in 2030. Overall, it is a positive project of which I am fully supportive.

Now, we have to consider how the project will be delivered on the ground. DART+ West will open doors for commuters, but we must ensure closing level crossings permanently does not close off communities. The Government is doing a great job of putting a faster main transport artery through the area. How can we ensure the local connections keep working? This will be a major construction project. When it is finished, it will transform people's access to local train services, which will change their communities, but the closure of level crossings and therefore of local roads will also change communities and those communities want information. They want information about it sooner rather than later. They are supportive of DART+ West, but they want to be communicated with about the plans for it.

In responses to my parliamentary questions, Iarnród Éireann has stated it

will continue to engage with local communities as the project progresses towards construction. This engagement will focus on the timing, phasing and potential impacts of the level crossing replacement works and will include advance notification of planned works, regular project updates, consultation with local authorities and elected representatives and targeted engagement with directly affected residents, businesses and community organisations.

I ask the Minister of State to encourage Iarnród Éireann to start that engagement now and not to wait until it reaches construction. I will explain why. Clonsilla level crossing is due to close permanently with a new active travel bridge to be implemented. Coolmine level crossing is due to be closed permanently with a new active travel bridge. Ashtown level crossing is due

to close permanently, with a new bridge underpass and an active travel bridge. In Clonsilla, a detour is to be implemented with a new bridge at Barberstown, which is a few kilometres away. In Coolmine, local road junctions are to be upgraded to deal with the closure of Coolmine Road and I believe that is happening at Porterstown along the Diswellstown Road to Blanchardstown and Laurel Lodge. I said "I believe" because I had to look for that information from Irish Rail recently and a lot of residents are still in the dark about the plans.

In responses I have received, Iarnród Éireann stated that it engaged in extensive public consultation prior to and as part of the railway order. The railway order was submitted in 2022. The consultations happened before that and some of them took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, so the community requires more information at this point to let it know DART+ West is coming, the benefits of DART+ West and about the overall transport management plan and transport strategy for the community.

This Bill is about safety. The permanent closure of level crossings is part of the railway order and therefore part of the planning approval for the project. The reason given for the permanent closure of the level crossings was safety. That still needs to be explained to people. I challenged the closure of the level crossings during the public consultations and at the oral hearing on DART+ West. I did so on the basis that two of them are currently operated by attendants who manually close the gates. I asked whether the crossings could instead be upgraded to the highest modern safety standards and retained, at least during peak hours, to maintain the connectivity between communities. The answer was "No". It was "No" even though the capacity is due to double at peak times and I do not know what the capacity or frequency will be at off-peak times. These are the questions people have and Irish Rail, the NTA, Fingal County Council and stakeholders should be available to the community at this point so they can explain to people the benefits - and I think we all support it - but also the plans for its introduction, not in 2027 or 2028, but now. I am not suggesting anything that would delay DART+ West. I actually support measures that would expedite it, but can we please ensure we create the time and space for communities to move with us as we move this project along?

Deputy Paula Butterly: Before I begin, I too offer my sympathies to the Doyle family. The loss of a child is always devastating.

I welcome the Bill. Safety on our tracks and level crossings is always paramount. I will focus my contribution on two points, which concern the safety on our trains and platforms. The first is about overcrowding. We are fortunate in County Louth as we have seen an increase in services between Dublin and Belfast. We will see the introduction of new carriages that will transport more than 400 people per service. We have seen more frequency, with services running 15 times per day between Dublin and Belfast. All of that is to be welcomed. As is said, "when you build it, they will come" and the trains are now overcrowded. People are huddled together at every point in the day and, at some stages, particularly in the summer when it was hot, people with conditions like asthma were struggling to breathe. It is not just on the carriages, but also on the platforms.

Drogheda station is full to capacity. There is nowhere to park and when people are rushing for a train at 6 a.m. or 7 a.m. and desperately trying to find a car parking space, they start to get het up and stressed and that can lead to incidents. There are incidents on the platform because

people are huddled together trying to get onto and off a crowded train. That safety issue has to be addressed and I have the solution. It is a solution I have spoken about again and again. It is the introduction of a new station in north Drogheda. The population is there and the housing is there and we will have an increased population, with more than 7,000 houses being built in the coming years. A train station in north Drogheda is absolutely vital. It needs to take people away from the platforms and car parks in Drogheda and get them onto a new platform and into a new car park in north Drogheda.

In Dundalk, it is the same situation. The car park is absolutely jammed. We need more space for more cars. These services have been of huge benefit to County Louth.

These services are getting people out of their cars and onto trains but, as a result, we once again have crowded platforms and crowded trains. As has been said, we are introducing new carriages and will have new seats but we need people to be able to get on that platform safely.

I have another solution for the Minister of State, the introduction of a train station in the mid-Louth area. This would serve not just the people of County Louth but also a lot of people in counties Meath, Monaghan and Cavan who do not have the facility or luxury of being able to get a train. In a recent parliamentary question, I asked the Minister to fund and carry out a feasibility study. Everybody on the ground knows that this is feasible and that the demand is there but we need to prove it with hard facts and evidence. I once again ask the Minister to provide funding for a feasibility study.

On my second point regarding safety on our trains and platforms, one of the key commitments in the programme for Government is to introduce a transport security force. While the numbers seem quite low, there were 50 incidents of sexual offences on trains in 2025. That number seems quite low but these are the people - teenagers, children and primarily women - who have actually made a report to Iarnród Éireann. Who knows how many have been in similar circumstances and have disembarked from a train without saying anything, despite going home shaken and traumatised by the event? It is a key priority in the programme for Government. When are we going to introduce the primary legislation to make this happen?

People going to work need to be able to travel safely. We continue to advocate for stronger measures to be brought in for anyone who commits any sort of sexual offence against a child, teenager, woman or man. Only yesterday, we walked out for women. Men and women of the Oireachtas stood together and walked out to say that violence and abuse towards women has to stop. We have that commitment. I would like to know when it is going to be fulfilled. There is no place for any woman, child or teenager to be abused on a train, on a bus, at a station, on a platform or in a car park. I would like the Minister of State to respond to that.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Táim an-bhuíoch as go leor rudaí sa Bhille seo ach tá a fhios ag gach duine sa Teach nach bhfuil sé maith go leor. Tá go leor rudaí ag tarlú ar na traenacha agus ar na busanna faoi láthair. Táim sásta go bhfuilimid tar éis an Bille seo a dhéanamh ach tá go leor rudaí eile gur féidir linn a dhéanamh.

There are definitely sensible and necessary provisions here. One of the best, particularly for north Dublin, is the putting of the railway accident investigation unit on a clear statutory footing. It is very important and I have constituents who will very much welcome it.

Strengthening the rules around alcohol and drugs for people working in safety-critical railway roles is something I fully support.

I will use this debate to talk about safety issues my constituents have raised with me and some of the stories they have told me. We need a quicker system to tell those with disabilities when a lift is not available at stations in north Dublin. It is not acceptable for a local representative, whether myself, another TD or a councillor, to get a phone call from a constituent who has a disability who has got off a DART only to see that they cannot get to the other side of the platform. Think of the embarrassment of that constituent when they must ask to be carried up the stairs. I welcome other parts of the Bill but this needs to be looked at.

I went over to the London recently, where there are contactless systems. You can just tap your phone. I know there have been developments on that but, if we are serious about getting people onto public transport, we need to speed up the procurement of that contactless system. We should not have to get a Leap card. You should be able to use your phone to tap on quickly when getting on a bus or rail service. Accessibility and ease will increase people's use of public transport and will allow us to have a just transition.

When we speak about safety, people with disabilities need to be at the forefront. Public transport is for everyone. If we build a system that works for those minority groups, it will also cover the majority. For most of us, when a lift is broken, it is just an inconvenience but it is not acceptable for someone to have to be carried up stairs.

I welcome the Minister of State's engagement with me regarding disabilities. I welcome the work his office has done for the schools in my area. I just wanted to say that when I see him on the front bench.

This Bill will be particularly helpful for stations in north Dublin, such as Clongriffin and Howth Junction, where people are feeling intimidated and are contacting my office. Staff should be able to go to work without being abused. I heard other Deputies mentioning that issue. The requirement for co-operation between An Garda Síochána and Iarnród Éireann is brilliant. CCTV will also be critical in the transition. Reporting is important but statistics always show that, when a camera is pointed at someone's face, there is a decrease in crime.

There is constant crowding on the northern line and there have been incidents of antisocial behaviour such as fires being lit at stations and people being robbed while waiting for the DART. People who experience that will be deterred from using public transport. If they are deterred from using public transport, they will get into a car, increasing congestion and creating a new habit they should be encouraged not to take up.

I would really welcome working lifts, CCTV, lighting, staffing and emergency response. I also welcome the parts of the Bill I have addressed. If it is done correctly, this could be a real game-changer. Last year, I raised with the Minister for Transport the issue of greater investment in next generation ticketing. Passengers see contactless payment working in other European cities. It is reasonable to ask why it is taking Ireland so long. It should be simple. The same principle applies to the information.

On updating people, when a lift is not working or a train is cancelled, people should be told. If a train is going to be late, people should be told more quickly.

I welcome what this Bill does. I welcome the stronger framework for accident investigation but I would ask the Minister of State to look beyond the Bill itself and to address the issue of safety for those with disabilities. I welcome the work he has done since taking up his office. This is something that would really help. People with disabilities need to be able to depend on public transport systems rather than having to hope that a lift is working when they arrive.

I welcome the investment in the DART+ and MetroLink developments. It is the right thing to do but we should measure how that money is being spent to ensure it does not become another children's hospital. That is a standard I would like to see at the heart of this Bill. I welcome that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call on the Minister of State, I welcome the students from University College Dublin. They are guests of Deputy Barry Ward and are undertaking a module on understanding government. All I can say is that I wish them luck with that.

After the Minister of State's speech, we will have Topical Issues. There are four Topical Issues: one for the Minister for education, two for the Minister for children and one for the Minister for Transport.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I welcome the students. I look forward to their analysis of how we understand government. It might be important for every citizen.

I thank the Deputies who spoke on the Railway Safety Bill. They gave informative insights not just into railway safety but into other issues. I offer my sincere sympathies to the family of Eoin Doyle on their tragic loss. Many Deputies across the House have raised genuine concerns in relation to railway safety and, indeed, the entire railway network. That just goes to show the importance of the railway system and the esteem in which it is held by Members of Dáil Éireann, both Opposition and Government. It is really refreshing to see that. Long may it continue.

I confirm to the House that the Government is committed to maintaining a modern and robust railway services statutory framework that supports the continuing safe operation and development of our railway sector. It covers not just the Iarnród Éireann network, light railways and heritage railways but also the planned metro network. This is a key Bill to ensure the railway safety investigation unit will be underpinned in primary legislation. This Bill will deliver on this objective by establishing a clear legislative basis for the unit.

4 o'clock

It is also important to restructure the existing framework governing the reporting and investigation of railway accidents and incidents for all railways. We cannot deny the reality that railway accidents occur and will continue to do so but what we can and must do is learn from these accidents. In so doing, we continuously strive to reduce the risks involved. Despite recent high profile railway accidents, railway remains a very safe mode of transport. The second significant objective of the Bill is to update the Railway Safety Act 2005. In Part 3 of the Bill, it is proposed to streamline some of the functions of the commission for railway regulation, including the timeframes for the administration of the assessment systems for new

works and new rolling stock so they are used by the Commission for Railway Regulation when independently overseeing the safety of our railways.

It is important legislation is kept up to date and fit for purpose in the modern day. Part 10 of the Act of 2005 has not been updated. Parts 4 and 5 and of the Bill modernised the Act of 2005 relating to intoxicants and safety critical railway workers, including testing, sampling, analysis and enforcement provisions. The measures in Part 5 will align with railway safety legislation with the modernisation road safety provisions in the road safety Acts for the roles of An Garda Síochána and the Medical Bureau of Road Safety ensuring a consistent approach to alcohol and drug testing, evidence gathering and enforcement across the sector.

A number of issues were raised in relation to young people using the railway network and encouraging everybody to feel safe on the railway network. This legislation is a crucially important tool for the Government to encourage more and more people to use the railways, which have been a huge benefit not just to urban Ireland but rural Ireland as well.

In many of the contributions from Members, they were looking at particular advances in terms of bringing the railway to different parts of cities and counties. It is a hugely important piece. We have to be very careful to look at where the railway map was a number of years ago and whether we want to expand the railways, not just in urban Ireland but in rural Ireland as well, to make sure we have balanced regional development. I am glad to see Iarnród Éireann and the Government are advancing an awful lot of car parking in regional towns that have railway stations to encourage people to get on the train and use the train safely. This legislation is very welcome and I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Railway Safety Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Transport pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

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:

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the NCCP's proposed national radioligand therapy plan.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss wait times for operations at the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh.

Deputy Duncan Smith - To discuss the need for an investigation into the loss of the remains or partial remains of unidentified bodies.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss making the shingles vaccination free of charge for immunocompromised patients and those over 65.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss the delay in response to parliamentary questions regarding assessment of need waiting lists.

Deputies Cian O'Callaghan, Naoise Ó Muirí and Barry Heneghan - To discuss the need to support Moatview Early Education Centre.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss bringing the Ring of Kerry road up to an acceptable and safe standard.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss physio services in Castleisland.

Deputies Louise O'Reilly and Grace Boland - To discuss the loss of a teaching post in Skerries.

Deputies John Lahart and Paul Murphy - To discuss the imminent closure of the childcare facility at the technological university site in Tallaght. To discuss the sudden closure of the TUD creche in Tallaght.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly and Grace Boland; John Lahart and Paul Murphy; Eoghan Kenny; Cian O'Callaghan, Naoise Ó Muirí and Barry Heneghan; and Michael Cahill have been Selected for discussion.

An Ceann Comhairle: With the agreement of the Deputies in the House, I propose to take Deputy Michael Cahill first as he needs to make an appointment after five o'clock. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Tourism Industry

Deputy Michael Cahill: I wish to again raise the Ring of Kerry road. I acknowledge the €10 million provided by the Minister for Transport. That funding was obviously very welcome. This is Ireland's premier tourist route. It is in a shocking and dangerous condition. It has lags, humps and hollows. It is 70% substandard. It has been underfunded for decades. In Cahersiveen town, the road and footpath are in a disgraceful condition. It is completely lopsided and there have been numerous accidents. This is a national secondary route.

Residents in Killorglin are also looking for the road there to be upgraded. From Laune Bridge to Dunmaniheen and on to Anglont, where the RDI Hub is, the residents have been campaigning for over 50 years for a new realignment and footpath. I would like to see that progressed. Kerry County Council has informed me if it received €150,000 from TII, it would cover the planning process. I ask the Minister of State to refer that to the Minister and TII officials.

My own village of Glenbeigh urgently needs new footpaths, public lighting and a pedestrian crossing. There are many other sections that require urgent attention along the Ring of Kerry, including Waterville, Caherdaniel, Castlecove and Sneem, among a number of others.

Traffic congestion and long delays are an everyday occurrence in both Killarney and Killorglin. The bypass is progressing for Killarney. There is a bypass required in both towns. I ask that TII senior officials look at both towns to see if we could come up with some short-term measures that would help alleviate this congestion.

I also wish to raise hedge cutting on the Ring of Kerry. The Ring of Kerry is Ireland's premier tourist route. It is on the Wild Atlantic Way. We have magnificent scenery and yet most people who use it cannot see the ocean even though it is right beside them because it is all covered in with trees. What is required here is funding from TII to provide a long reach hedge cutter and specialist climbers who would climb down as a lot of the trees are growing from under the cliff edge. It is a huge issue and everybody is on about it all the time. The road is dangerous as a result.

I ask the Minister of State relay my concerns to the Minister. I raised the same issues yesterday with the Taoiseach. That is how important it is to the people of Kerry and to all visitors to our county.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I will go through the format first and then come to the points he raised. The matter of infrastructure investment to support road safety as well as the quality of life for people who rely on the N70 is an important one. The Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding but TII, the national roads authority, and the local authorities are intertwined in relation to these projects.

Deputy Cahill mentioned a number of issues along the Wild Atlantic Way and, more importantly, the N70, and a number of concerns he has about it. I concur with the Deputy's concerns. I travelled the road this summer and it is a premier tourist attraction. From the Cork side, we do not like giving that to Kerry but we accept the Ring of Kerry and all of its beauty. It is hugely important that we understand and I will certainly be taking the issues the Deputy raised back to the Minister for Transport and TII as well. He has outlined a number of issues on which locals have been campaigning for decades in terms of road improvement. That shows the level of commitment he has in supporting them. He mentioned his own community of Glenbeigh as well. It is right on the Wild Atlantic Way and the Ring of Kerry.

It is important and very much incumbent on Government, at a political level, and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, in conjunction with the local authority, to make sure we are preserving and enhancing the primary tourist routes across the country, that is, the Wild Atlantic Way but also the Ring of Kerry, which is famous in terms of tourism going back centuries. I will be taking those issues back.

As the Deputy mentioned, there is a huge amount of money being invested in County Kerry, which I know he has been advocating for, not just while he has been in this House but for a long number of years, working hard with the local authority and TII. They are progressing but the issues he raised today, including the issue with hedge cutting, is not lost.

That is a hugely important piece. We have to revisit and look at the policies on those premier tourism routes, both at local authority level and the level of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, to make sure we are offering the best possible to those who come to Kerry. A huge number of livelihoods are dependent on tourism in the region Deputy Cahill talks about. They are two of the most important pieces. I will certainly raise with the Department of Transport both the issues and the points the Deputy made. He mentioned Sneem, Blackwater Bridge and other places. They are hugely important tourism routes. We meet many tourists going on the Ring of Kerry either by bus or otherwise, and it is important we show off to the best of our ability the great facilities, scenery and communities we have along the Ring of Kerry and the N70. I will convey the Deputy's request for funding back to TII and the Department of Transport as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Michael Cahill: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, and the Members for accommodating me. I am happy enough now.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy's colleagues for the flexibility shown towards the Deputy.

School Staff

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This concerns the reckless decision of the Government to remove a teacher, the 11th mainstream teaching post, from St. Patrick's Junior National School in Skerries. I will refer to what a parent wrote to me. I have spoken to parents and teachers. They are absolutely frantic. She said the school currently has 267 pupils, which is above the standard retention threshold of 258. This raises an important question. Why is a school that remains above the normal teacher retention threshold losing a teaching post and doing so in a way and at a time when there will be the maximum amount of disruption on 23 October? That means we have 22 days to change the Minister of State's mind and for him to reverse this reckless decision. Parents have written to me and what they are saying is that it seems like this Government is failing their children. This will put the class size at 33. We know that the Minister is aiming for 21. At the moment, the number is 22, but it will move it to 33. That is absolutely reckless. This decision must be reversed.

Deputy Grace Boland: I know the school very well. It is where I started my own schooldays. I share my constituency colleague's concerns. It is simply unacceptable to have a class size of 33. Will the Minister of State engage very proactively with the school? There are huge additional needs in this particular year, but as he knows, in all years we have very challenging needs. That puts undue pressure on pupils, students and SNAs. First, a class size of 33 is simply unacceptable. Second, will the Minister of State go back and look at the threshold? This school is meeting the threshold. There has to be some flexibility here to retain the teacher. Parents, teachers, the wider school community and I am at a loss as to why we are going to lose this teacher. I urge the Minister of State to proactively engage with the school and do everything he can to retain the teacher.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I back my two constituency colleagues and thank them for sharing time with me. The north county is exploding in its demographics and school supply is

lagging behind there as it is. St. Patrick's Junior School in Skerries needs to retain the 11th teacher for a number of reasons. The second class is going to go from 22 to 33 students if we lose the 11th teacher. I worked in a secondary school, so I know at first hand the impact increasing the number in a class by that size has on the attention students are going to get. With all the will in the world, if we add 50% to a class, it is so much more difficult for any teacher to address their needs. This is at a time when, as my colleague mentioned, we are looking at having 21 students per class. Could we please look at this again? Could we have some flexibility in this case?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputies very much for raising the issue. It is always great to see TDs raising issues on a cross-constituency basis. It shows the importance of the issue being raised, so I thank them for raising it. The primary staffing schedule is a long-standing feature of the primary allocation system, which ensures fairness and transparency in the allocation of mainstream class teachers across primary schools, regardless of location.

The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at an individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and the enrolment of pupils on the previous 30 September. The staffing arrangements for primary schools for the 2026-2027 school year are set out in circular 25 of 2026. In the 2025-2026 school year, St. Patrick's Junior School in Skerries had a mainstream staffing of an administrative principal and 12 mainstream class teachers based on an enrolment of 281 pupils on 30 September 2024. The school enrolment fell to 249 on 30 September 2025 and so the mainstream staffing at the school was due to be reduced by two classroom teachers for 2026-2027. Staffing arrangements included a projected enrolment process whereby schools experiencing significant increase in enrolment may apply for additional mainstream staffing. In order to qualify for such a post, schools like St. Patrick's Junior National School, which had more than seven teachers, required an increase of 23 pupils on the previous September's enrolment. The projected enrolment figure must be five more than the appointed threshold for teachers as set out in appendix A of the circular 25 of 2026. An additional classroom teacher is allocated on a provisional basis pending confirmation that the school reaches the required enrolment on 30 September. In the case of St. Patrick's, a projected enrolment of 272 was required in order to qualify for the post. As the school advises of a projected enrolment of 273 pupils for 30 September, the school was given a provisional sanction for a projected enrolment post. Obviously, as today is 1 October, we are awaiting the figures as of yesterday, 30 September.

The staffing process also contains an appeal mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal to the independent primary staffing appeals board. One of the appeals criteria is aimed at schools that received a projected enrolment post but do not meet the required enrolment on 30 September, while another is aimed at schools experiencing pressure on class sizes at infant level. Such schools may submit an appeal to the October meeting of the primary staffing appeal board. The information and application forms are available from the Department and on circular 25 of 2026. The closing date for the application or appeal is 13 October. I might address the other issues in my closing remarks.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The school is due to lose the teacher on 23 October. In his closing remarks the Minister of State might advise us how this is going to work, given that the deadline is looming. He might also advise us whether he believes that 33 children in a classroom is

acceptable. I will tell him on my behalf that 33 children in a classroom is very much not acceptable. That is not a good learning environment for children to have. That is not a good environment for teachers, SNAs and the wider school community to have to deal with. That is not an environment that is conducive to being able to do the best for children with additional needs, and there are many in this school. Parents are frantic. Of course they can engage in the appeals process, but the date they are due to lose the teacher is 23 October. I urge the Minister of State to tell me if he thinks 33 children in a classroom is okay. When we know the OECD average is 21, the EU average is 19, we are looking at 33 in a junior school in Skerries. It is not acceptable. The Minister of State might confirm in his remarks if he or the Government think it is acceptable, because I really do not.

Deputy Grace Boland: I have only just received the Minister of State's answer, but I was trying to follow him. He says the school had 249 pupils and it needed an additional 23 on the previous September's enrolment, which it has. It has exceeded that. I am not sure what the threshold figure is but there has to be some flexibility here. The school has exceeded its enrolment by 23 pupils. Pressures are going to be placed on the students in the classroom, in particular with all of the additional needs.

The Minister of State is the Minister of State responsible for special education. He has to agree it is simply not acceptable to have 33 students in a class.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Enrolment is a tricky at this level, namely, going from school into secondary school and going from early years into primary school, when parents must apply to numerous schools to get one place. I do not have the answer as to how we make the system better for mainstream schools at primary level but I do think it is something we can knock our heads together on and make a better system. I know from experience that the classroom environment functions better with fewer numbers. I know the Minister of State knows that and agrees with us on that, so that is why we are asking him to bear in mind the pressure on students and the pressure on teachers who have to take 33 students instead of 21. I ask him to please reconsider.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputies for the questions. I would nearly bet that the school has probably committed to and sent in the enrolment for 30 September at this stage because schools are very efficient bodies and I am sure this school, St. Patrick's, is no different. We will reflect on that figure when it is sent in.

I take the point. We have to have a staffing schedule. If we look at the average of our schools, it is even fewer than 20 when we take every teacher into account. I take the point the Deputies made about 33 pupils in a classroom. Governments over many years have been reducing the pupil-teacher ratio to ensure we have smaller classrooms where children can thrive.

I have no doubt the school has contacted the Department, so I will ensure it liaises directly with the school on the figures and advise it accordingly as to the next process. There is no point in me standing up here, whether I agree or not with the issue. Unfortunately, we have to have a staffing schedule that is part of the system and a system of governance that applies right across the education system. However, when cases like this are brought to my attention, I will

reflect very carefully on them and see what has come back from the school in order that we make the appropriate decision.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies for their flexibility towards their colleague. Ultimately, it is not setting a precedent.

Childcare Services

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue and the Minister of State for being present to take it. The Minister of State will agree that when it comes to childcare, parents need certainty. Close to work, on-site, or, as in this case, on-campus childcare is as good as it gets with parents working in close proximity to where their child is minded. Oakview Crèche, based in the grounds of Technological University Dublin, TU Dublin, in Tallaght ticks all the boxes I have just mentioned.

The first thing we need to agree on is that this facility, regardless of who owns it, remains in place. Deputy Murphy and I have spoken in the Chamber about this particular crèche facility previously. The crèche serves TU Dublin staff on site, the children of some students and families from the wider community. TU Dublin has confirmed that the operators of Oakview Crèche exercised a break option in their contract in May 2026 and that the current licence expires on 31 December of this year. The university has also stated that the continuation of the crèche would require a new procurement process and that this is not currently proposed because the building requires investment.

Parents are seeking clarification on what steps were taken between May and September to preserve childcare provision on site? Why is no replacement procurement process currently proposed? What works are actually required and what are they expected to cost? Does continued childcare remain an option for the building? Do historical public funding obligations in relation to this facility - I am particularly referencing Pobal funding - remain relevant?

Deputy Paul Murphy: This seems like an incredible situation. It is very stressful and shocking for the parents. Literally, on Monday gone they got a notification that their crèche place would be gone. What are they meant to do? They rely on this crèche. There are 44 kids in the crèche in TU Dublin in Tallaght. It is a mixture of children of staff, students and people from the community. If this goes ahead, the impact will be horrendous. One mother is quoted in the *Tallaght Echo* as saying she is in her second year of college and might have to abandon her studies as a consequence of losing this crèche place.

There is obviously a dispute between the operator of Oakview Crèche and TU Dublin as to the cause of this. There is some underlying issue. Work needed to be done in the building. The provision of air conditioning was required because the temperature was too high as identified a number of years ago by Tusla. That work has not happened. Then there is a dispute about exactly what has gotten us to this point and whether the parents should have been informed earlier by the operator of Oakview Crèche. That seems to be the case on the part of TU Dublin.

From my perspective the issue here is the rights of the parents, the children and the fact there is a building which can serve as a crèche and could remain open in January without any

of the works taking place. Obviously, there will not be high temperatures in January. The works could take place. This building needs to operate as a crèche.

The main thing in terms of the Department is to contact TU Dublin to get to the bottom of this matter. If funding is necessary for the capital works that have been identified by Tusla to make this place work 100% appropriately as a crèche, then that funding should be provided rather than losing these crèche places when there is no prospect of these families getting any other crèche place for January. Do not throw parents into that disastrous situation.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank both Deputies for their collaboration and for raising this important issue and offering me the opportunity to respond.

The Department is aware of the decision to close the service as the university prepares to repurpose the current facility. It is acknowledged that this is a deeply stressful time for the parents, children, the staff affected and the local community. South Dublin Childcare Committee is collaborating with the private provider to review alternative premises and to secure a new location for the service. The childcare committee has continued to provide support to the provider with information on the options available. However, the Department does not directly operate or manage early learning and childcare or school age childcare services. Decisions about the day-to-day running of services, including their chosen business model or base of operations, ultimately lie with the provider.

If the provider would like to relocate, they have to apply for a change in circumstance application to be made to Tusla early years inspectorate. As part of this process, the inspectorate requests relevant statutory documentation that evidences the proposed building is safe and secure for children in the new setting. This includes, but is not limited to, fire safety certification, building regulations compliance, and other documentation required under current legislation. A fit for purpose inspection is also required once all relevant documents have been received.

Timeframes for change in circumstance applications, which are set out in regulation 8 of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, require at least 60 days advance notification for changes to a service. This is to allow sufficient time to ensure that all providers meet the relevant statutory requirements to ensure the safety, quality of care and the support of children in these settings.

I would advise the provider in question to engage with the inspectorate directly in relation to this matter as a matter of urgency. It is hugely important both Deputies relay that to the provider. In the event that a suitable alternative location cannot be secured, the Department will continue to work closely with the South Dublin Childcare Committee to assist affected families in identifying alternative options in the area.

South Dublin County Childcare Committee can provide contact information for parents should they need help to secure alternative places. Parents and guardians can also use a website to find core funding partner services in their area. It is also important there is engagement with the inspectorate directly to process the matter and see what options are open but I take on board the concerns the Deputies have raised.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for the answer but that line in the early part of his reply that "the university prepares to repurpose the current facility" is the issue that I have a problem with. The point I made earlier was that close to work on-campus or on-site childcare is as good as it gets.

That is what the university here should be aiming for. The solution is along the lines of the solution announced by the Minister for children earlier this week with regard to State-led early learning and childcare capital projects, a number of which were announced. This is the way to go. The Minister should look at the campus of the technological university in Tallaght with a view to using that facility and entering into a partnership with TUD to initiate a State-led on-site childcare facility on the Tallaght campus.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Any parent, and many others, will know that getting your child into a crèche is no small task these days. As far as I know, there are massive waiting lists for every crèche in Tallaght. A solution must be found for the crèche in TU Dublin. It is fine if that solution involves relocation to somewhere in the area. There may be an idea that many of these parents are going to find alternative crèches in January, but that is just not going to happen. If TU Dublin or Oakview knew that this was only going to run until December well before the parents were told, it was a very bad decision not to tell parents before they applied in September, thinking they were getting a whole year. If funds are the issue in terms of the works that need to be done on the building, my bottom-line question is whether the Government will commit to stepping in and providing those funds so the building can be used for its current purpose, that is, as a crèche.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The Deputies have spoken about having proper childcare facilities on campus. Ideally, that is the way to go. The announcement of a number of crèches and of childcare funding earlier this week shows the correct process to do that. However, that is little comfort for the Deputies' constituents in the challenges they will face in a couple of months' time. I reiterate that it is for the providers to go back. The Department and I will ensure the concerns the Deputies have raised are taken up and that everybody, including the county childcare committee and the inspectorate, are working together to find a solution. It is very difficult. The point regarding how short the notice given to families has been is not lost on me. It is hugely challenging and difficult. From dealing with families across my own area, I know what it is like and I know what the challenges are. Right now, we have to try to find a solution for the immediate future. In the long term, it is the right thing to do to ensure there are proper facilities on campus but, right now, we have to deal with these issues. I will give an undertaking to ensure the Department engages on whether an alternative can be found, which I know it is willing to do. We will work with the Department to try to find a solution and make sure any engagement towards finding that solution is meaningful.

Early Childhood Care and Education

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Moatview Early Education Centre plays an absolutely vital role in the local community in Moatview, Dublin 17. If it closes - if action is not taken, that is exactly what may happen - it will leave a huge gap in the local community that will not be filled. It does excellent work. It takes in a lot of children with additional needs and looks after

them very well. It has a huge funding deficit. Part of this arises from the centre not getting core funding a couple of years ago and this funding not being restored. Pobal needs to engage with Susan Russell, who is a brilliant manager, with Sinead Tucker and with all of the staff and work with them to resolve this issue. To date, Pobal has not engaged with Ms Russell, the manager. Public representatives have asked to meet with Pobal on the issue but Pobal has not met with them. I urge the Minister of State and the Government to act and to get Pobal to engage so that we can protect this really important childcare facility in the local community.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I echo Deputy O'Callaghan's points. I have visited Moatview Early Education Centre and I have met Susan Russell and the staff. They do great work. It is an area of serious disadvantage. This service has lasted since 1992, through many years, providing absolutely vital early learning education to local children. I cannot countenance the area losing this service. It would be an absolute travesty. I do not think it will. There is a tactical funding issue here. I think the centre is viable in the long term given that it has done so well since 1992 but there is a gap in funding because of the loss of core funding from Pobal. To echo Deputy O'Callaghan's point, we need Pobal to get involved and to work with the directors and the team to get these issues resolved in order that the service can continue, which I believe and hope it will, and in order that the children and parents get the education and service they deserve locally.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: This issue has been raised and it will continue to be raised. We have all met Susan Russell and Sinead Tucker. The Department has confirmed to us that the budget has been approved. That sounds positive but the centre has still not received any money. Speaking to the parents would break your heart. The Department told me that the funding would enable the centre to remain operational while the board, Pobal and Dublin City Childcare Committee work together. However, I have again been contacted by the service, which says that it has had no meaningful contact from Pobal. To echo Deputies Ó Muirí and O'Callaghan, those involved do not feel supported. They feel abandoned. Pobal then confirmed that the funding is not intended to provide reimbursement. There is a serious issue there because people have used money to cover salaries, food and basic day-to-day running costs. Those contributions were fully disclosed. If that is disputed, somebody needs to sit down with the service and explain clearly what is covered and what is not. No one is argued against the need for things to be transparent but there also needs to be a sense of urgency. In the area I represent, parents are ringing me up and crying on the phone. We have all raised this through direct means. Children who have additional needs and who require support to be cared for in a service need support from Government. Will the Minister of State raise this issue with Pobal and with the Department with a view to arranging an urgent meeting with the staff?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputies for raising the issue of support for Moatview Early Education Centre. The Department supports the ongoing development of existing and new services in the sector through its range of funding schemes and support infrastructure, including city and county childcare committees. In particular, core funding offers supply side funding to services. Core funding is a grant to providers designed to support quality, sustainability and enhanced public management with associated conditions in relation to fee control and cost transparency. It incorporates funding for administration and to support the employment of graduate staff. The introduction of core funding in 2022 brought a

significant increase in investment for the sector. This increased year-on-year and core funding is now worth €482 million in the current programme year.

I can confirm that the service in question is signed up to the core funding scheme for the current programme year. This will ensure the Department can continue to support the service's sustainability. Following engagement with Dublin City Childcare Committee and Pobal in July, the Department approved a sustainability funding request from Pobal on 7 September totalling €22,342. Funding will be provided to top up the shortfall between overall income and identified operating costs with due regard to any efficiencies arising as operational changes are implemented. As a result, the overall grant value issued to the service is under consistent review and may either increase or decrease throughout the defined period of transition agreed by the board of directors of the service. This funding will enable the service to remain operational while the board of directors, Pobal and the Dublin City Childcare Committee determine the full scope of financial and non-financial supports required to place Moatview Early Education Centre on a sustainable footing for the new programme year. Payment will issue to the service provider once the Department is assured that the newly established board is fully aware of its legal responsibilities and that appropriate financial controls and oversight mechanisms are operational prior to the signing of the sustainability funding contract. The Department requires this assurance as it has a responsibility to safeguard Exchequer funds.

It is worth noting that the Department does not directly operate or manage early learning and childcare or school-age childcare services. Decisions about the day-to-day running of services ultimately lie with the board of directors. In this instance, it is a decision for the board of directors whether to fully engage with the Department's case management and sustainability funding process or to wind down the service.

The Deputy made the point that the Department and Pobal must engage fully with the service. I will ensure to take that point back. It is only with engagement that we can put it on a sustainable funding mechanism and continue to support it. I take that point loud and clear. I might answer further questions in my concluding remarks.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: My apologies, but I will have to leave early. Why is Pobal insisting on dealing simply with the board of directors? Why will Pobal not deal with the manager, Susan Russell, who runs this small community childcare service and has done for decades? She has been running this successfully, day in, day out, for years. She is the person who, through her blood, sweat and tears, has run this and kept it open over the years. She is the person who is trying to engage with Pobal, but Pobal will not engage with her. Pobal has its criteria for how it wants to operate, but it is ignoring the manager on the ground who is running it. It is not working. That is what Pobal needs to do. I implore the Minister of State to work on that.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: This is a good response. It sounds like there is a gap between the board of directors and the service. As Deputy O'Callaghan has mentioned, a very good and capable manager is running the service. Based on what we have heard, it looks like we need to get the directors to the table as well. I understand that the directors run what is a legal entity, and that is how Pobal will fund it. I get that. I appeal to Pobal and the directors. Let us get everybody around the table with the support of the Minister of State and Pobal, and get this resolved with the directors there as well, so that everything is clear.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the Minister of State's confirmation that the funding was approved on 7 September. That was sent to us. What the service is still telling us is that it is operating with minimum staff and may have to close classrooms. The outstanding question is when the money will be paid. Will the Minister of State urgently bring Pobal, Dublin City Council and Moatview together to resolve this immediately? The staff do not need another acknowledgment email. The parents are under immense stress. I welcome the statement from the Minister of State and thank him. What we need is a meeting, for the board of directors to be overseen, and for Susan Russell and Sinead Tucker to be dealt with directly.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: This is very important. As with all childcare facilities across the country, it is vital that this is maintained. Moatview has been in operation since 1992, which is 34 years. It is probably putting the second or third generation through its hands at this stage. This is important. I will undertake to ensure that from the Department side and Pobal's side, there will be serious engagement with the board of directors and the managers. I have no doubt that after operating for 34 years, the managers must be at the top of their game to keep facilities like that going. I will ask about this. The point the Deputies have made is that we need to bring everybody to the table to thrash out the issues. I will report that back to both Pobal and the Department, and ensure that engagement is meaningful so that Moatview can move forward.

**An Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (Ceart chun Tithíochta),
2026: An Dara Céim [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]**

**Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Right to Housing) Bill 2026: Second Stage
[Private Members]**

Deputy Rory Hearne: Tairgim: "Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois."

I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

The starting point of this Bill is that the housing crisis is a complete and utter catastrophe, and we need something to radically change. Over two years ago, the Housing Commission, an official body set up by the Government, recommended that a right to housing should be inserted in the Constitution. Since then, the coalition of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has let that recommendation gather dust on the shelf, all the while ramming through rental reforms that benefit large investor landlords. Today, I move my Bill, which sets out the Housing Commission's proposal for a referendum on a right to housing that would insert a new Article 40A into the Constitution, which would state:

1. The State recognises that having a home is of fundamental importance to quality of life and that access to adequate housing, by facilitating the development of family, social and community relationships, promotes the common good.
2. The State therefore guarantees to every citizen a right of access to adequate housing and pledges, as far as practicable, by its laws to protect and vindicate that right.

When we look at what the Housing Commission has proposed, it is very clear that it sets out a number of very practical ways that this constitutional right would help the housing situation. When we look at what has happened, we have an entire generation stuck in their childhood bedrooms or forced to emigrate. The recent National Youth Council of Ireland survey showed that seven out of ten people are considering leaving the country. What we see is record house prices and record rents. We have the highest levels of eviction since the Great Famine. In 2024, 16,500 households were issued with eviction notices, in 2025, it was 20,000, and in the first six months of this year, it was 11,000. That is a 25% increase on the first six months of 2024. The scale of this tsunami of evictions is overwhelming when we consider that 47,000 households have been given notices to quit in just two and a half years. That amounts to over 130,000 people, including tens of thousands of children, going through the trauma of losing their home, uprooting their lives and all the stresses that come with that.

This is a very significant reason behind the record levels of homelessness. Of course, the monthly homeless figures that we see do not include the thousands of people in hidden homelessness who are couch surfing, in domestic violence refuges or sleeping rough in cars and tents.

The Irish State, unfortunately, has forgotten the lessons of the past, when it used to build council housing on a massive scale. Nowadays, we have outsourced housing to the market to meet the profit needs of investor funds, developers and banks. Housing is not treated as a home or a human right. It is treated as a commodity and an investment asset. This is the fundamental problem. We have housing policy being dictated by what the market is seeking, and we saw this in March of last year, with the change to rents for the corporate investor funds.

There is not one mention of a right to housing in any housing policy in this country. No wonder we are going around in circles, repeating the same failed policies and expecting a different outcome. The housing catastrophe has been deepening for well over a decade, and in some ways, we could argue we have been in a housing crisis since the 1990s. There is something fundamentally wrong with our housing system, the housing market, the way we treat housing and the way we understand housing.

Other countries, such as Spain and Finland, have a right to housing in their constitutions. Their starting point in the creation of housing policy and their treatment of housing is that it is a human right. Without this, in Ireland, we see confusion. Is housing an investment commodity? Is it something about the public good? Is it a social need? That is why the Housing Commission, which Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael set up, was very clear in its recommendation that there should be a referendum to insert a right to housing in the Constitution, which would then guide all Government policy decisions going forward.

The Housing Commission was clear that this would place a clear legal responsibility on the entire Irish State, from local authorities all the way to the Minister for housing, to ensure that every citizen in this country has access to adequate housing. I do not believe that the scale of evictions and homelessness we currently see would be tolerated or exist if a right to housing was enshrined in our Constitution. Legal obligations would be put in place to prevent evictions and homelessness.

It is not just us saying this. The Home for Good coalition, which includes trade unions and NGOs like Threshold, and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions believe that this is necessary.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has said very clearly that the trade union movement in Ireland sees a constitutional referendum as a key priority for housing. ICTU believes that Ireland should follow the example of other countries that have created the legally protected right to housing to balance constitutional protections on private property and ensure that no constitutional barriers prevent the Government from providing access to decent and affordable housing for all.

The issue here, and I will call it out, is that unlike Fine Gael, which has made its opposition to the right to housing public and clear, Fianna Fáil has actually backed a right to housing before.

The Oireachtas housing committee, which a number of Fianna Fáil TDs, including Deputy McAuliffe, were part of, supported holding a referendum on a right to housing in 2020. In the Seanad, a Fianna Fáil Senator introduced a motion calling on the Government to hold a referendum on a right to housing. Current Fianna Fáil Ministers of State, Deputies Ardagh and Dooley, voted in favour of having a referendum on a right to housing. What has happened? Why does Fianna Fáil no longer believe that housing is a human right? Why is it breaking its promise to hold a referendum to put a right to housing into the Constitution? Fianna Fáil is now opposing this Bill, despite it having the clear recommendation of the Housing Commission that the Minister set up. What is happening is that the institutional investors have said to the Minister that they do not want a right to housing. I do not understand it, and there is no other reason why the Minister would not promote it. No one is saying that a right to housing and having a referendum to include a right to housing in the Constitution will make the situation worse.

The Minister and the Government have put on record that they will use every lever possible to address the housing crisis. The Housing Commission, which is the body that the Minister set up, has made a very clear majority recommendation that a right to housing will make practical changes to the housing situation but the Minister is ignoring that and saying that he is not going to do it. Why? What are the reasons? I look forward to hearing why the Minister is not progressing it, given that it is something that Fianna Fáil has committed to in the past. This is something Fianna Fáil claims to believe in but that it will not put into practice, even when the expert body that it set up recommends that it does so.

It is worth noting that the Housing Commission report is substantial. I am not sure whether the Minister has read the specific report from the commission on the proposed amendment to Bunreacht na hÉireann and the wording thereof. It is worth noting that it asks what practical impact the introduction of a constitutional right to housing would carry. It says that a constitutional right has several practical implications. First, it influences the law-making process, including at the pre-legislative stage. Every law passed by the Oireachtas carries a presumption of constitutionality and lawmakers are obliged to consider and take account of the State's obligations with respect to protecting constitutional rights through its laws. Certain policies or proposed legislation may be considered or rejected at preliminary stage on the basis that they would undermine constitutional rights. A constitutional right may also be directly enforceable by an individual or individuals in court and an individual may initiate proceedings on that basis. The commission goes on to give other reasons as to why a constitutional right would have practical effect. It says that a constitutional right can shape outcomes outside the realm of the courtroom or the Oireachtas. It can be raised and cited in formal interactions such

as legal correspondence or informal interactions with State bodies, including local authorities or State agencies.

A constitutional right may carry significant symbolic or rhetorical weight. It is a recognition that a particular interest is considered to be of exceptional importance and deserving of special protection in the higher law. The commission goes on to state that a right to housing, as per the wording I have put forward, would make a change. It would put a greater obligation on the State than that which currently exists to address the issue and ensure that everyone has access to an affordable and secure home. Is the Minister refusing to do this because he does not want to have to meet the obligations that would be set out by a constitutional right to housing? Is he not doing it because he knows that currently he would already be in breach of that right to housing? What is it that he is afraid of? Why is he not willing to do this?

It is very clear to me, as is set out by the Housing Commission, that there is no negative reason for pursuing a referendum on the right to housing. If it is lost, it is lost. If it is passed, that would be great. The commission has set out very clearly that it would strengthen the State's obligation to ensure that people have access to housing. Of course, it would not mean, as I am sure the Minister will not argue, that everyone would get a house if we put a right to a home into the Constitution. It is also not going to mean that lots of people will be running to the courts. The commission report makes it very clear, by means of the opinion of constitutional and legal experts, that if such a right was put in place, it would not lead to a significant number of cases in the courts because the courts do not react like that. The experience in other jurisdictions is that a constitutional right to housing essentially, where it does go to court, is used as a way to assess a government's actions as to whether they are in breach of the constitution. It is not likely that this would open up a massive load of cases.

It is particularly important to point out that we have one of a few social and economic rights, the right to primary education, in our Constitution. That has an impact on the Department of education and on how education is provided. One will hear people say here that they have a constitutional right to education, particularly parents of children with additional needs. That puts an extra obligation on the State. Why be afraid of that? That would be a positive thing. The State is forced, even more, to ensure that it is meeting its obligations. I remember the former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Leilani Farha, asking that question as to what government would not want to deliver the right to housing. What government wants to say that it is unwilling to deliver the right to housing or wants to be in breach? Why would governments not actually stand up and say that they are willing to be held to account, to set standards that they want to meet?

Let us put a right to housing in our Constitution. Let the people have the discussion. Even if one is opposed to it, in terms of what it might actually do, why not give the people their say? That is what this is about. It is about giving them their say. Let us have the debate and discussion and let us deliver something. The opinion polls show that a majority of people are very clearly in favour of this. It comes back to the question of why the Government is not willing to do this. Why has Fianna Fáil made a U-turn on a referendum to insert a right to housing into the Constitution? Is it about what the institutional funds are saying? They do not want a right to housing. They do not want what it would mean. It is very clear who is benefiting from the housing system at the moment, . We have just seen it again with reports of IRES REIT tripling its profits due to the new rent rules. There is the potential of it being sold to a

US investor for close to €1 billion, with its shareholders pocketing hundreds of millions from the Government's rental changes that have squeezed and will continue to squeeze ordinary renters and young people out of the possibility of ever having homes of their own.

The Minister should support and implement what is proposed. Otherwise, what he is saying is that he and the Government do not believe in the right to housing and are so captured by vested property interests that they are unwilling to do something that would put greater supports in place for people in the context of a right to housing and ensure, once and for all, that we solve this crisis and ensure that people have affordable, secure and decent housing. As the Minister knows, the amendment is not about a right to a home; it is about a right to access adequate housing. There are different views about its limitations, but it does not set out that the State has to provide a house for everybody. What it says is that the State has an obligation to ensure that every citizen has access to a decent, affordable and secure home. I do not understand why the Minister would not want to progress a referendum that would put that in our Constitution. Let us join other countries and make the change. Over time, it would lead, as the Housing Commission has set out, to positive change in housing. I do not understand why the Minister would oppose that.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I will start by thanking Deputy Hearne for bringing forward this Bill to amend the Constitution to include a right to housing. While the Government cannot support the Bill at this time, I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's position on this important issue.

Our housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities, 2025-2030*, sets out that housing is a basic human right. The Deputy will be aware that almost one third of all our National Development Plan, NDP, funding is going towards housing and water infrastructure. It is important to remember that kind of funding is unequalled by any other country in the western world. We also have to fund other projects such as healthcare facilities, schools, roads, footpaths, community centres and so on. In that context, the level of funding that this Government is providing for housing is extraordinary.

5 o'clock

It needs to be extraordinary but I think the level needs to be understood compared to other countries as well.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Housing Commission was established in December 2021 to consider housing policy post-2030 and make proposals as appropriate. It was also tasked with advising Government on the critical factors to be considered regarding a referendum on housing and, if appropriate, to recommend wording for a constitutional change.

The commission submitted its overall report on housing and a stand-alone report on a referendum which included proposed wording for an amendment to *Bunreacht na hÉireann* to the then Minister on 8 May 2024. A minority report was also submitted by a small number of commission members recommending a statutory strategic plan-based approach rather than a constitutional amendment. An additional alternative proposal was submitted by another commission member accepting that a referendum should be progressed but supporting an alternative wording and an alternative placement of the new provision in the Constitution in Article 45.

What is clear to see is that there were differing views within the commission on the right to housing and no full consensus on what is a complex issue. The wording of the majority report is what is proposed in the Bill or as near as. It is of note that the commission was also of the view that a constitutional amendment to provide for a right to housing was not necessary in order to permit substantial and far-reaching legislative reform in relation to housing and, significantly, that the current constitutional position in and of itself does not pose a barrier to measures designed to tackle the housing crisis. That is reflected in the significant measures we have been taking.

While I do not reject outright the general concept of a right to housing by way of a constitutional amendment, it is very complex. We should all be in agreement that any such proposal should be taken at the right time, with the appropriate level of scrutiny and consultation. Let me be clear: the State cannot directly provide all the housing the country needs and to insert a right to housing into the Constitution without considering the ramifications would create false expectations that it can and will likely redirect State resources to lengthy legal complications for years to come. It is also a democratic need for any government to balance all the necessary needs and demands in any society. It is not just housing but it is healthcare and other social supports as well that people need.

Given that the Bill proposed has mirrored wording provided in the majority report of the commission, the Attorney General has previously provided Government with preliminary advice on that wording and has signalled serious issues arising from it that would be irresponsible for us to ignore. Holding a referendum at this time is a distraction from the delivery of real housing on the ground in an already challenged housing market. We built the largest number of social houses in the history of the State last year, so it is not holding us back.

The Deputy referenced Spain, which has this right in its constitution and which has a housing crisis. That country is blowing up over the housing crisis there at the moment. A constitutional right to housing does not really aid anything unless we want to make it strong to make sure that it does but, in that case, it is prioritising issues in terms of government expenditure that may be needed elsewhere and may exclude, for example, healthcare and other social protections and supports.

It is complex in terms of what the expenditure is but also the legal complexities. We have a very strong Constitution in this country. It gives people a strong right of access, as it should, to the courts and to exercise their right to have constitutional rights upheld.

As I said, holding a referendum at this time would be a distraction. As is well recognised, a referendum on housing is not going to resolve the housing supply problem and may have unwanted or unintended consequences. The immediate focus and priority continues to be on the delivery of homes as set out in the programme for Government. It is important to highlight, however, that we are making real progress. Between July 2020 and the end of June 2026, we delivered nearly 178,000 new build homes. In 2025 alone, there were 36,284 new dwelling completions, an increase of 20% on 2024.

This delivery is backed up by record levels of Government funding for housing. Over €9 billion of capital funding will be provided through the Exchequer in 2026, including funding by the LDA and the Housing Finance Agency. As a result, we are now seeing an unprecedented

level of delivery of new-build social homes, with 2025 representing the largest number of new build social homes constructed since the foundation of the State.

Some 17,700 starter home supports were delivered last year - an increase of 21% on 2024 and the highest annual total recorded. These supports were delivered across the starter homes purchase scheme, the cost-rental scheme, the first home scheme, the vacant property refurbishment grant and the help to buy scheme. These figures demonstrate the impact of sustained State investment and this Government's commitment to expanding housing options for people across the country. They represent serious momentum. They reflect the scaling up of local authority building programmes, increased output from approved housing bodies and the acceleration of construction activity across the country.

While 2025 was a record year, we are driving on. The focus now is on sustaining and expanding this delivery, scaling further and ensuring that more people benefit from access to high-quality and secure homes. We are making home ownership more accessible and affordable, and we are getting people into long-term, high-quality and affordable rental homes. We are also supporting the regeneration of old and previously vacant and derelict properties into new homes. I am confident that this trajectory will continue throughout 2026.

In addition, the pipeline for new homes is strong. Recent planning permission figures show permission was granted for 39,354 new homes in the 12 months to the end of quarter 2 of 2026 - up 26% year on year. In recent months, commencement figures have increased significantly with 22,854 homes - up 162% on the same period last year, and we are going to continue to build on this momentum.

Measures to tackle homelessness, increase housing supply and affordability and to ensure that a suitable range of housing across tenure types is available to all are an absolute concern of mine. The new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, builds on the foundations laid under Housing for All to enable the delivery of a minimum of 300,000 new homes, while activating supply, the first pillar of our new plan, will support increased housing delivery. It commits to ensuring a strong pipeline of zoned and serviced land, and it aims to create the conditions needed to attract the required levels of investment into the sector so that new delivery is not solely reliant on State funding.

There is a dedicated suite of actions to increase skills and support the adoption of modern methods of construction in the construction sector. It also focuses on addressing vacancy and dereliction so that we can best use the homes that we already have. All of this will help us achieve the radical step change in delivery that is now needed.

We are reforming and streamlining the planning process, which is already reducing delays in housing and strategic infrastructure projects. The Planning and Development Act 2024 is a major reform that will speed up housing delivery. Local authorities are updating their development plans to ensure that sufficient and suitable land is zoned. Progress is being made in this regard but has to continue. We have also established a housing activation office which is now backed by a new multi-annual €1 billion Housing Infrastructure Investment Fund to get more housing built by removing infrastructure delays.

In budget 2026, we reduced the VAT rate on apartments from 13.5% to 9% to improve the viability of apartment building, and we introduced a corporation tax exemption for cost-rental income to support delivery and increase viability of cost rental units.

We are continuing to make real and tangible progress with the croí cónaithe cities scheme. The scheme is integral to improving the viability of apartments for private sale within our cities and towns and it is currently expected to deliver 2,317 new owner-occupier homes that would not otherwise have been built. There is a great opportunity to activate further supply in addressing vacancy and dereliction. New targeted measures have been introduced aimed at unlocking unused spaces in cities, towns and villages by converting vacant and derelict buildings and unused above the shop areas into residential homes. All of these measures are designed to bring more of these buildings back into productive use and provide much-needed homes for people to live in their own communities.

We will continue to act as a Government to ensure we remain fully focused on those measures which will continue to increase the supply of new homes, bringing about a significant scale up in the delivery of housing over the coming years, addressing the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities and making buying and renting homes more affordable as well as supporting the development of villages, towns and cities across the country.

This practical and real focus on housing supply is my priority right now rather than holding a referendum which will not result in the delivery of a single new home. In short, we are making significant changes and investment that I would happily compare to any other country in the western world. The record delivery of social housing last year is a prime example of our commitment to solving this housing crisis and doing it in a manner that supports vulnerable people in our society.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The First Dáil declared that it was the first duty of the Government of Ireland to ensure that no child suffered from a lack of clothing, food or shelter. This Government is failing in that duty. There are currently 17,885 people homeless. That was the August figure. It is actually higher now. Some 5,830 of those are children. I asked the Minister's predecessor how many children must become homeless before Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and this Government admit they are wrong and admit the crisis is at a stage where they have failed and where we need urgent action.

How many children must become homeless? Must it be 6,000 or 7,000? Will the Minister give us an answer to that or is he just going to go on with the big lists that he gave? Regarding the lists that the Minister gave, none of them give a constitutional right to housing to people who should be entitled to it.

The Minister is failing in his duty because right now in Cork and Kerry there are 276 children in homeless accommodation. Many of these children left school in June for the summer not knowing where they were going to be living when school started back in September. These children are listening to their classmates looking forward to Hallowe'en, trick or treating and Christmas. Can the Minister imagine being a homeless child or teenager not knowing where he is going to be for Hallowe'en or Christmas? The shame and embarrassment they and their parents feel is not their fault. They should be ashamed to be homeless. It is the Minister who should be ashamed that there are so many children who are homeless. It is the Minister and this Government who should be ashamed of all the families and people who are homeless.

Deputy Hearne is being forward a Bill. It is not going to guarantee people a right to a home but it is going to force this Government to do everything in its power to ensure that people have a home and it will be their constitutional right. How wrong is that?

The Minister talked about how he is going to get on with doing the things he is going to do. Commitments were made before the previous election. Typical Fianna Fáil promised that there would be a referendum. I was on the previous housing committee where Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael members spoke about having a constitutional right to housing and to a family having a home. Now, they break their promises. Do not shake your head at me, Minister. That was promised. Fianna Fáil said it would support it. They are running for the hills now. Is the Minister saying they will never support a constitutional right to housing?

I am talking to families, and it is heartbreaking. They are walking down streets and living in communities with boarded up council houses. There are thousands of them. I have asked the Minister repeatedly if he will give funding to local authorities to get all these houses back into use. To be fair to the Minister, he was straight and said "No". He said he would not provide all the funding required to get these back into use. Imagine the child and the teenager who are homeless and the trauma that is being caused by the homeless crisis. What we are bringing forward in and of itself will not solve the homeless crisis but it will give people hope and an opportunity to know that they have rights. The Minister, however, is denying their rights by not supporting this.

We have people who are facing eviction. I have a clinic every week. It is out the door with families looking for houses. We have people who are overstaying. The Government slashed the tenant in situ scheme. We have families now who are overstaying. Local authorities are telling them to overstay. Where are they going to go? Where are their rights? We have people who are on the waiting lists for years and years. How long is long enough to be waiting on the list? How long must people wait on the list? Is it five, seven, ten or 15 years? When does a person have a right? When does a family have a right to a home?

There are two more important elements I want to talk about. There is action and there is policy, or there is action and there is principle. We may disagree on the actions the Government has taken but we believe that ordinary workers and families should come before speculators and developers. That is a disagreement that we have. That is what we believe - people first. We want people to have an ability access affordable housing - truly affordable housing not the affordable housing the Government is talking about - and for no child or adult to be forced into homelessness. I hope we can agree on that.

Terence MacSwiney, a member of the First Dáil and former Ardmhéara Chorcaí once famously said, " ... in matters of principle there can be no tactics, there is one straight forward course to follow and that course must be found and followed without swerving to the end." Deputy Hearne is not in here talking about tactics, and neither am I or others in the Opposition. We are trying to make a genuine change. Terence MacSwiney said this 100 years ago. The First Dáil said that children should have access to a roof over their heads. When we talk about people having a roof over their heads, it is not four walls and a roof. It is about a home. It does not matter if there are ten in the house or one in the house, everyone should have that right.

We have children growing up without homes. It is the duty of this Government to stop that from happening. Every child should be able to grow up with a home. This work needs to be

done and we should honour the legacy of the first Parliament and the Government should go ahead and deliver that.

We talk about cherishing all the children of the nation but how can we do so when thousands of them are in emergency accommodation and there are tens of thousands of them in overcrowded accommodation, sharing homes and in boxrooms?

It is a symbolic move to put this into the Constitution. However, it more than just symbolic in that it means something. The importance of a home cannot be ignored. My home is where my wife and I raised our two kids. We had some unbelievable days in that home and we had some really hard times over the years where we would come together and hug and cry but we had a home. So many people are in hotel rooms crying. So many parents are heartbroken because they are looking at their kids and wondering what their future is going to be. A home could be rented or private. We are not saying to give everyone a house. Deputy Hearne said a while ago that is not what we are saying. We are saying that everyone should have a constitutional right to be able to access housing. That would mean no local authority houses would be allowed to be boarded up for years. Regarding the number of vacancies, there are over 100,00 houses. Some people reckon that 160,000 houses are vacant right now.

I have asked the Minister and his predecessor to walk the streets of Dublin or Cork with me. I will show him house after house that is empty. At the same time, we have families in crowded emergency accommodation. It is so disappointing that promises and commitments were made to people. That is one of the reasons people have lost faith in politicians because when they make a promise, they do not stand over it. We will not agree on a lot of policy or actions but at least if the Government makes a commitment, it should stand over that.

I left the Chamber ten minutes ago to talk to a person in Cork City Council's homeless section about getting accommodation for a girl and her child who become homeless on Tuesday night. I know dozens of families, lone parents and individuals who are in homeless accommodation and who are crying out for help. I will give Cork City Council credit. A total of 33% of its allocations went to people in homeless accommodation but still the numbers go up and the homeless figures go up. I ask the Minister to reconsider and to support this Bill.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Deputy Hearne for bringing forward this Bill, which we are very happy to support. It will be interesting to see because the indications are that the Government is not going to support it. Deputy Ó Broin had similar Bills in the previous Dáil. I had a Bill on the right to housing in 2021 that amazingly passed.

I think that was a mistake - the Government forgot to call a vote, so we got the right to housing referendum Bill passed. Of course, nothing was done about it and the housing situation has continued to get worse. The number of people in homeless and emergency accommodation has worsened steadily. At that stage when the Bill was passed, it was probably below 10,000 and since then, it has gone up to 17,000.

The number of people on housing lists - if you include everybody who is on a housing list, both those on the social housing list and those on HAP lists - is about the same; it is roughly 110,000 households. There are of course, and I will go into this in a second, people who do not even qualify for lists. The failure of the Government is spectacular and despite listing off all the things it says it is doing, the situation has continued to get worse.

I have one human example of why we need a right to housing. Caoimhe is now homeless for the second time, because of two subsequent evictions. She has three children and last Christmas, I read out a letter from one of her children who said in her letter to Santa that the only thing the child wanted was a home. They are still in emergency accommodation. It is ten months later and for the second time in their lives, they have been evicted through no fault of their own.

Caoimhe is a childcare worker and because the Government has not raised the social housing income thresholds - because, in my opinion, it wants to deny people eligibility for social housing - she is homeless. However, she has now been taken off the housing list because as a childcare worker, she has gone over the eligibility limit. For a single person, that is now €43,930 and she earns €44,272. Here is someone, to use Government phraseology, who gets up early in the morning and has three children to look after who are writing to Santa saying they just want a home and who are now homeless for a second time through no fault of their own. They were evicted because the Government allows landlords to evict families like hers. She is now trapped as not only can she not get social housing, she is not eligible for HAP either.

It is this crazy situation where if you are in a HAP tenancy, it does not matter if your earnings go up. If she had been in a social house which she should be in - if the Government had not failed her - it would not have made any difference if her income went up, she would just pay a higher rent. However, she is now homeless and in the worst possible position. She is eligible for nothing because her pay has gone over the housing limit that the Government will not raise, despite us appealing to it for the past two years. People are being knocked off the lists all the time and are being punished for working and getting up early in the morning. There is also of course, the hopelessness of those who are actually on the lists, particularly families. Much of the social housing the Government boasts about delivering is outsourced to the private sector, which does not want to build family homes. They can get more one- and two-bedroom units on a site than building three- or four-bedroom units.

That is why family homelessness in particular has gone up. The Government is relying on people who want to make money from every site rather than deliver for the housing need. This is something that has been pointed out repeatedly to the Government but it continues to outsource it. Even worse, it then sells off public land. It grieves me every single time I go out the N11 to pass by the RTÉ campus and I look at the most profitable house builder in the country now building 500 apartments on part of the old campus. Why is a private builder whose profits last year rose to €168 million and which are increasing every year, going to profit from and decide what proportion of the houses on what was public land will be three or two bedrooms? Of course, a very small proportion will be three bedrooms and there will be no four bedrooms for the bigger families that need them, because it is not profitable. The Government gave this builder the site. The State allowed that to happen, instead of the LDA taking it.

In Cherrywood in my area, which has the biggest residential development in the country, DLR Properties is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council but the elected councillors have no control over what it does with the property. However, there are Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors on the board - not anybody on the Left of course - who have decided to sell it. They have decided to sell public land, which could deliver 1,200 houses in order that some other profiteer can make money, can decide whether there will be any family housing and that will get all the profits made from the land. The Government is

now rezoning land everywhere, instantly increasing its value, which is all in private hands, so that more people can profit from the housing misery of people like Caoimhe.

A right to housing would be helpful in this regard. If there was a constitutional right, there would be legal backing and an imperative to ensure people like Caoimhe were not made homeless. There would be a prioritisation of State resources to provide housing for people like Caoimhe, and most importantly, for her children. By the way, Caoimhe is from Ballybrack-Loughlinstown. Andy is another person who is 25 and who is now being threatened with eviction from the council house he has lived in all his life. His mother died recently and while it is tragic enough to lose your parent, as a consequence of the technicality of him not being the primary tenant even though he has never lived anywhere else, he is now being told to get out and is not being offered anywhere else. That is unbelievable. Why, against a background of record levels of homelessness, would the State allow someone to be thrown out? He will then be down in emergency accommodation. Why would the Government do that? This is the sort of madness we have because we do not have a right to housing.

I have to be honest. We need to start getting radical over this. We need to start doing what they do in Spain, because the young and older people - an 87-year-old woman was evicted - are out on the streets saying, "We have had enough of this shit." I have been arguing this stuff for a long time, as have other people in this House, and to be honest, we need to get angry and do something about it because these sorts of situations are unacceptable. You can multiply those cases by thousands. People are trapped in this situation where they have done nothing wrong, and there are people profiteering from it. Cairn Homes and Glenveagh Homes have their profits going up. The O'Flynn and Ballymore Groups and so on do not even publish their profits but we know they have gone up. IRES REIT profits have also gone up.

People are profiteering off this stuff. They are hoarding land, speculating, charging record house prices and rents and ordinary working people are being left in these dire circumstances. The majority of young people are now saying they are going to leave the country because they do not think they will ever afford to live here but not to worry, the lads are making profits so it does not matter. That is why the Government will not do it, because it will infringe on the profits of these people. It is worried we might actually control prices and rents and that we might take the land bank back off them. What got Die Linke, the left-wing party in Berlin, elected was proposing to expropriate the landlords. That is what the Government is worried about. It is worried that the right to housing might lead to that but it is what needs to happen. By the way, this was more or less said back in the early 1970s in the Kenny report, that is, taking the zoned land bank off these people to deliver housing for need. That is what needs to happen.

There are greedy speculators controlling the price of land, the available property and what is built. The consequence is housing misery and a housing crisis that just goes on and on. We have to stop this for the sake of Caoimhe and her children, for Andy and for people like them. Even if the Minister is not going to do that, will he raise the thresholds and start telling local authorities to not make people homeless? Will Government stop selling off public land to people who are just profiteering?

I thank Deputy Hearne but to be honest, we need to be out on the streets in the way they are in Spain and Germany, as well as putting Bills forward in here.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Deputy Hearne for introducing this important legislation and giving us an opportunity to debate it this evening, although I have to say that there is a terrible sense of *déjà vu*. For 12 years, the Oireachtas and the wider public have been debating the need for a constitutionalised right to housing. In fact, so exercised was the then Government about the matter that, in 2013, it asked the then Convention on the Constitution to deliberate on a number of economic and social rights. The report was published in 2014. Having listened to all of the arguments and carefully considered the pros and cons of the proposition, an astounding 84% of people in that convention voted to urge the Government to enshrine that right in the Constitution, much higher than almost any of the other rights that they considered at that weekend.

It is important to think about the time that this was published. In early 2014, there were officially fewer than 3,000 adults in what was then the Department of environment-funded emergency accommodation. Child homelessness was virtually unheard of. In the 12 years since, not only have we seen the most dramatic increase in adult and child homelessness in the modern history of the State, but rents and house prices have reached levels that are so unaffordable that even people on very good incomes have no reasonable prospect of affording a home. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's record, despite what the Minister says, in delivering social and affordable housing has been, and continues to be, abysmal. Gross social housing need continues to rise. Local authority council waiting lists continue to grow ever longer. Therefore, if people thought that enshrining the right to housing in the Constitution was necessary in 2014, it is even more necessary 12 years on.

Deputy Boyd Barrett rightly pointed out the fact that this was actually the fourth or fifth debate on a constitutional referendum Bill in the decade that I have been here. He had one, I think Gerry Adams had one, I had one, and others as well. What is really interesting is, separate to these exchanges, we have had very considered deliberation in successive hearings of the Oireachtas housing committee on this matter, where we have not just exchanged political opinions, but we have listened to expert testimony. We have listened to people who have studied what has happened in other jurisdictions, particularly European jurisdictions, when a legal or a constitutional right to housing was introduced, including some people who, as they told our committee, started off their journeys on this matter as sceptics but, having studied the evidence, became absolutely convinced of the need for this.

We know that the 2020 programme for Government had that elusive promise of a referendum on housing. Nobody ever knew what that meant and the Government never clarified it for us, but when Darragh O'Brien, under pressure, eventually published the Housing Commission's report - it was actually given to him in September 2023 and he sat on it for a year, so uncomfortable was he - a Fianna Fáil Senator tabled a motion in the Seanad using exactly the same wording as in this Bill and the Seanad, by a majority - not including Fine Gael, I have to say - voted for it. Only weeks afterwards, our Oireachtas housing committee met and discussed these matters and for the very first time, Fianna Fáil, which had never fully declared a position on this matter, supported those of us among the Opposition on the committee and our committee agreed to write to the Minister, urging him to proceed with the referendum. Yet here we are, with a programme for Government almost two years old, with no commitment on the right and the current Minister giving the same lame, uninformed justifications for not acting.

Let me just for the record tell the Minister why this is a good idea, as that is what this debate is ultimately about. The first reason we should do this is because, under our system of referendum, we know from our experience that we have really valued, profound, statewide public conversations about matters of crucial importance. What more important matter could we discuss as a state and as a population than the role of home in our society? That in itself would be enormously valuable and empowering, but all of the international evidence shows that where that debate then leads to a change in law or, in our case, an enshrinement in the Constitution, it creates a huge expectation among the public for real policy change, policy change that would have a profound impact on people's lives. In turn, that would act as a catalyst for governments to do things above and beyond what they otherwise would do. All of the evidence we have heard in repeated sessions of the Oireachtas housing committee on this matter show that the real value is that catalyst for change that delivers meaningful and tangible results in the quality of people's access to secure, adequate and affordable housing.

There are also a number of other changes. It would remove a set of barriers. The Department of public expenditure and reform and its line Minister are an obstacle to many of the things that the Minister, Deputy Browne, his officials and his predecessors have been trying to do in housing. Anyone who reads Eoghan Murphy's autobiography knows that one of his biggest challenges was his Cabinet colleagues in finance and public expenditure and those Departments. A constitutional right to housing would remove that barrier and would ensure that Departments had to act.

It would also clarify the law, because one of the things that the Government is very good at, and the Minister has done it again today, is hiding behind the Constitution and the unavailable advice of the Attorney General not to do something. We all remember when Alan Kelly - poor old Alan Kelly - was trying to do something good as Minister for housing. He wanted to link rents to the consumer price index, CPI, and Michael Noonan railed against the proposal, saying it was not constitutional. Balderdash. Every single constitutional expert in the country knew that that was not true. How do we know it was balderdash? Only a couple of years later, a Fine Gael Minister, Simon Coveney, introduced an arguably far more draconian form of rent regulation - rent pressure zones - and there were no constitutional problems from the Attorney General at the time. Removing that red herring through clarifying the law would be enormously important.

Crucially, it would also place an obligation on the State to progressively realise people's right to have affordable, secure and adequate housing. While a lot of the debate often focuses on whether it will lead to increased litigation or not - the evidence suggests not so - it would give those people who are most egregiously denied the right to adequate, secure and affordable accommodation some recourse in the courts if the Government simply refused to listen.

If these are all the reasons to do it, you have to ask why this Government is so implacably opposed. I have a slightly different read of it than Deputy Hearné, although not from any significant difference on the legislation. I think that the Government is scared of this because if it became a part of our Constitution, it would have to do things that it was politically not willing to do to address this crisis.

We have always said that this is not a silver bullet and will not resolve the housing crisis overnight, but in order to tackle the ever-deepening housing crisis in our society, we need every single tool in the toolbox. This is one of them. It is not a waste of time, it is not a distraction.

It is a valuable tool, one among many others. Of course, the Minister is right, in that enshrining something in the Constitution does not build a single home, but if that was the case, we would not have a Constitution at all. Constitutions have an entirely different function, and that is why this proposition is to be supported.

I know that, unlike his predecessor, the Minister is a considered person. He actually thinks about things, unlike the Deputy from Fingal. I would urge him to just go and read the testimony that the eminent professor of constitutional law from the University College London, Professor Colm O'Cinneide, gave to our committee. As somebody who has been in this debate for a very long time, it was one of the most profound experiences I had. Professor O'Cinneide is the individual who said that when he started researching this, he was a sceptic. He did not believe that this was a necessary or valuable tool in addressing housing need. However, having studied every single country that has legalised or constitutionalised housing, he is now a strong advocate for many of the reasons that I have set out. At some point, the Minister has to start basing policy not on the limited lobby interests that the lobby register discloses have a revolving door to the Custom House and Government Buildings next door, but on people who actually have real experience, people who have real expertise, and Professor O'Cinneide is one of those.

I have no doubt, having been part of this discussion for over a decade, that this is an important, positive and absolutely necessary proposal. That is why I am enthusiastically supporting this Bill and will support any other Bill that seeks to do the same thing. The fact that the Minister is not willing to support it shows once again that he is not serious about tackling the housing crisis despite what he said. He is not willing to do everything that is necessary to ensure people's needs for social, affordable or privately owned homes are met. That is the real reason he is opposing this today.

The Minister is not willing to do everything that is necessary to ensure people's needs for social, affordable or privately owned homes are met. That is the real reason he is opposing this today. It is not because of any flaw in the legislation but because it would expose the flaws in the Government's policy, its failure on housing and the tragic impact that is having on tens of thousands of people across the State.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I am here to speak in support of this Bill. At the outset in his speech, the Minister mentioned Spain and the housing crisis that is raging across Spain at the moment. It is important to note for context that there is such a terrible housing crisis in Spain because when Spain transitioned from Francoism to democracy, the social housing stock in Spain was between 1% and about 3%. There was a Francoist system of housing which transitioned into democracy. There were the 1990s and 2000s, an awful lot of property speculation and a property boom. Even though this constitutional right to housing, which I support, is not a silver bullet, it is certainly not worsening the situation in Spain.

I cannot understand why Government is opposing this Bill because it grabs the text from the Housing Commission report and it goes more to my constant refrain and criticism of Government treating the Housing Commission report almost like a buffet from which you can pick bits and bobs while ignoring other parts of it. It is important to note that because the Minister's predecessor did not even launch the Housing Commission report. There was no

proper launch. He did not want it to get the level of traction that it got because it sets out starkly in many ways how the State is going wrong.

I also support this Bill because I believe a constitutional right to housing would make the Minister's job easier. It is plain for those of us in opposition to see that many of the issues in relation to housing, particularly the delivery of public housing, come with how the Minister's Department interacts with the Department of public expenditure. It is clear that the tenant in situ cuts that were carried out last year, the changes to that scheme and the narrowing of the focus were as a result of the Department of public expenditure essentially coming in with big scissors. The problem is that in our Constitution we have a right to private property. We do not have an explicit right to housing. Therefore, it is almost, *ipso facto*, by way of our basic law, that housing is essentially treated as a commodity and not as a public good. Different Oireachtas housing committees have looked at this over the years. They have heard from many expert witnesses, most of whom who have drawn the same conclusion. This is not a silver bullet but it is about rebalancing the scales and putting a constitutional duty on the State to ensure that every citizen has access to secure, affordable and dignified accommodation. It is a rebalance away from treating housing as a commodity towards treating housing as a common and public good.

Looking at how we have delivered housing over the best part of three or four decades, it is very clear from the pickle we find ourselves in at the moment that it is not working. It is not working because we have 18,000 people homeless. It is not working because rents and house prices are so high. Even though the Minister constantly talks about the need to deliver more supply, while we do need to deliver more supply, the supply that is being incentivised at the moment, certainly in Dublin and Cork and the major cities, is not affordable. It is high-end luxury, build-to-rent apartments, at €2,000 or €3,000 a month to rent. This Bill would ensure that if we had a constitutional right to housing, there would be a situation where if an individual or a family entered homelessness or was at risk of entering homelessness, their right to safe and secure shelter would be the primary policy consideration.

I cannot understand why the Minister is outright opposing it. I do not understand why he talks about the Housing Commission and post-2030 in his speech, and why Government could not even have considered a timed amendment on this, for us to maybe come back to it at some point in the not-too-distant future. As was mentioned by other speakers, the Minister's own colleague, Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, introduced a Private Members' motion in the Seanad in 2021, seeking to amend Article 43 of the Constitution. We are at a stage now where the time for tinkering around the edges of a system that is fundamentally broken is over. Many of the societal problems, not just here but in other countries around the so-called western world, which we have at the moment are caused by decades of neoliberalism and a vision of a Thatcherite or a Reaganite state in how public services and housing are delivered. It is not working.

We need proper State accountability. We need to see the right to housing inserted into the Constitution because it affects other things. For example, the Kenny report has been sitting on a shelf somewhere gathering mould since the 1970s. We have huge issues with land speculation in this country. It is one of the primary drivers of our housing crisis. The access to adequate, secure and affordable shelter should be explicitly recognised as a fundamental human right. I support this because we need to rebalance and re-tilt the scales. We need to legally obligate

the State to prioritise public housing above and beyond all other forms of housing and to actually tackle homelessness.

I am disappointed because the Bill is so narrow and so specific. It uses the wording the Housing Commission spent the bones of two years deliberating over but the Minister has come in and delivered a speech prepared by his Department that we have all heard many times before. He constantly says the State is building record amounts of social housing but the housing deficit continues to grow year on year. It is going to be at around 300,000. This crisis and the numbers entering homelessness are unfortunately continuing to rise. That is why I really believe this Bill, as something that is genuinely radical, merits a more serious treatment than it is getting here tonight.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister for being here for the debate and for attending for as long as he did. I thank Deputy Hearne for bringing forward the Bill. We are proud to put it forward as a party and of all the work Deputy Hearne put into it. The first thing I want to speak to is the constitutional element of this because for me the Constitution is where law meets the population.

The Constitution should reflect the values of the population. It is not just an instrument of law. It is an expression of who we are as a society, where we are as a society and where our priorities are as a society. For me, the idea that we do not have housing enshrined in our Constitution as a fundamental right is a problem because we can see all around us on a daily basis in our constituency offices and among all of the different groups we work with that this is a crisis and an emergency.

I want to speak to some of the fundamentals of that crisis. Essentially, every generation that is younger than me has been locked out of home ownership. We are seeing spiralling figures of homelessness, with 5,830 children now in homelessness and 17,885 people in total. Some of those children are experiencing multiple years in homelessness. If we ever want to see a dictionary definition of storing up problems, then it is child homelessness. Those children will grow up having experienced the difficulties sown in these fundamental years that they are experiencing as children, and we as a society will be paying for this crisis for generations to come.

The reality of the Minister's speech is a million miles away. That for me is one of the biggest issues when we come to debate these topics. The phrases that are in there - "the largest number of new build social homes", "the highest annual total recorded" of starter homes supports, "These figures demonstrate the impact", "They represent serious momentum", "They reflect the scaling up", "While 2025 was a record year, we are driving on", "We are making home ownership more accessible", and "I am confident that this trajectory will continue throughout 2026" - do not match with what we can all see clearly with our eyes, which is that this is a housing emergency that has dominated our society for decades now and is affecting every single person in our country. It is not only about the people who are locked out of home ownership in the generations younger than I am. It is about their families who have to support them, it is the many houses that I knock on in my constituency where 30-year-old and 40-year-old people are living in their box rooms still, now seeking the best they can look forward to, which might be a bed in a shed. This is what we are dealing with. This reality that is being put forward by the Minister just does not tally.

The Minister commented that this Bill was a distraction. Saying that to progress a right to housing being enshrined in the Constitution is a distraction is just so disingenuous. Honestly, not to gender stereotype, but can we not multitask in the Government? Can we not pursue the right to housing while we address the supply issue?

That brings me to the other matter, which is that the Minister says this will not resolve the issue. We know it will not. We understand the complexity and do not need to be talked down to on that. All of the other bodies that have backed this know that too. What it will do is force a better response from the Government and from the State, including all of the arms of the State that need to be involved in our response to the housing emergency that we are all living through. It will better balance the emphasis that the Government places on the private sector solutions. When we say this, we get thrown right back at us that we do not see or recognise that the private sector has a role to play. That is not true. We absolutely see that there is a role for the private sector to play, but what we have is a better balance between what the private sector can do and what the State must do. What this Bill and the enshrined recognition in our Constitution of a right to housing would do is support the Minister and local authorities in developing that policy. All of the arms of the State would be better equipped if we had that recognised right to housing.

In the remaining half of my time, I would like to talk about what this can do. The right to housing, as something enshrined in our Constitution, would be an expression of our values. It would be a statement of values that we can all look to. My colleague Deputy Hearne spoke about the fact that people talked about the right to education. They talk about it here in the House, but they also talk in society about how we have the right to an appropriate education for our children and that that right needs to be realised. I am not saying it is realised in every way, but it nonetheless is something that people can get their heads around and can actually be something in respect of which there is a common understanding that it is a right.

The other thing about housing as a fundamental right - I am speaking now about my own experience in this area in the rights and equality space - is that it is a fundamental right. This means that without the right to housing, it is virtually impossible to realise the other rights that we all should enjoy in society such as the right to employment, the right to privacy and the right to health. These are all compromised when people cannot find appropriate shelter to live in. That is why it is a fundamental right and that is why it deserves to be introduced into our Constitution.

Another concept I want to speak to today is adequate housing. When I was working in my previous organisation, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, we did a lot of work on this to try to create a legal benchmark of what adequate housing was and what we meant when we talked about adequate housing. The work we commissioned on that defined adequate housing as having: security of tenure; affordability; habitability, that is, quality housing you can actually live in; availability of services, given that there is no point in having a house if you do not have access to water and sanitation; accessibility for those people who need particular design or logistical features in their homes; location so that you can do the things you want to do such as go to school, go to work and take part in community activities; and cultural adequacy.

That last one is interesting because it brings me to my next point, which is really the reason that I do not think the Government is interested in this. It is the people who are most at risk who would actually be assisted by the right to housing being enshrined in our Constitution.

For example, we heard from a spokesperson of the Before We Die campaign at a briefing today. I do not think I saw any Government representatives attending the briefing. We heard from experts from legal groups, disability groups and so on. The Before We Die spokesperson spoke about how his daughter would simply be seen as a commodity once her parents died. They are scrambling hard at the moment, but once they die, she does not have a right to housing. She will probably be removed from the location she is in. When her parents die, she will lose her home and probably be shifted to somewhere else in the country, meaning that she also cannot access the services, community and activities that she currently enjoys as an adult with an intellectual disability.

We are also talking about lone parents who, like the case Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned, are already existing in a Byzantine reality of supports from the State. They are pushed out of housing lists and pushed out of this and that because they adjust their circumstances ever so slightly. I raised my daughter alone and I know a lot about how lone parents are challenged in this society. While I was lucky enough to come from a background that meant my housing was never compromised, I did have to move back into my own family home. I slept in my old bed in my old bedroom with my daughter for the first four years of her life before I was able to move into an annexe at my family home and eventually be able to afford to move when my daughter was nine years old. For lone parents trying to manage all of this in the middle of a housing crisis, this is what they are looking at. These are the people who experience discrimination most but who are so under pressure that they cannot pursue the discrimination through the legal access to justice they are owed. If a person is denied a housing assistant payment, HAP, application or a rental application essentially because they are a single parent, even though that might not be explicitly said, they are not going to go to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and lodge a case. They just have to put a roof over their child's head. Migrants are most likely to live in inadequate housing in terms of overcrowding and actual availability of services and standards. These are the groups that are going to be helped most by the recognition of housing as a right. The Minister of State's party supported it - that is the most heartbreaking part of it - but like neutrality, it seems to have left that in the dust and joined with its Fine Gael colleagues to say it is going to go with this ideology instead now. I ask the Minister of State to please support this and make it easier for his own Minister for housing to actually provide a right to housing in our Constitution.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I, too, would like to congratulate my colleague Deputy Hearne on tabling this proposal. It is an important one and an important debate.

6 o'clock

I am disappointed that the Minister did not stay to respond to the debate. We have had a good discussion. Time and again, Ministers do not engage with the substance of the debate in the House and do not stay to respond to the points made by the Opposition. Far too often, it feels like we are shouting into a void and they are not listening or responding to the key issues we put before them. It was remarkable to hear the Minister talk down public investment in housing the week before a budget. He talked about the State not being able to provide all the housing the country needs. We need the Minister to talk up investment in public housing and try to deliver more public housing for people.

Last week, a woman came to my clinic. She is living in her car. I got a flashback to 15 years ago when I was the welfare officer in the students' union of UCC and knew a student who was living in their car. It reminded me that nothing is changing. It is just getting worse, day after day, month after month and year after year. We need a radical change of direction and a change in policy. We fundamentally need a right to housing in the Constitution.

I was concerned when the Minister described this as a distraction. At least he is not talking about turning a corner because the Government turned so many corners, it was going around in circles. It is good that we have this new description of it as a distraction instead.

It has to be said that there is much that could be done to change things. There are simple things that could be done to provide housing. I did an event for students in UCC on Monday. Walking down College Road, within a stone's throw of the college, I saw a boarded-up house. That is one of the areas of Cork city where there is the most demand for housing. There is a boarded-up house on College Road. There is a house in Ballyphehane, just down the road from my house, that is boarded up. It was boarded up two years ago. I look at it every day when I go for a walk. The same council house is still boarded up two years later. It says to me and the people living in my community that the Government does not care. It does not give a damn about the people in that community, including the woman living in her car. They could have access to housing and a fundamental right to housing.

We know that a constitutional right to housing would provide a clear floor of protection in respect of access to basic, adequate housing and would provide recognition that a home is central to the dignity of each person. It would provide a legal mechanism for citizens to vindicate their right to housing before the courts. It would oblige the State to reasonably protect and fulfil the right in the spirit of the obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and provide a ready-made legal framework by which they could progressively realise the right to housing and by which it could be pursued. It would provide a safeguard against which all State housing policy and decision-making could be measured and challenged.

It is fundamentally important that we reframe our housing policy to put a rights-based focus on it and provide people with that basic right to adequate housing because it is crucial to the dignity of every individual in the State. What kind of Republic is this? Why kind of Republic does the Minister of State want? I know I want a Republic of equals, where everybody is treated equally, with dignity and respect. Core to that is providing access to basic services, supports and housing. We must build a social floor below which nobody is allowed to fall.

We have repeatedly heard that over a ten-year period, 13 Bills were proposed by the Government on the basis of concerns around property rights, according to research by the Oireachtas. Time and again, the property rights in the Constitution trump people's right to housing. A right to housing would provide some balance in the Constitution to those private property rights. As was referenced earlier, in 2014, the Convention on the Constitution recommended that the Constitution be amended to include economic, social and cultural rights, including a right to housing. The people are on side, as was very evident in those discussions at the Convention on the Constitution. If you put this proposal to a referendum, an overwhelming majority of people would vote in favour of it, and that is what the Government is afraid of.

We have seen this right around the world. Over 80 countries have a right to housing in the constitution, including Belgium, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. Many countries already do this and we should do it too. We know that a right to housing would not mean a key to a home for everybody the day after the referendum. However, it would require the State in its policies and decisions to ask reasonably to ensure people have access to housing.

It is not just the Convention on the Constitution that has called for the right. The Ombudsman for Children has called on the Government to bring forward a referendum to put a right to housing in the Constitution and to address the homelessness crisis that is a matter of urgency. Far too many children in this State are growing up in homelessness and growing up in hotel rooms and bed and breakfast accommodation. We know that is damaging their development. We all know that. We know it is going to have a lifelong impact on these children who are growing up in poverty. We know we have that situation because of decisions taken by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over decades. Clear policy choices were made to reduce the number of social houses in the 1980s and 1990s. We decided to rely on the private market and the social housing stock collapsed. The peak for social housing was in the 1970s. The Minister says we are now building more, but it is not comparable when we consider the percentage of our population in need. We must get back to investing far more in social and affordable housing. Other countries do this. They provide people with adequate housing and we can do that too.

One of the interesting things about this debate is the unity on the left in this Parliament on this issue. All of the parties have talked about their support for the right to housing. It is just the members of the Government, those in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and the Independents who support this Government, who are opposing that right and who do not want to see that fundamental change to deliver housing for our people, to build a social floor beneath which no one is allowed to fall and to ensure no child grows up in homelessness. We have a different vision for this country. We want to see a more equal, fairer and better Ireland. I urge the Government to rethink its approach. I urge Fianna Fáil, in particular, to go back to its roots and go back to where it was not too long ago in terms of prioritising social housing and the basic services that should be delivered for people in this country. As Deputy Gibney said, Fianna Fáil is being lurching to the right by Fine Gael and needs to change tack.

Crucially, I ask the Government not to be afraid of the people. Put this referendum to the people and we will get the result we need. When we get that referendum and the right to housing, we can start to change this country for the better.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank Deputy Hearne and all the Deputies who spoke so genuinely and eloquently about housing and the challenges that are facing us. I reaffirm the Government's commitment to tackling the housing crisis. We know that these challenges are having a real impact on people's lives and we remain focused on increasing delivery. Enshrining a right to housing in the Constitution is not necessary to solve this crisis. To hold a referendum on this now would simply create a distraction from the real work of scaling up the supply of new housing. It is simply unrealistic to suggest we can deliver a home for everybody. We cannot create unrealistic expectations.

The Government has shown a clear commitment to tackling the housing crisis in a real and practical way through introducing measures that support the increased delivery of housing. In this regard, supply has increased significantly over recent years. In the five years to the end of June of 2026, more than 156,000 new homes have been delivered. This compares to 87,819 in the previous five-year period and just 29,855 in the five years before that. However, there is still a considerable amount of work to do. Increasing the supply of new homes is critical to alleviating the pressures in the housing market, helping to moderate price growth and ease affordability challenges across the country. We must ensure everybody has a range of housing options available to them, whether they want to buy or rent a house or are in need of social housing.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities seeks to significantly accelerate delivery of new homes by focusing on activating land and creating the optimal environment to encourage housing activity, including regulatory reform, tax incentives and the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State. Some €275 billion has been earmarked for investment in infrastructure over the next ten years through the delivery of the national development plan. The unprecedented level of investment the Government has committed to bringing about will include a significant scaling up in the delivery of housing over the coming years, which will address the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities, make buying and renting homes more affordable and support the development of villages, towns and cities across the country.

Introducing a right to housing in the Constitution will not result in the delivery of a single additional house. Rather, it could create unwanted and unintended consequences that delay the delivery of housing by creating uncertainty in the market and redirecting State resources to addressing lengthy legal challenges for years to come. That is why the Government will not be supporting the Bill.

The Government's immediate focus and priority continue to be on the delivery of homes as set out in the programme for Government and the Delivering Homes, Building Communities plan. I assure Deputies that I have taken on board the comments raised in the debate. Delivering homes is of huge importance to the Government and we are working and investing huge amounts of time and effort across government to achieve that.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank those who spoke in favour of the Bill, including Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, People Before Profit and my colleagues in the Social Democrats. They all spoke clearly and eloquently and made the case that was needed to be made as to the importance and significance of this Bill. I express my deep disappointment that the Government is opposing this. I am trying to figure out its reason for doing so. I do not think the Minister of State believes these arguments about distraction and that it might “delay delivery ... by creating uncertainty in the market”. The idea that a right to housing would create uncertainty in the market is nonsense. Did the Government ask the institutional investors for their response to this Bill and this is what they said? This is not serious. As Deputy Gibney said, it is disingenuous. It is not a serious engagement with this Bill, the work the Housing Commission put in, the work of the original convention in 2014, as Deputy Ó Broin pointed out, or with the work put in by all Opposition parties on numerous similar Bills.

To go back to the Housing Commission, this did not need to be a partisan Bill. It did not need to be seen through the lens of the Opposition versus the Government. The Government

asked its own Housing Commission what it should do with this wording, and it came forward with this proposal. After listening to the debate and the Minister of State's rationale, my conclusion, like that of Deputies Rice and Ó Broin, is that the Government is afraid of the people. It does not want to see resounding majority support for this referendum because that would mandate Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, this Government, to do things that they are clearly unwilling to do, nor does the market want to put in place that floor of protection. That is what the Government's position shows.

I will specifically call out Fianna Fáil in this regard because it made a commitment previously, including its TDs who are now Ministers, to support a right to housing in a referendum. It is now actively denying people their fundamental right. This is a clear Bill that would give citizens in this country a fundamental right to housing, which so many are being denied. That is what the Bill sets out. The Government could do it, but it is saying "No.". It is saying it is going to refuse to give citizens in this Republic a human right to housing. It is saying it is going to leave citizens without that right. We will see thousands of people continue to languish in homelessness, with the lives of both children and parents destroyed. There will be tens of thousands in hidden homelessness who are not even allowed to enter social housing lists or be eligible for emergency accommodation. Instead, they will be sleeping on the streets or in cars. A generation will continue to be stuck in their childhood bedrooms or forced to emigrate. The Government is actively denying people the right to housing, which is incredible. It is an incredible position for Fianna Fáil to take. It is saying it is not going to implement a right to housing or hold a referendum, despite previously committing to do so.

All the arguments have been made. This is not going to be a distraction. The Housing Commission said it would enhance the Government's obligations and requirements to deliver housing. Is that not a good thing? No one is saying the State is going to have an obligation to build or deliver a house for everyone. No one is saying that. Again, that is completely disingenuous. This would ensure that everyone has the right to access an adequate, affordable and secure home of a decent standard. It is about that need being met for everyone. That comes in many forms, including both State and private sector supply. Ultimately, it means the Government is responsible to ensure that our housing system delivers that. Currently, it is not doing so. It is failing so many people. The Government is afraid of a constitutional right to housing. It is unwilling to take it on because it does not have the courage of its convictions to solve this crisis fundamentally. That is why it is not bringing this legislation through.

I wish to highlight two particular groups. The first is our Gaeltacht communities and the housing issue they face in the Gaeltacht. There is a fundamental issue that their right to housing has not been delivered. It is fundamental. Is pobail mhionlaigh iad na pobail Ghaeltachta atá againn. Is iad a bhfuil fágtha againn de na pobail mhóra Gaeilge a bhí sa Stát seo 100 bliain ó shin. Tá easpa soláthair thithíochta ag lagú struchtúr na bpobal Gaeltachta agus ag cur thodhchaí na gceantar Gaeltachta i mbaol san fhadtréimhse. Ar an mbealach sin, tá cearta cultúrtha agus teanga na bpobal á séanadh ag an Státchóras sa tír seo i mbealach náireach gan aird ar an dochar atá á dhéanamh. Our Gaeltacht communities are minority communities. They are all that remains of the large Irish-speaking population that existed in this State a century ago. A lack of housing provision is undermining the structure of Gaeltacht communities and jeopardising the long-term future of these areas. A right to housing in our Constitution would support our Gaeltacht communities to have access to culturally appropriate housing that meets their needs. BÁNU, the group that has been working on this issue, has asked that the Minister

for housing set up a commission to undertake an independent professional assessment and a linguistic impact assessment on the new national planning statement. I ask for that to be carried out because there is a real danger that the national planning statement will do the opposite of what it says with regard to supporting Gaeltacht communities. I ask the Minister of State to take that back to the Minister.

The second group I wish to highlight is disabled people. We heard Deputy Gibney talk about the Before We Die campaign, disabled people and their families. Joan Carthy from the Irish Wheelchair Association spoke in the audiovisual room this morning. I was struck by what she said. She said:

From a disability perspective, housing is about having the freedom to decide where you live, about being able to leave your parents' home and build a life of your own. It is about participating in your community, accessing education and employment, maintaining relationships and living with dignity. For people with disabilities, housing is not simply a roof over your head. It is independence, inclusion, equality and, more importantly, equity. Many people live with ageing parents because there is nowhere suitable to move to. Others are trapped in homes that no longer meet their needs. Others remain on waiting lists for years. Independent living cannot happen without housing. Community inclusion cannot happen without housing. Choice cannot happen without housing. A person cannot fully participate in society if there is nowhere suitable for them to live. That is why the right to housing and the right to independent living are inseparable. You cannot have one without the other because housing is not just about buildings; it is about belonging, opportunity and dignity. It is about whether every person in this country is afforded the same chance to live a full and equal life. So, yes, let us recognise housing as a constitutional right.

Those are the words of Joan Carthy from the Irish Wheelchair Association. They sum up why we need to put a right to housing in our Constitution. We need to do it for all those groups who are currently excluded and left behind because the system does not meet their needs and is not obliged to do so.

That is the fundamental problem. We still do not see or treat housing as a human right and that means so many groups are excluded.

The Minister has said he is going to oppose the Bill, which is deeply disappointing. The Social Democrats and the other parties here will continue to push for this. If the Minister votes against the Bill next week, which he said he is going to do, we will highlight that, we will show the public what position he has taken on this and we will continue to push for it because it is absolutely essential. I ask people who support this to contact their local TD to ask them to support it and to change their mind. There is time between now and next week in terms of people deciding.

I ask Fianna Fáil TDs, in particular, to look into their conscience, to look at what is going on in this country and to look at their previous commitments to see if this is actually the decision they are going to make. They are going to vote against giving people the right to access adequate housing, which they committed to in the past. That will be a shame if it happens.

Cuireadh an cheist.

Question put.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.22 p.m. go dtí 1 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 6 Deireadh Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.22 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 6 October 2026.