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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 3 Samhain 2026

Tuesday, 3 November 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere) i gceannas ar 1 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): 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 John Connolly - To discuss the proposed expansion of the TFI bike rental scheme in Galway city.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the Ballyheige water contamination issue.

Deputy Grace Boland - To discuss an additional grant for essential electrical work that may be required before solar panels or a battery system can be installed.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for EV charging infrastructure to be located in developments.

Deputy Paul Lawless - To discuss the Health Service Executive recruitment restrictions and delays in the appointment of front-line healthcare staff in the HSE West and North West region.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss the allocation of funding for school building protects.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the publication of the revised wind energy development guidelines.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss Bunclody AFC and the fallout of Clearwater going into liquidation.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the opening a stem cell transplant unit at Cork University Hospital.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the need to strengthen Uisce Éireann's accountability to Dáil Éireann.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss water services infrastructure investment and supply disruption i gContae Phort Láirge.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss physiotherapy services in Kerry.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss the issue businesses are facing regarding the use of sick certificates from online doctors.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the introduction of planning exemptions for sports clubs' changing facilities.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Eoghan Kenny, Colm Burke, Peter 'Chap' Cleere, Shane Moynihan have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Electric Vehicles

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Topical Issue. The question is fairly straightforward. On the one hand, the Government tells us it wants us in electric vehicles and to move away from fossil fuels. All of that is really good. I do not for a moment come in here to do anything other than try to work with the Government constructively to ensure the people I represent and beyond have the opportunity to charge their cars. When you buy a house or apartment in a multi-unit development, often you do not have a front garden. If people have their own front garden, they can put in EV charging, park the car in the front garden and they do not have to think about it. However, there is an issue if there are communal parking spaces. I will highlight two cases to illustrate the point. The broader point stands but I will talk specifically about two cases. They are both in multi-unit developments.

In case number one, planning permission was given to a developer. I will not name the developer because it is partly the developer's fault and partly the local authority's. The planning permission was given on the basis that every parking space would have ducting to facilitate EV charging. Fast forward to people moving into their homes and they find out they cannot put EV charging in at their designated parking space because the ducting is not in place. They have been back and forth. I have to pay tribute to my constituent for his patience and diligence. I will not mention his name but the story has been covered very well by Eoghan Dalton in *The Journal* who has done good work in this space. The ducting is not in place. Other cables are now under the ground that make it very complicated to put that ducting in place. My constituent still wants what he was told he would have when he bought the house and what he was also told is Government policy, which is the opportunity to drive an electric vehicle.

Case number two is an estate where some residents have their own front gardens and others do not. This person does not have a front garden. The estate has not been taken in charge so he cannot put an EV charger in because it is unclear at this stage who the person in charge is. He has been told local authorities currently have no mechanism for agreement to allow personal charger cables across public footpaths. The estate consists of communal parking bays owned and managed by the council rather than individual homeowners but residents understand that

running a charging cable across the public footpath is unsafe and not permitted. Their question is simple. The council has helpfully illustrated what they cannot do - they cannot drag it across the footpath or put it over. They want me to ask the Minister of State what they are to do. What does the Minister of State on behalf of the Minister advise that they should do?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): Will the Deputy provide a bit more detail on case number two?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In case two, the estate has not been fully taken in charge as yet. The footpaths have been taken in charge as they are public footpaths but the people still own the bay. It is that strip of land. They want to drive electric vehicles but they cannot if they cannot charge them overnight. The Minister of State knows that. It is an impossibility if they do not have the facility to charge them at their home. Their question is simple. What does the Government say? This is in direct conflict with what I believe is Government policy. What is it they are to do?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy O'Reilly for raising this important matter and providing me with an opportunity to update the House. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne. I will outline what the general provisions are and will refer to the specific points the Deputy raised.

EV charging requirements are primarily set by the building regulations and apply to new developments. Planning permissions may also specify parking layouts and charging provision. Where non-compliance with the terms of a grant of planning permission is reported, it is for the relevant planning authority to consider the need for enforcement action.

The current building regulations requirements for the provision of electric vehicle recharging infrastructure for buildings other than dwellings are contained in SI 393/2021, the European Union (Energy Performance of Buildings) Regulations 2021. Requirement for EV recharging infrastructure in dwellings is provided for under the Building Regulations (Part L Amendment) Regulations 2022, SI 535/2022. These regulations apply to dwellings where the relevant works or major renovation commence or take place on or after 1 November 2022. The regulations require that a multi-unit building containing one, or more than one, dwelling that is new or undergoing major renovation should install, as the Deputy has already referenced, ducting infrastructure consisting of conduits for electrical cables for each car parking space, to enable the subsequent installation of recharging points for electric vehicles where the parking space is located inside the building or within the curtilage of the building. I am not certain of the specific circumstances the Deputy referenced in terms of 1 November 2022.

The regulations also require that a new building that is a dwelling, other than where the dwelling forms part of a multi-unit building, where a parking space is located within the curtilage of a dwelling, should have installed appropriate electric vehicle recharging infrastructure to enable the subsequent installation of recharging points for electric vehicles. Technical guidance documents provide practical guidance on compliance with these requirements. These regulations generally apply to off-street parking associated with developments and do not apply to areas of public on-street parking that may ultimately be taken

in charge by a local authority. Once again, I think the Deputy has made reference to an element of that.

Alongside the building regulations framework, planning policy may also address the provision of EV charging infrastructure. Some local authority development plans contain objectives relating to EV charging points and associated infrastructure. In addition, the sustainable residential development and compact settlements guidelines of 2024 include a policy requirement relating to parking provision in residential developments, stating that the maximum parking standards do not include bays assigned for designated short-stay EV charging stations. It should also be noted that subject to compliance with certain conditions, EV charging points are exempt from the need for planning permission under classes 29A and 29B of Part 1 of Schedule 2 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended. Class 29A provides for the construction of a charging point for electric vehicles. It is open to a property owner to make use of planning exemptions subject to the requirement to adhere to any conditions imposed within the regulations. It is therefore important to recognise that responsibility for EV charging infrastructure can arise through both the building regulations and the planning process. While the building regulations establish minimum technical requirements, planning authorities may also determine the appropriate quantum and distribution of EV charging infrastructure within a development, having regard to local circumstances and planning policy.

Deputy O'Reilly has obviously done a lot of work regarding case one and case two. I do not know if it is the same local authority. If she wishes to elaborate a bit more and write to the Minister's Department, it may be something we can contact the local authority on without interfering with process to see what the circumstances are. I hope that sheds some light. I will await the Deputy's contribution.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State once again for being here. Regarding case number one, my constituent tells me the requirement for 100% EV ducting in communal multi-unit developments was explicitly reinforced during Dáil debates - which it was because I have checked it - where Ministerial clarifications confirm that national frameworks require comprehensive preinstalled ducting in multi-unit parking structures to prevent subsequent retrofitting excavation.

I get that because once it is built you want it to stay built; you do not want to be going back in with diggers. Condition 10 of the parent planning permission, and I will send this on to the Minister of State, strictly mandates that 100% of car parking spaces across the phase must be equipped with subterranean ducting to meet Fingal development plan standards. That was not done and-----

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Was that in the project planning?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yes, exactly. It was an explicit condition of planning and it was not done. Therefore, my constituent finds himself in a situation where he is on a merry-go-round. He is back and forth with the council. The council has given him a certain amount of information, but nobody is addressing this. The years are ticking by and he still does not have access to EV charging at his home. The same is true of my other constituent, who has been in

touch with the council. He understands very clearly what the rules are but he also asks the question, in the application of the rules in the spirit of what the Government says, which is that 100% of spaces should be EV-charging compliant, what does he do where they are not?

In case two, he has not yet bought an electric vehicle but that is another diesel or petrol car on the road. I know the Government wants to take those off the road and I want to work with it to take them off the road. At the moment, however, the man does not have a choice because he cannot charge it at home. It is not feasible to be going around charging it in other places. It is not safe to be parking your car in other places at night, nor would you want to do it. The question is a simple one. I will send the details of both these cases to the Minister of State, as he has asked, because they illustrate a broader problem. Hopefully, we will be able to come to some class of a resolution. All they want is to be able to charge their cars at home.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank Deputy O'Reilly for raising this important matter. I am taking the Topical Issue matter on behalf of James Browne, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

As I have outlined, the requirements for electric vehicle charging are primarily established through the building regulations and must be complied with in the delivery of new developments, in addition to grants of permission, which the Deputy has referred to, that may contain specific requirements regarding parking layouts or the provision and distribution of charging facilities in such cases. It is a matter for the local authority to consider the need for enforcement in the event that the authority is notified of non-compliance with the terms of the permission. I refer to independent statutory bodies, directly elected councils and their own management. In addition, section 30 of the planning Act precludes the Minister with responsibility for planning from exercising any power or control in relation to any particular case with which a planning authority may be concerned. Accordingly, when matters of planning enforcement arise, these functions must remain a matter for the relevant planning authority. The Deputy can come to us and we can give her the actual position, but the Minister cannot in any way interfere in the process in terms of the local authority.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am not asking for that.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The Government remains committed to supporting the transition to electric vehicles through the continued implementation of green energy, the building directives, the building regulations framework and wider climate and transport policy measures. These measures will help ensure that EV charging infrastructure is provided in new developments to meet growing demand in the years ahead.

Planning Issues

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for being here. This topic is a matter I want to raise around the introduction of planning exemptions for a sports club for certain changing facilities and, in general, to incentivise our planning system to allow for the positive development of sporting facilities by clubs.

Sports clubs play an important role in all our communities, no more so than in my community in Dublin Mid-West, providing opportunities for people of all ages to participate in sport and become involved locally. At the same time, in areas like Dublin Mid-West, population growth in areas such as Lucan, Adamstown, Clonburris, Clondalkin, Newcastle, Rathcoole and others is putting increasing pressure on existing pitches, changing rooms and other sporting facilities. Many clubs that have access to their own property are working to accommodate growing membership with limited resources and, as we the Minister of State know, relying heavily on volunteers to fundraise, manage projects and improve their facilities.

However, not least of all for female members, members who have additional needs or who have disabilities, for clubs to provide additional changing facilities, toilets or other basic welfare facilities for those people, the planning process can add significant time, expense and uncertainty, even for relatively modest developments, for example, under 40 sq. m or 45 sq. m. That availability of appropriate changing rooms and accessible facilities is particularly important in supporting participation among women and girls, younger players and players with disabilities. While I welcome the Government's efforts to simplify the planning system, there is low-hanging fruit here by taking a proportionate approach to smaller developments at established sports clubs that have their own established lands as well.

In this House and in other places, I have consistently made the case that sports infrastructure needs to keep pace with housing development and I have advocated for proper changing rooms and storage facilities in our public parks since my time in South Dublin County Council. I pay tribute to South Dublin County Council for its investment in a pavilion programme across all its public parks. This is delivering those much-needed storage facilities and changing rooms in parks such as those at Griffeen Valley, Corkagh and Willsbrook. This modular approach is resulting in more efficient and faster delivery.

That same sort of practical thinking is needed for clubs that are developing facilities on their own grounds. I have worked with many clubs across Dublin Mid-West to secure sports capital funding but securing a grant is only one part of the process. Things can slow down when converting plans into reality on the ground, costing a lot of time and resources. When drawing on volunteers to do this work, time can be an expensive commodity.

With that in mind, will the Minister consider introducing a clearly defined planning exemption for modest changing rooms, toilets, storage and associated facilities at existing sports clubs, possibly where they would cover less than 40 sq. m or 45 sq. m, and obviously subject to appropriate safeguards? Will the Department look at engaging with local authorities and sporting organisations to incentivise positive engagement on the development of things like ball walls, astro pitches or all-weather pitches on existing sports grounds? This would provide for positive development and encourage clubs that are trying to grapple with ever-growing memberships, that are competing with screens and are trying to make sport attractive to everybody from all sections of society regardless of where they are from. This is a practical way to bring to life something that is very important to everybody in this House; the idea that everybody should have access to sport regardless of gender, ability or age. Putting in place a planning exemption for changing facilities and toilets is a basic thing and a very easy step Government could take to incentivise and achieve that vision of sport for all.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne. At the outset, I will explain that the role of the Minister in relation to the planning system is primarily to provide the policy and legislative framework under which the planning authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála perform their statutory planning functions.

The general position is that all developments require consent following appropriate examination by the relevant planning authority. This process allows for public participation, which is a long-established and key element of the planning process under which any person who may be affected by a proposed development may make a submission or observation in relation to a planning application. The planning authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála must have regard to any valid submissions or observations made when making a decision to grant or refuse a planning application. A person who has made a submission or observation on a planning application that a planning authority has decided to grant or refuse may subsequently appeal that decision to An Coimisiún Pleanála or make a further submission in relation to an appeal of that decision.

In some circumstances, where there is a level of uniformity and similarity in the nature of developments and where such developments would get planning permission if the regular processes were followed, it makes sense to relieve the planning system of the burden of carrying out such repeated assessments and to provide an exemption for the need to apply for consent. Criteria for such exemptions have been developed over time and are provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, and the supplementary Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended. So long as a development conforms with the specified set of criteria, it should be possible for it to be permitted without any controversy. In all other cases, it is important that the usual planning processes continue to be applied.

The criteria that apply to planning exemptions have been under review in recent years as part of the transition to the new Planning and Development Act 2024. A public consultation on the matter was held in 2025, which received over 900 submissions. I advise Deputy Moynihan that the matter of changing facilities for sports clubs was not raised as a theme under the public consultation and there are no plans to introduce any such exemption at this time. The current focus is on exemptions for the delivery of critical infrastructure and other matters raised during this consultation, such as exemptions for domestic dwellings.

I also note that where local authorities own land, they may provide sports facilities under the general exemption in section 4 of the 2000 Act, subject to the Part 8 process. As the Deputy will know, this is a reserved function of the elected members and a matter for the relevant local authority. I remind Deputy Moynihan that under section 30 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall not exercise any power or control in relation to any particular case.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for setting out and clarifying the criteria for exemptions under the planning guidelines and the planning and development Acts.

I respectfully suggest that if something is not raised in the public consultation but is raised in Dáil Éireann, that probably is a good enough reason to consider giving it some sort of detailed analysis. I respectfully submit that this is perhaps something the Minister of State could look at, or ask officials to look at, in terms of its timeliness, not least the fact that we spend an

unprecedented amount of money pumping investment, and rightly so, into our sports clubs around the country. For a modest investment that incentivises female participation in sport, surely to God we should consider whether a planning exemption is appropriate for something that is smaller than 40 sq. m, notwithstanding the fact that it was not raised in a public consultation. I hope the fact that it was raised on the floor of this House is enough currency to ensure it is given adequate attention. For example, we are now rightly and at last removing the planning requirements around things like bus shelters. I respectfully suggest that something like changing facilities for women and girls is as important, if not more important, as bus shelters in terms of those exemptions. I ask that it be considered as part of this.

This is a fundamental point related to a deeper theme that many clubs mention to me during discussions, namely, the difficulty in getting volunteers. It sometimes feels we are making it very difficult for volunteers to engage in their clubs. We should take a volunteer-led approach to some of these issues around the support that sports clubs need. We did it with the sports capital programme. It is easier to apply for those grants. We should look at things like planning permissions, and what clubs need to do to satisfy planning conditions and make it easier for the volunteers who give their time freely to develop all the people in our community regardless of their background or gender. That should be recognised, and sometimes it feels like we should do a bit more to make it easier for people to volunteer and value the fact that they are giving so freely of their time.

I ask the Minister of State to go back and ask officials to look at this, notwithstanding that it was not raised in public consultation, but it has been raised in the floor of the House.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank the Deputy for raising this topic, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne.

The Department of housing is in the process of commencing the Planning and Development Act 2024 on a phased basis to facilitate the transition to a new legislative framework across the planning system, taking into account the need to liaise with local authorities, planning bodies and other stakeholders. The Planning and Development Act 2000 shall continue to operate until such a time as Part 4, development consents, of the 2024 Act is brought into operation. The planning exemptions in the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended, shall remain in effect until they are revoked through the regulations under section 9 of the Planning and Development 2024, as amended.

As mentioned, the priority is to transfer existing exemptions and any appropriate modifications which were highlighted through the public consultation in 2025. As I said, there are currently no plans to introduce any new exemptions in relation to sports clubs' changing facilities and the usual planning laws will continue to be applied to such projects. I will bring the points the Deputy raised to the attention of the Department and the Minister for housing, as I have no doubt he will also do in his own way.

Under section 30 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall not exercise any power or control in relation to any particular case which a planning authority or local authority is or may be concerned with. This means that the Minister is specifically prevented from interfering in such cases. This is of the upmost importance in maintaining the independence of the planning authority or the commission. I trust this sets out the current position.

Cancer Services

Deputy Colm Burke: As the Minister of State is aware, there is no CAR T-cell treatment facility in Cork University Hospital, CUH. A facility was in place in 2008 but was closed down as a result of a number of inspections. In the nearly 20 years since 2008, people from the Cork and Kerry region have had to go to Galway or Dublin for this treatment.

It is important to explain CAR T-cell therapy. Blood is drawn for a stem cell transplant and blood stem cells are harvested for CAR T-cell therapy. White blood cells, T-cells, are specifically collected. They are then treated and infused back into the patient they were taken from.

Between January and September 2026, over 80 patients were referred from CUH to Galway or Dublin. If we take in Clare, Limerick, Cork, Kerry, Waterford and north Tipperary, there are 1.4 million people living in the region, which has no CAR T-cell treatment facility. With a growing population, this issue will come up more and more.

Over 400 people a year are diagnosed with melanoma and over 3,000 people with it are getting ongoing treatment. Treatment is available in Galway and in St. James's and St. Vincent's hospitals in Dublin. In the period 2006 to 2008, the Irish Medicines Board, IMB, carried out inspections in CUH and in 2008, the unit was closed. A business case was put together a number f years later, in 2019, and presented to the South/South West Hospital Group in 2022. The national cancer control programme, NCCP, is extremely supportive. In a letter dated 31 October 2025, Patricia Heckmann, assistant national director of the NCCP, said that given the capacity issue nationally and the current requirement for patients from the south-west region to travel to Galway or Dublin to access such services, the NCCP continues to recommend the re-establishment of a HSCT service at CUH and the repatriation of south-west region patients from the other sites. The NCCP, she added, has provided financial support and staffing regarding this re-establishment; however, an upgrade in CUH laboratory infrastructure in the form of new tissue establishment is central to the reinstatement of the HSCT service on the site. A new tissue establishment will facilitate on-site stem cell procurement and transplantation for CUH patients without unnecessary travel or delays and associated potential risk of disease, she continued.

The national cancer control programme wants this facility reinstated and for the services to be provided in Cork. CUH is catering for a whole range of areas but it is also dealing with cancer patients on a large scale. This particular treatment is not available in CUH. It is not a day procedure but a treatment over a period of time, so there is a huge cost involved for families travelling and staying in either Galway or Dublin. I ask that the Department consider providing the funding to HSE South West and CUH so that this service can be brought back into use and patients no longer need to travel, and also a growing number of people are being identified with this problem.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of the proposal to open a stem cell transplant unit at Cork University Hospital, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. The Government is committed to improving cancer care, ensuring better prevention, maintaining improvements in cancer

survival rates and facilitating timely access to treatments. The availability of appropriate, fit-for-purpose facilities and equipment is critical to the safe and timely delivery of cancer care. In this context, the Government has allocated significant funding of €105 million since 2017, including €23 million in 2025, to the national cancer strategy to support cancer services and improve outcomes for patients. The Deputy will appreciate that haematopoietic stem cell transplantation and other related cellular therapies are highly specialised treatments used in the management of a range of malignant and non-malignant diseases.

Cellular therapies currently available in Ireland include autologous stem cell transplantation, allogeneic stem cell transplantation and chimeric antigen receptor, CAR T-cell therapy. These therapies require specialist multidisciplinary teams, dedicated laboratory facilities, tissue establishment infrastructure, specialised inpatient facilities and robust regulatory and accreditation arrangements. Adult autologous stem cell transplantation services are currently provided in St. James's Hospital, University Hospital Galway and St. Vincent's University Hospital. Adult allogeneic stem cell transplantation is currently provided through St. James's Hospital, which has also provided CAR T-cell therapy to adult patients since December 2021.

Stem cell transplantation activity continues to increase nationally, driven primarily by growth in cellular therapies and the expansion of CAR T treatment indications. As the Deputy may be aware, in 2026 Beaumont Hospital was designated an additional autologous stem cell transplantation and CAR T centre, working towards commencement of services in 2027. This illustrates the Government's ongoing efforts to increase capacity to meet nationally increasing demand for these important services. It is against this background that HSE South West is considering proposals for a stem cell tissue establishment and advanced cellular therapies unit at Cork University Hospital that may increase national capacity even further, while supporting the delivery of stem cell transplantation and other advanced cellular therapies closer to home for patients across the south west. The national development plan sets out the investment to enable the furtherance of the Government's commitments to include the provision of infrastructure necessary in ensuring better healthcare for all. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has published the Department of Health's sectoral plan for 2026 to 2030 under the national development plan, NDP. The sectoral plan sets out infrastructure investment priorities for the next five years, building on a strong track record of delivery to support the delivery of equitable, accessible and high-quality healthcare across Ireland.

While the project is not included in the current approved HSE capital plan, it remains under consideration through the established capital planning and approval processes. Accordingly, the future progression of the project is subject to the normal appraisal, approval, budgetary and capital funding processes necessary with projects of this nature.

Deputy Colm Burke: The site has been clearly established as being located in CUH, where a detailed plan has been completed as regards where the infrastructure can be put in place. The problem is the funding. We are going to have a huge problem that is already in CUH where certain work has had to be outsourced because the hospital does not have the availability to provide the treatment patients require. As I said, over 80 patients were sent to either Dublin or Galway from January to September, and that figure is going to continue to grow.

It is important to note I am not just talking about Cork here; I am talking about the entire southern region, including the Minister of State's county of Limerick and counties Clare, Kerry, Cork and Waterford. It is important we develop the service here because it is clear from the national cancer control programme that there is a concern there are not adequate facilities available to deal with the growing number of patients. Therefore, I do not think this can be put down the road. It is on the programme for the south and south west region but it is ninth on the list for construction work. This project should be brought forward and the additional funding provided so that the work can start. Even if the work started today, it would, as the Minister of State knows, take at least 12 months to complete and have ready for use. Even if we start today, we have a problem that is two years down the road. I do not want to have a situation where I am back here in two years' time raising the same issue and saying the same thing, and there being another two years added on.

I ask that this matter be given priority by the Department. The pressure is on the two hospitals in Dublin and Galway. They have the numbers from their own region and are now also taking numbers from the south and south west.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I thank Deputy Burke for his contribution today and his ongoing advocacy on this matter. He has been strongly dedicated to the improvement of cancer services and has been a particularly strong advocate for the patients of the south west, especially in Cork.

The Government recognises the importance of ensuring patients nationally can access high-quality specialised cancer care as close to home as possible. I acknowledge that travelling to Dublin or Galway can be difficult for patients and their families. The proposals being considered by HSE South West for stem cell tissue establishment in the advance cellular therapies unit in Cork University Hospital is representative of the growing national demand for these treatments, and the Government's commitment in the national cancer strategy to align services both at both regional and national levels, where appropriate. While projects not including the HSE capital plan 2026 remain a consideration, all major investment must be progressed through the established planning and approval process.

The Department of Health will continue to engage with the HSE at this proposal develops.

I thank Deputy Burke again for his advocacy on this issue and for cancer services more broadly. I will bring the matter he has raised to the attention of the Minister and the Department.

Medical Inquiries

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I raise an issue that is causing increasing concern among employers throughout the country, particularly small and medium-sized businesses. It is an issue that deserves serious attention from the Government. I refer to the growing use of online medical consultations to obtain sick certificates and, in particular, to questions being raised about the adequacy of clinical assessments before certificates recommending periods of absence from work are issued. Let me be clear that this is not about questioning the rights of employees who are genuinely unwell. Those rights must be protected. Nor am I suggesting

that online medical consultations do not have a legitimate and important role in modern healthcare. However, we must also recognise that the system needs to work fairly for everyone, including employers who ultimately carry significant financial and operational responsibilities when employees are absent.

I have been contacted by employers who are increasingly concerned about what they are experiencing. One employer recently reported that two employees working on the same project received medical certificates from the same online medical practice on the same day recommending exactly the same period of absence – two weeks. I stress that I am not making allegations against the employees or medical practitioners involved. However, these examples raise legitimate questions about the process, the level of clinical assessment taking place and the safeguards in place. For an employer, these situations have real consequences. Businesses have projects to deliver, customers to satisfy and contractual obligations to meet. Other employees must often carry the additional workload when colleagues are absent. For a larger organisation, these challenges may be manageable, but for a small business employing 20, 30, 50 or 100 employees, a sudden absence of even a small number of employees can have a significant impact.

There is also a direct financial consequence, with employers required to meet their statutory sick pay obligations where the qualifying conditions are satisfied, in addition to the cost of replacement labour and lost productivity. Are we confident the system has sufficient safeguards to ensure medical certificates, particularly those recommending extended periods away from work, are supported by an appropriate clinical assessment?

The Medical Council has been very clear that doctors providing remote consultations must maintain the same professional standards as those providing face-to-face consultations. I fully support that principle. However, we also need to examine the wider picture, including the commercial platforms through which these consultations are provided and which are responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are maintained.

I ask that the Minister address four specific matters. First, will the Government engage with the Medical Council to examine whether clinical assessment standards are being applied appropriately when online consultations result in extended periods of certified absence? Second, will the Government examine what oversight exists in respect of commercial online medical certificate services and whether additional safeguards are necessary? Third, will it consider a review of the medical certification arrangements to ensure they strike the right balance between protecting employees and providing reasonable assurance to employers? Finally, will the Government commit to engaging with employer representative organisations, particularly those representing SMEs, so that the practical impact on businesses is properly understood?

We should not have to choose between protecting workers and businesses. Both are absolutely essential. Employees who are genuinely ill deserve support and protection but, equally, employers which provide jobs, invest in their businesses and contribute to our economy deserve to have confidence that the systems they are required to operate are fair, robust and not open to misuse. I ask that the Minister recognise that this is a growing concern and commit to examining it properly before it becomes an even greater problem for Irish businesses.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I will try to address his four questions in my opening contribution, while fully recognising what has been raised on behalf of businesses. Regarding businesses, particularly small businesses, I meet many family businesses and independent operators who are under significant pressures, including rising labour and operational costs. Where an employee is absent for an extended period, it creates real challenges for them in terms of staffing, service delivery and day-to-day running of the business.

It is understandable, therefore, that employers want confidence that medical certificates are being issued following an appropriate clinical assessment and that there are clear standards underpinning the process. Of course, we must also ensure that employees who are genuinely unwell are protected. I know the Deputy is not challenging the merits or legitimacy around that. The challenge is to strike a fair balance between the rights of employees and the legitimate concerns of employers.

The Sick Leave Act 2022 introduced Ireland's first statutory entitlement to employer-paid sick leave. The scheme commenced on 1 January 2023 with an initial entitlement of three days increasing to five days on 1 January 2024. The purpose of the legislation is to provide employees with a minimum level of financial protection when they are unable to work due to illness or injury, particularly those in lower-paid or precarious employment. The legislation does not interfere with more favourable sick pay arrangements already provided by employers. Under the Act, an employee must provide a medical certificate from a registered medical practitioner stating that he or she is unfit to work due to illness or injury.

I appreciate, however, that simply requiring a certificate does not necessarily address every concern an employer may have about the assessment underpinning it, particularly where certification is provided online. It is important to clarify that services providing medical certificates online operate on a private basis. They are not provided by the HSE nor are they provided by general practitioners under their HSE contracts where they fall outside the scope of those contracts. Doctors are clinically independent practitioners and must make decisions based on their professional expertise and experience. They are responsible for the clinical decisions and certifications they issue.

Importantly, the use of telemedicine or online appointments does not remove or diminish a doctor's professional obligations. As referenced by the Deputy, the Medical Council of Ireland permits doctors to provide telemedicine services but its guidance makes clear that the same standards of professional conduct and practice apply as would be expected in an in-person consultation. The Medical Council's guide to professional conduct and ethics also states that a medical practitioner should only sign a certificate, report or document following a review of the patient's condition. The decisions recognise the needs of the employee but also ensure that employees have income protection where the practical and financial pressures are being faced by those who are being assessed to be unfit to work. The legislation is kept under constant review.

I acknowledge that employers are entitled to raise legitimate concerns, as the Deputy has raised on the floor of the Dáil, about the certificate process. Maintaining confidence in medical certification is an important process for both employees, employers and the wider public.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I thank the Minister of State for his response but I want to emphasise that simply pointing to existing regulation and professional guidelines does not necessarily address what employers are experiencing on the ground. The question is whether those arrangements are working effectively in practice. I am hearing from employers all over the country, including in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, who are feeling increasingly frustrated because they have very little visibility or reassurance around the process through which these certificates are being issued, particularly when an online consultation results in an absence of one or two weeks.

I return to the examples I mentioned earlier. These are not hypothetical situations. These are genuine experiences being reported by employers who are trying to manage their businesses, meet deadlines and retain staff. I am particularly concerned about smaller businesses, which simply do not have the resources or flexibility to absorb repeated and extended absences but there is also a wider policy consideration here. We have introduced statutory sick pay obligations for employers and there have been discussions about extending those entitlements but if we are asking businesses to carry greater responsibilities, surely we must also ensure that the certification system underpinning those responsibilities is robust and properly overseen.

This is not about restricting legitimate healthcare or challenging the professional judgment of doctors. It is about ensuring that appropriate assessments take place and that there is accountability across the system.

Will the Minister of State commit to bringing the Department of Health, the Medical Council and the relevant employer representative organisations together to examine online medical certification practices, the adequacy of clinical assessments and whether additional safeguards are required? This is a reasonable request, which would be welcomed by employers across the country. We need to get ahead of this issue rather than wait until confidence in the system is further undermined.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I reiterate that I understand why the issue is a concern for employers. An extended absence can place considerable pressures on a business, particularly when replacing staff or covering additional shifts can be difficult. It can also be costly for the business. It is entirely reasonable that employers want confidence that the medical certificate process is supported by appropriate clinical assessment. As I said earlier, the Medical Council guidance is clear that doctors who are providing telemedicine services must meet the same professional standards as they would in an in-person consultation. It also states that a doctor should only issue a certificate following a review of the patient's conditions.

We are public representatives. We are not clinicians or doctors. They are professionally responsible for the clinical decisions they make and while the Medical Council regulates medical practitioners and promotes appropriate professional standards, it is important to ask the question as to what assessments they are undertaking. I will speak to the Minister for Health about this.

On the Deputy's point, the objective is very much to protect employees who are genuinely unwell under the legislation. We all have a responsibility to do that while also recognising there are real pressures on employers in maintaining confidence in the certification process.

The concerns raised by the Deputy should be taken seriously. I will review that with the Minister for Health.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I welcome the opportunity to raise the delays affecting school building projects across Cork and throughout the country. I welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. She will also appreciate the question I have put down is a broad topic, so I do not expect a reply to every single individual question I have. Perhaps we could liaise on all of them.

As a former secondary school teacher, I understand, as does the Minister, the importance of proper school facilities. I also understand this from personal experience. Following the devastating fire at the Patrician Academy in Mallow in 2016, I spent years being educated in temporary accommodation. As a student, I wrote to the Minister's former colleague, Joe McHugh, who was Minister for Education, asking when permanent classrooms would be delivered. They were delivered last year. Years later, I find myself asking the same questions on behalf of other school communities.

I want to raise three particular cases today. The first is Coláiste an Chroí Naofa in Carraig na bhFear. I recently visited the school and met acting principal Andrew Barry. I saw first hand the challenges facing students and staff, particularly children with additional educational needs. The building project remains at stage 2B. Approximately €900,000 has already been spent yet the planning permission is due to expire in 2027. We cannot allow a project with such significant investment to face further delays that could jeopardise its planning permission. The Minister will be aware I have requested an urgent meeting between herself, the school management, myself and the Department. I am asking that the Minister consider that. I recognise the opening of the North Cork Community Special School in Carraig na bhFear. It is really welcome.

Ballincollig is a rapidly growing community. Le Chéile Secondary School opened there in 2021 while Gaelscoil an Chaisleain opened in 2017. Both continue operating in temporary accommodation while awaiting permanent buildings at Lisheens. The secondary school is planned to accommodate approximately 1,000 students, including six special education classrooms.

Ballincollig's population increased by more than 13% between 2016 and 2022 and substantial further housing development is planned and rezoning has been done.

I acknowledge my Labour Party colleague, Councillor Ciara O'Connor, who represents Ballincollig on Cork City Council and has been working tirelessly to advance these schools building projects. Councillor O'Connor has been pursuing the outstanding land transfer with Cork City Council and advocating for the school communities to receive the permanent accommodation they deserve. Yet when I received replies to parliamentary questions about this in July, the legal transfer remained outstanding. Has that transfer finally been completed and will construction begin?

The third is the Convent Primary School in my hometown, Mallow, which has been seeking progress on its building project for many years. The project is to provide five dedicated

classrooms for children with additional needs, alongside mainstream education. What is preventing this project progressing and when can the school expect to receive a clear timetable?

This is a much wider issue, namely the State's dependence on prefabricated accommodation. In 2024 alone, €28.8 million was spent on renting prefabs in 440 schools nationwide, including €3.7 million in my county of Cork. At the Committee of Public Accounts, the Department confirmed that overall school accommodation rental expenditure reached €37 million in 2025. That is €37 million in one year for renting school accommodation instead of owning it. I accept temporary accommodation in emergency circumstances is necessary but our priority should be properly designed, permanent, brick and mortar schools. I would, therefore, welcome an improvement to the system in terms of choosing it as a permanent solution. I would welcome engagement from the Minister on the schools I referenced.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht an ábhair seo a ardú mar tugann sé deis dom staid reatha na hinfheistíochta in eastát na scoile a leagadh amach don Dáil.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department published the €7.55 billion national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan for the education and youth sectors for the period 2026 to 2030 earlier this year. The capital allocation available to the Department of Education and Youth in 2026 is €1.6 billion and in 2027, it is €1.6 billion. That represents a significant level of investment in the school estate.

The NDP sectoral plan involves a strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. The plan included a list of 105 school building projects to proceed to construction or tender in 2026 and 2027. Some 56 of these projects have now been completed, commenced construction or received approval to commence construction. Further modular and smaller scale additional accommodation projects also continued to be progressed to meet annual September needs.

It is important to note that the list of 105 projects to move to tender and construction in 2026 and 2027 represents a subset of all projects currently being progressed. Overall, approximately 1,000 school building projects of varying scales will be on site during the course of 2026 with a similar level expected in 2027. This represents a significant level of investment in the upgrade and expansion of the school estate. It includes large scale projects, additional accommodation and modular projects, repurposing for special classes, climate action summer works and the climate pathfinder programme.

The next tranche of projects for progression to tender is expected to be announced in 2027. Prioritisation is ongoing and has included consultation with patrons and management bodies. As part of the NDP plan, clarity has also been provided to schools on an annual December-January payment period for minor works and ICT grants to schools. The minor works for the 2026-2027 school year issued in December 2025 and the ICT grants for the school year 2025-2026 issued in January. Since 2020, in the region of €330 million in minor works grants was issued to schools. Investment under the NDP plan also involves the delivery of the first tranche of 297 projects under the climate action summer works scheme.

Is féidir liom a dhearbhú don Teachta go bhfuil mo Roinn fós tiomanta bonneagar scoile ar ardchaighdeán a sholáthar chun freastal ar an éileamh, agus go leanfaidh muid ag obair go dlúth le scoileanna ar fud na tíre chun tosaíochtaí infheistíochta caipitil a chur i bhfeidhm.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I recognise the significant investment that has been put into capital building projects in our school communities. Will the next tranche of projects be announced in mid, early or late 2027? As the Minister will have noted from my opening piece, Carrignavar's planning permission is due to expire in October 2027. Carrignavar school is in immediate danger of its planning permission lapsing. There is an expectation in the school community that the building project will begin. There are two issues, the certainty for school communities and the value for taxpayers' money.

Projects are undergoing technical reviews, awaiting approval and progressing through appropriate stages. They are the responses we are receiving from the Department but it is hard to determine what to give back to schools. The same question is coming up: what does that actually mean? In Carrignavar, approximately €900,000 has already been spent, yet the planning permission is approaching expiry. I ask the Minister to commit to meeting the school management. I wrote to her about this only yesterday, which is to be appreciated.

In Ballincollig, two schools are awaiting permanent school buildings. I would appreciate if the Minister could confirm to me in writing whether the land transfer at Lisheens has been completed. I would also appreciate if a clear update on the Convent Primary School Mallow can be provided to the school management.

To return to the issue of prefabs, the Department spent approximately €37 million renting school accommodation in 2025 alone. That is money spent year after year without necessarily delivering a permanent asset for the State. There is a difference between a school being grateful for an additional classroom and a school choosing that accommodation as its long-term future. Our priority must be permanent, properly designed, brick-and-mortar schools. Ultimately, I am asking for delivery dates and not a list of administrative stages.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Since 2020, the Department of Education and Youth has provided over €229 million in capital funding for schools in Cork North-Central. Over this period, 34 schools have been upgraded through provision of a new school building, an extension, modular accommodation or climate pathfinders. Five school projects to go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027 were included in the NDP implementation plan. Four large-scale extension, modular or climate pathfinder projects in Cork North-Central are under construction and eight projects are under way through the climate action summer works scheme. Nineteen classes have also been sanctioned in Cork North-Central for 2026.

Regarding the NDP, prior to the summer break, departmental officials contacted in the region of 250 schools by telephone to provide an update on the projects' status, prioritising those that had had a stage submission with the Department for six months or more. During these calls, the stage report review requirements and the overall process for prioritisation were outlined. Schools were also invited to share any relevant information regarding their accommodation needs to inform the prioritisation process. In addition, officials have visited a number of schools that have expressed urgent additional needs, pending the delivery of their

major projects. My officials will continue to engage with schools over the coming months and to provide any necessary guidance.

Additionally, the planning and building unit officials met with all patrons and management bodies in June of this year to outline their prioritisation approach and to seek feedback from them to inform future tranches. The Department is targeting 2027 for the publication of the next tranche of priority projects to proceed to tender. Since 2020, the Department has invested over €7.55 billion in our schools throughout the country. Is é seo an leibhéal ab airde infheistíochta i bhfoirgnimh scoile riamh. We can come back to the Deputy directly on the specific schools he mentioned.

2 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I would like to take the opportunity, and Members may join me, in welcoming Liam Conlon MP to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. Liam Conlon is a Labour Party MP for Beckenham and Penge. He is joining us this afternoon as a guest of Deputy Ivana Bacik. He is most welcome.

We will move to Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 38.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cuirim fáilte roimh Liam Conlon chuig an Teach inniu.

I want to mark the heartbreaking passing of the wonderful Ciara Mageean. She was a remarkable person and an amazing athlete gone too soon. Her heroics on the track were matched by such grace and strength. Ireland has truly lost an incredible young woman. Our sympathies to Ciara's husband, Thomas, and all who loved her. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tá oibrithe san earnáil phoiblí ag pleanáil dul ar stailc don dara huair an tseachtain seo chugainn. Táimid ag an bpointe seo mar gheall gur theip ar an Rialtas comhaontú pá réasúnta a bhaint amach, mar gheall ar an easpa ceannaireachta ón Rialtas. Tá sé in am deireadh a chur leis na cleasa agus comhréiteach pá cothrom, atá tuillte go maith ag na hoibrithe seo, a chur i gcrích.

The Government's lack of respect forced public sector workers onto the picket line three weeks ago. That same lack informs the Government's refusal to deliver a fair pay deal. I will cite a figure for the Taoiseach that captures what is the stark unfairness at play here. That figure is €95,000. That is the pay hike that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, has signed off on for the CEO of Dublin Airport Authority. It is an increase far above the total salary of a young teacher or nurse. It was granted with no problem, no drawn out talks and signed off on with the stroke of a pen. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael deliver for those at the top but it is a very different story if you are a nurse, a teacher, an SNA or a firefighter. After ten days of talks, the Government has failed to hear their concerns, failed to deliver a credible pay offer and failed to respond to the

cost of living that is devouring their wages. That pressure has hit home again today as the CSO reveals that energy bills have increased by over 18% in the past year. Where is the Government's urgency to deliver a fair deal?

What the public sees is a distracted Government with its eye off the ball, not treating this dispute seriously. It is a Government unable and unwilling to get the job done. It allows drift and continues to pick a fight with public sector workers. The result is the prospect of another strike next week. If this strike goes ahead, every cancelled hospital appointment, every school closure and every disruption to vital services is on the Government. That is the Taoiseach's responsibility. He refused to put himself in the shoes of a nurse, working long shifts in an overcrowded hospital, and wondering how she will pay her bills, or of the teacher who goes above and beyond but stresses out on how he builds a future.

I visited the picket line three weeks ago. The workers told me very clearly that they do not want to be on strike, yet we face another strike because of a failure of leadership by the Government. On the eve of the last strike, I told the Taoiseach that playing a game of chicken with public sector workers was short-sighted, unfair and wrong.

I told him it would lead to a longer dispute and here we are. Can he now accept it is time to change tack? Will he stop the brinkmanship? Will he respond to the cost-of-living pressure on these workers and finally deliver a fair pay deal?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I again articulate our deep sadness at the very untimely passing of Ciara Mageean. As we stand here at this moment, her family and community are gathering at St. Patrick's Church, Ballyphilip, Portaferry, to honour a truly special person who left a truly special legacy in Irish life. As a European champion and an Olympian, she inspired so many with her outstanding performances, bringing immense pride to her family, her native Portaferry and the entire country. The great dignity and quiet courage she showed during her health challenge only added to her legacy and Ireland's affection for her. Our heartfelt sympathies and those of the entire Government and Oireachtas go to her husband Thomas and to her family and friends. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a h-anam dílis.

I would not accept at all the Deputy's characterisation of the Government's approach to a public service pay agreement or, indeed, to the public service. This Government and the previous Government have invested hugely in the public service. The sheer numbers have increased exponentially since about 2019. Public service employment has grown by about 85,000 since 2019. That does not indicate a lack of respect for the public service, rather, it represents a significant expansion. On average, 13,000 additional staff were recruited each year. We are looking at a significant increase in the Civil Service, now up to 50,000, and at 31,000 additional healthcare staff, over 11,000 more nurses and midwives, and 16,800 more teachers. The expansion of the public service has been very significant.

The last pay agreement, which expired in June, provided increases of about 9.6% cumulatively, greater than inflation of 6.6% over the same period. Between 2019 and 2025, there were pay increases totalling 22.5%, broadly in line with inflation. For the lowest paid public servants, pay was increased by 36% over this period, significantly in excess of inflation.

To give some examples of how public service pay has increased, the starting pay for a teacher and a nurse increased by 23.6% and 28.3% respectively between 2019 and 2025.

The population has grown and there are additional pressures on the public service. That is acknowledged. The Government wants a public service pay agreement. We entered into talks in good faith and continue to engage in good faith. We agreed at the outset a template for the conduct of these talks under the aegis of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. An overseeing panel was created, which trade unions sought, at the commencement of the talks. That overseeing panel, working with the WRC, is now engaging with both sides. In my view, we should allow the talks to continue. The Government is very clear we want to arrive at a public service pay agreement that is sustainable and fair. There is no brinkmanship here and there is no lack of respect here. The expansion of the public service over the last five to six years has been far in excess of anything in the previous ten years because we have been in a position to do it across all sectors, and we will continue to do so in terms of education, health and all areas of the public service. Also, there is a local bargaining dimension and a low-pay element to this that we want to prioritise and focus on.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The last pay deal, as the Taoiseach says, ran out in June and the Government dithered and delayed for months. It ran things literally to the wire and literally to the eleventh hour. It dithered, delayed and played a game of chicken with public sector workers and drove them onto the picket line. Now, after ten days of talks, it has failed to bring forward a credible offer in respect of pay. That is the Taoiseach's track record.

If that is not brinkmanship, the very definition of a delay tactic, designed to face these workers down, well then I do not know what it is. Now we face the prospect of more industrial action and of more strikes next week with all of the attendant disruption and hardship that will bring. That is on the Taoiseach. I am asking him now to change that approach, to come to the table in real good faith with real honesty, recognising that inflation and the cost of living have devoured the salaries of public sectors workers.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond, please. Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The contrast between how the high-flyers are-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, Taoiseach to respond. Time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----treated, with massive pay increases, and the average public sector worker-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, time is up

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----is astonishing and unacceptable.

The Taoiseach: It is not on me actually. We had no hand, act or part in any decision by the trade union movement to make the announcement it made yesterday. That was its decision. From our perspective, we committed to a template governing the pay negotiations and we are

adhering to that template. We want to arrive at a fair and sustainable pay agreement for public servants. Government is committed to its role as a good employer. As I said, we have expanded the number of public servants. We believe that the terms and conditions of employment generally in the public service are competitive, right across the board from pay and increments to pension entitlements and a range of other things. As an employer, we want to be a good employer of public servants and to continue to expand the public service. In the budget, we made a decision on a significant tax package, which will help workers and public service workers in particular. The decision to reduce childcare costs will help public service workers as well as related cost-of-living measures in terms of rent credits and so on-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and cost-of-disability payments-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----which will be significant all round.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I want to extend our condolences to the family and friends of Ciara Mageean and especially to her husband Thomas. Ciara was one of Ireland's greatest athletes. Despite her illness she showed immense courage and bravery, sharing her story and raising awareness of bowel cancer. She remained deeply concerned about others and was outspoken against the genocide in Gaza. We have lost an amazing person. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a h-anam.

Taoiseach, your Government's handling of the talks with public service workers has been an unmitigated disaster. For most of the year, you ignored them, barely bothering to engage before the current pay deal expired in June. This intransigence and arrogance blew up in your face and resulted in the biggest public service strike in nearly two decades. Up to that point, your Government had refused to countenance talks in which the issue of pay was front and centre. It took more than 300,000 workers joining picket lines before you climbed down. Now, just a few weeks later, there will be another day of strike action because your Government has failed to make a credible pay offer. This mess begs an important question: what is your Government at? You have been all over the place all year. You have treated public service workers with barely disguised contempt, allowed the previous deal to expire, refused to discuss pay first and then you eventually climbed down on that. Your intransigence achieved absolutely nothing.

There are public service workers who are barely keeping their heads above water - nurses, gardaí, teachers, SNAs and local authority workers, delivering essential services across the country. They keep us safe, teach our children and look after us when we are not well. Then they go home and wonder how they will put food on the table or pay their soaring energy bills. Let us be clear - if there is another strike next week, it will be the fault of your Government. Your Government has spent more time on internal bickering and rivalries than addressing the

country's problems. You sleepwalked your way into an industrial relations crisis. The question for the Taoiseach now is: what are you going to do to avert next week's strike? Will you personally intervene? Will you ensure a credible offer on pay is finally made?

The Taoiseach: I think your language is completely over the top, genuinely. The Deputy said "barely disguised contempt".

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: This has gone on for months.

The Taoiseach: He said we treat public service workers with "barely disguised contempt".

Deputy Gary Gannon: They do not even want to strike.

The Taoiseach: I attended the annual conference of Fórsa earlier this year. Does that suggest to the Deputy that I treat them with contempt? It was actually a very agreeable conference. We got on very well.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It does if you talk out both sides of your mouth.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: For example, we will have expanded the number of special needs assistants to about 23,000 by the end of this year. Is that treating the public service with contempt? We have expanded the public service very significantly over the past four to five years. Is that treating the public service with contempt? I know you have to do what you have to-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: You will not do what you should do.

The Taoiseach: I know the old line, which is not that imaginative or creative, that "if a strike happens, it is your fault". It is a great line and that is what the Deputy has to say. That is what he is going to say and will continue to say but from our perspective, we entered into the talks in good faith. We agreed a template for these talks with the trade union movement in advance of the talks commencing. By the way, we were available for talks all along prior to that. We made that very clear before any strike happened. We did not have to wait for a strike to say we wanted to get into talks. The template was agreed and it involved the overseeing panel under the aegis of the WRC and Kevin Foley engaging with both sides if an impasse arose. That is all that is happening now. That was agreed over the weekend. We should allow the talks to continue. The Deputy is not a party to the talks. The offers that have been made are not small offers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not credible either.

The Taoiseach: You have had your say.

There is sustainability involved here. We have to think of the wider picture as a Government. We have responsibilities and that is it. We will continue to engage in the talks in

good faith with the trade unions. There is no need for a strike next week. With a will, there is a way to resolving this.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Taoiseach, you have been around Government and politics for decades. You know what normally happens here. When a pay deal expires, a new one is agreed. Under your Government, that has not happened. You have not made a credible pay offer. The media reports are of pay offers below inflation. How is that credible in a cost-of-living crisis? How is that not treating public sector workers with contempt? You owe it to the people working hard to deliver public services and to the public who need those services to resolve this quickly. Make a credible pay offer. Get on with this.

Instead, Taoiseach, you let weeks and months go by months before talks even began because you would not agree that pay would be the first item on the agenda? Where did that get you? It got you nowhere except delays. The Government is too busy with Ministers briefing against each other and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael trying to outvie each other. You have your eye off the ball. When will you actually make a credible pay offer and get this resolved?

The Taoiseach: First of all, earlier this year I did offer an enhanced social dialogue to the trade union movement. We circulated a paper to that effect-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: They need credible pay offers.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, uninterrupted, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: -----in the context of the LEEF.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: They said address pay first.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy-----

The Taoiseach: You are characterising Government as not respecting the trade union movement and not engaging with it; I am just laying out the facts. They said, "Not yet".

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is about pay in a cost-of-living crisis.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: You only see it through one dimension. I cannot be responsible for how others engage or deal with things. All I can simply say is that the Government wants a national pay agreement. It does not believe there is any need for a strike next week. Where there is a will, there is a way. In our view, we should allow the negotiation process to conclude and to enable that agreement to be arrived at.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for welcoming our visitor, Liam Conlon MP to the Gallery.

On behalf of the Labour Party, I extend my deepest sympathies to the husband and family of Ciara Mageean as she is laid to rest today. Ciara inspired a generation of young women to embrace sport. By speaking publicly about her diagnosis, she will also have saved many lives. I echo calls for bowel cancer screening to be extended in her memory. May she rest in peace.

Here we go again Taoiseach - another public sector work stoppage next week, potential strike action on one of the most important days of our EU Presidency. It is just in time for Friday the 13th - unlucky for some, they say, but this is not back luck; this is bad government. Your Government let the last pay deal expire in June, on the eve the start of the EU Presidency, a massive undertaking you knew would place huge demands on public servants. The Taoiseach may not like us saying it but it is the truth that his Government's failure to engage then is what brought about the strike last month by 300,000 public service workers.

Now he is doing it again. Instead of showcasing our country at its best, the EU Presidency is being overshadowed by a pay dispute of the Taoiseach's making.

On his way into Cabinet today the Tánaiste encouraged everyone to dig deep in good faith. The Government might think of engaging deeply and in good faith itself. We understand that one of the sticking points in talks with the unions is the lack of provision for the lowest paid workers. There is nothing meaningful, it seems, for those on less than €50,000 per year. How can the Minister, Deputy Chambers, claim to be pursuing a fair deal for workers while leaving behind those who need the most help? Meanwhile, the same Minister has been busy approving inflation-busting pay rises for the heads of semi-State agencies. Many of these rises are multiples of the rate of inflation. Let us take a few examples. Uisce Éireann's CEO got a pay rise of 43%. The chief executives of Bus Éireann and the Land Development Agency each received top-ups of €50,000. That increase alone matches the total salary a teacher can expect to earn after six years' service. The CEO of the Dublin Airport Authority will draw a wage of €380,000. That is a €95,000 increase compared with his predecessor.

These are eye-watering amounts. Of course we need competitive salaries to attract people to lead our public bodies, but what message does it send to public servants when chief executives receive increases of this magnitude while the Government is reportedly asking those delivering essential front-line services to settle for less than 2% for now? Is it any wonder they are preparing to down tools or looking beyond our shores? The impact is being felt across the country already. The Ombudsman for Children tells us of children missing vital developmental checks because we cannot retain or recruit public health nurses. The public sector is not a charity case. As engagement continues today, will the Government put a serious offer on the table, including meaningful increases for the lowest paid public servants, so that we can resolve the dispute now?

The Taoiseach: I disagree with the Deputy's narrative in terms of how this negotiation has unfolded. The Government engaged very early on with the trade union movement in respect of public service pay. This issue about whether pay was first or last was a complete red herring, if you want my honest opinion about it. The national pay agreement talks are about a national pay agreement. In the name of God, what did you think we were going to be discussing? Let us bring a bit of common sense into the debate now as well. A national pay agreement is about pay, fundamentally. That is what always happens. That is what happened the last time - it was about pay.

The last agreement that expired in June provided increases of about 9.6% cumulatively, greater than inflation over the same period of 6.6%, but for the lowest paid public servants pay was increased by 36% over this period, significantly in excess of inflation. The Government shares the Deputy's view of a prioritisation of lower-paid workers. Again, I do not want to pre-empt the negotiations. Those talks are under way in accordance with the template that had been agreed with the trade union movement at the commencement of the latest phase of the talks with an overseeing panel that was sought by the trade union movement, which was agreed and under the aegis of the WRC. Those talks are ongoing and we should allow those talks to continue.

We are not responsible for people making decisions to set a further strike day. We cannot allow that to undermine our approach to the talks or influence us either. The Presidency is for six months. We have achieved a lot already on a whole range of files and issues from competition in terms of One Market, One Europe, particularly with the Capital Markets Union, a new corporate legal framework for SMEs, enlargement of the European Union and real progress with Montenegro, Moldova and Ukraine. We will continue to work extremely competently and in a focused and ambitious way for the remainder of the Presidency. Parallel with that we want to achieve a fair and sustainable pay agreement. As I said, talks are continuing. We should allow the talks continue between the unions and Government under the aegis of the WRC. That is the logical way to proceed here and that is what we intend to do.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad the Taoiseach said he would be willing to prioritise the lowest paid public servants. That is really welcome and is a very positive sign but nobody can accept his assertion that his Government engaged early in meaningful talks. He keeps referring in his responses today to the last pay deal but that ran out in June. What nobody can understand, least of all nurses, gardaí and teachers on the front lines, is why the Government let that pay deal run out and did not seek to renew it before the expiry date and before the EU Presidency began. There is a passivity that is characterising the Government's response to public servants. That is what is bringing about the anger and people's desperation. People are really struggling out there with inflation running now at 4% and families not being able to afford to keep food on the table or to pay energy bills. We know hundreds of thousands are in arrears on energy bills. Public transport fares are set to increase. People are really hard-pressed.

It is welcome to hear a willingness to prioritise the lowest paid public servants. That is positive. We know in the Labour Party about negotiation. We know nobody wants to withdraw labour. Nobody-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----does it on a whim, but this is now being seen as a last resort in the face of Government passivity and inaction.

The Taoiseach: I do not think that is a fair characterisation at all. The Government's engagement in the talks in the last week has been very proactive-----

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is not a characterisation at all. It is a fact.

The Taoiseach: -----and very fair in terms of seeking an agreement.

Second, the cost of living is the big issue and in the budget we responded to that. Again, in terms of low-paid and low-income groups, and do not take our word for it, objective data shows that we looked after the lowest income groups more than anybody else. They were the biggest beneficiaries of the budget. We brought in significant tax cuts, which will take effect early next year, in the form of a €1.3 billion income tax package for both private sector and public service workers. The reductions in childcare costs, which were significant, will impact on workers and other measures in the budget will take pressure off workers. This is necessary given the cost-of-living pressures people are undoubtedly under. If the Deputy compares the tax cuts in our budget to any other budget across Europe, there is not a comparison. That is the reality. We have expanded the public service very significantly as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: There is no question about that either.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: On behalf of the Green Party I would like to join with the tributes paid to Ciara Mageean. She is a loss to athletics and a loss to our country.

The UN Convention on Biological Diversity has been meeting in Yerevan in Armenia for the last two weeks under the theme of taking action for nature. The conclusions from this annual meeting were stark. In its State of Biodiversity Action report, the secretariat of the convention determined that fewer than half of national biodiversity improvement targets were reported as being on track. Here in Ireland we see similar threats to nature. Last year, the Central Statistics Office found that between 2006 and 2019, 2.7% of species were no longer found to exist in the State. They are described now as being "regionally extinct". It also found that 14.7% of species were considered "at risk of extinction". Bees were among the most endangered. About 3% of bee species were regionally extinct and 30% were threatened. It is bees I want to focus on today.

In the last government, the Green Party took steps to protect one species of bee, the native Irish honey bee. With the agreement of the government, which the Taoiseach was part of, a Green Party Private Members' Bill, the Protection of the Native Irish Honey Bee Bill passed all stages in the Seanad. That Bill is now awaiting its Second Stage debate here in the Dáil. The Taoiseach may recall that at the centre of the law is a proposal to stop the import of non-native honey bee queens into Ireland to prevent the hybridisation of the native Irish honey bee. Recent research shows that up to 25% of honey bees in Irish are now non-native - a big jump in a short period of time. Research was commissioned by the Department of agriculture to support the Bill, with the final report delivered to the Minister's desk in September 2025. That is over a year ago now.

I raised the matter with the Minister for agriculture three weeks ago and he was not able to give me clarity on when that research will be published. There is also no clarity on whether the Government will continue the policy of the last government, support the ban on the importation of non-native honey bees and protect the unique characteristics of the Irish honey bee. There is a lot of support for this Bill from Deputies and Senators in government and also in opposition. I want to work with the Taoiseach and the Minister for agriculture to get this

important proposal over the line but it would help to have clarity on two specific points. First, when will the research about the native Irish honey bee, which is sitting on the Minister for agriculture's desk, be published? Second, does the Taoiseach support the central plank of my Bill, to protect the native Irish honey bee, and will he work with me to get this Bill passed during this Dáil?

The Taoiseach: I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, who was in Yerevan in respect of the biodiversity COP and led the way in respect of a number of issues there. He has done a fine job, generally speaking, such is his love for all things to do with nature, and he shows his enthusiasm for that. Over the past five years - Deputy O'Gorman was in the Government - we have substantially enhanced the National Parks and Wildlife Service. I think we have more than doubled the team working there. We have developed and designated a number of new national parks, and I hope that over the next year or two we will be in a position to designate more national parks and to enhance our resources for biodiversity more generally. It is a subject I am very keen on and interested in and one I have overseen with a particular focus on the well-being of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and I continue to do so as Taoiseach.

In respect of the native Irish honeybee Bill, I share, generally speaking, the Deputy's objectives and aspirations. A memo came to the Government last week on the matter. I better be careful. I was going to say the matter is not black and white but, as the Deputy knows, that is the unique characteristic of the native Irish honeybee.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Can it sting?

The Taoiseach: In any event, there are about 330 imports, I think, into the Republic. We have thousands into the North of Ireland. That creates a problem for us. If things continue for the next 50 years, we potentially face the extinction of the native Irish honeybee. We will have to watch the legal framework and make sure anything we do is in conformity with EU frameworks and so on.

In short, I am willing to work with the Deputy. I sought the research on the native Irish honeybee myself and read it very quickly over recent days. I am concerned about its prospects over a 50- to 70-year timeframe. We need to do something in respect of protecting it. The imports have come a way down. There was a substantial increase during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is interesting, but they have come back down to what might be called manageable levels for the moment. We have no control over that into the future in terms of higher volumes of imports. We should increase consumer awareness of our native honeybee and the product from it, which is far better honey, health-wise and well-being-wise, for all of us, as opposed to imports. My understanding is that the research will be published without delay. I will talk to the Minister for agriculture on that. The deliberative process is not totally over but effectively over. I will work with the Deputy to see how we can progress this issue.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I welcome the Taoiseach's concern on the issue. Having read the research, he is clearly even more up to date with the real threat that exists to the Irish honeybee. This is not just a question of protecting nature; it is a question of our country's food security. As regards the Irish honeybee and its hybridisation, which we see at the moment, this

process risks ending a unique genetic resource that has evolved very specifically towards the Irish climate. This process puts our bee population at risk, and there are consequences of that for food production and plant diversity. Those consequences are absolutely enormous, and even if they are over a 50- to 70-year timeframe, that is still hugely consequential.

There is a proposal on the table. There is actually legislation drafted. It has passed the Seanad; it just has to pass this House. I ask the Taoiseach specifically on my Bill whether he is willing to support it. I am not precious - we can amend it - but will he use that as a vehicle to face this real threat to the native Irish honeybee?

The Taoiseach: As I said, I am very concerned about it in terms of the future. I agree 100% with the Deputy that it is inextricably bound up with our overall sustainability, biodiversity, food chain and so on. There are some issues and hurdles we would have to jump. I would be prepared to work with the Deputy and I will ask our colleague, the Minister, Deputy Heydon, as well to engage with Deputy O'Gorman in relation to this and how we can navigate this particular issue. I pay tribute also to our former ambassador in Paris, Niall Burgess, who has been a great champion of the native Irish honeybee and who briefed me quite a number of years ago on the intricacies of this issue. It is a very serious issue, so I am very much focused on helping.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions. Just before I move to the Order of Business, I too add my voice to pay sympathy to the family, friends and colleagues of the late Ciara Mageean. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 35, I call on the Chief Whip, Deputy Mary Butler, to move the arrangements for this week's business.

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Finance (No. 2) Bill 2026 - Financial Resolutions (without debate; to be moved together and decided by one question and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Statements on 'Our Rural Future 2026-2031' (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Hospital Overcrowding, Safe Staffing and Winter Preparedness, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements and Q&A on post European Council meeting of 15th – 16th October 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133 (not to exceed 1 hour 33.5 mins, followed by 20 mins Q&A and Ministerial response for 5 mins)

- Short-Term Letting and Tourism Letting Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)

- Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (to conclude within 1 hour)

- Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (to conclude within 1 hour)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Protected Disclosures Enquiry, selected by Independent Technical Group.

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2026, sponsored by Deputy Alan Kelly.

Proposed Arrangements for this week’s business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) private members’ business shall be taken following Government Business with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the following arrangements shall apply to the proceedings on the Motions for Financial Resolutions for the Finance (No. 2) Bill 2026:

(a) the motions shall be moved and decided together by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

(b) the proceedings thereon shall be taken without debate; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

3. the Statements on 'Our Rural Future 2026-2031' shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	3	9	10	3	5
Total: 2 hours 15 mins					

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

1. notwithstanding any in Standing Orders:

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

(b) the Statements and Q&A on post European Council meeting of 15th-16th October 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133, shall be taken at the time when the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) would normally be taken, and on the conclusion of the Minister's response to the statements, the sitting shall stand suspended for one hour; and

(c) the weekly division time may be taken later than 8.45 p.m. with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the Statements and Q&A on post European Council meeting of 15th-16th October 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133, shall not exceed 1 hour and 58.5 minutes, and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

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

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

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

(d) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	15	10	5	9	3.5
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	5	8	3.5	5	8
	SF	ITG	Gov	OM	
Mins	3.5	5	8	5	
Total: 1 hour 33.5 mins					

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Short-Term Letting and Tourism Letting Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20
Total: 3 hours 24 mins					

4. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Transport; and

5. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) which were to be taken on Tuesday, 13th October, 2026, shall be taken immediately following the SOS and without any change to the allocation of priority Questions to that Minister and not otherwise affecting the current sequence of Ministers or rota for priority Questions as ordered by the House; and

(b) Second Stage of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2026 may be taken earlier than 8.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are this week's arrangements agreed to?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Deputy Mary Butler: Surprise, surprise.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Today the High Court delivered a damning judgment on the Minister for justice's criminal legal aid reform. "Grossly unfair", the judge said, and "demonstrably illogical". This is damning. We need statements and questions urgently in the Dáil to find out what the Government will do to sort out this chaos and crisis as soon as possible.

Deputy Gary Gannon: "Grossly unfair" and "demonstrably illogical". For four months we have raised the issue of the chaos that exists in our courts because of these attempts at reforms. It is sloppy work on the part of the Minister. We need statements and we need them fast. We need to know how a resolution will be achieved and how the Minister intends to bring this absolute farce of his own creation to an end. We need those statements this week.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In the spirit of how this House can constructively honour the memory of Ciara Mageean, would we be able to schedule, at the earliest possible convenience, detailed statements on how we can reform and extend bowel screening in this country? Bowel Cancer Ireland has very articulately put forward what we can do. I know the Minister for Health has stated that she intends to expand and lower the age, but we should have a debate on that at the earliest possible convenience.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government has forced hundreds of thousands of public sector workers, on whom this country relies, in health, education, councils, to take strike action because - the details are now emerging - it is offering them pay that amounts to a pay cut in real terms. It is asking workers to go out and work for less, looking at the percentages the Government is offering. There needs to be an urgent discussion here about why the Government is insisting on asking public sector workers to take a pay cut-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: With the AGRIFISH Council meeting coming up, can we have the Minister in for a debate on the state of the fishing industry before the meeting? Issues like Rockall, Scotland, bluefin tuna and a fuel cost crisis are leaving the industry on the edge. One fisherman sent me his fuel bill for being out five days last week in his trawler. It was €22,851.81. This is not sustainable. The Minister needs to come before the Dáil to lay out his plans for the fishing industry.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have listened intently to the suggestions. I will take them and consider them, but the Order of Business stands for now.

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

Deputies: Not agreed.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boland, Grace.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	

Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Daly, Pa.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Devine, Máire.	
Chambers, Jack.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Clendennen, John.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Connolly, John.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Cooney, Joe.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cummins, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Currie, Emer.	Gannon, Gary.	
Daly, Martin.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Gould, Thomas.	
Dillon, Alan.	Graves, Ann.	
Dolan, Albert.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Healy, Seamus.	
Fleming, Sean.	Hearne, Rory.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawless, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lawless, James.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nolan, Carol.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	

Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Neville, Joe.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connor, James.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		

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

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I welcome the Taoiseach's intention to bring a memorandum to Government before Christmas on Ireland's constitutional future. There is no doubt that momentum towards unity is growing and that the question of reunification is now a pressing political reality. A united Ireland offers the best future for all of our people and now is a moment for leadership. Preparations for change have to begin now. People across the island must shape the debate and get clear answers on the practical choices ahead. What is the timetable for the Taoiseach's initiative? When precisely does he propose to bring this memorandum to Government and, crucially, what engagement with parties from the Opposition will he have in advance of bringing that memorandum?

The Taoiseach: The Government has shown very strong leadership on this question for quite some time. One of the more significant achievements to date has been the legacy framework, which tends to get ignored now that we have reached an agreement. I welcome the fact that it

has gone through the House of Commons. I hope it can get through to the House of Lords, so that, for the first time in 30 years, we will have an overarching framework for all those who have lost lives and their families to try to get closure.

The shared island initiative has been the most consequential initiative since the Good Friday Agreement and the most significant investment in Northern Ireland since the foundation of the State, with over €1 billion allocated already.

A new initiative to hear all voices and not see this pathway as one of victory over anybody or a sense of inevitability but, rather, a pathway to enable voices from all traditions to be heard and heard properly is under consideration by the Government. When I have further details, I will come back to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: In August, the CEO of Cork University Hospital, CUH, raised serious concerns about the impact staff shortages will have on patient safety in the hospital this winter. We are now in winter, and the situation has got worse and not better. These concerns were echoed by the consultant committee, the clinical directors and countless front-line staff, yet they have been dismissed by the Minister for Health. Staff shortages have resulted in over 4,000 people waiting over 24 hours in the accident and emergency unit in the first half of the year, CT scanners operating at 50% capacity, paediatric epilepsy supports being cut, 21 beds being stuck in limbo, a reduction in maternity services and the surgical hub shambles. Staff morale is on the floor as a result.

The latest we have heard is that the hospital CEO has been threatened with a performance review for speaking out. It is an attempt to silence dissent. Is it appropriate to threaten hospital CEOs who speak out about patient safety concerns with disciplinary action? Does the Taoiseach accept the concerns expressed to him directly by nine clinical directors in the hospital? Will he commit to an independent assessment of the headcount to ensure there is adequate staff in CUH to deliver vital services in addition to the work being done by HIQA?

The Taoiseach: Funding to Cork University Hospital increased from about €303 million in 2019 to €600 million in 2025. That is a very significant investment. There has been a huge increase in staff. It has gone from about 3,456 in 2019 to about 4,870 by the end of 2025. It is now at 5,194.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: We need an independent assessment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, there are to be no interruptions.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, that is a 41% increase. The Deputy said the CEO was threatened. By whom?

Deputy Liam Quaide: Andy Phillips.

An Ceann Comhairle: No. That was rhetorical.

The Taoiseach: I have serious question marks over the veracity of that assertion. People need to be very careful about what is being asserted.

Deputy Liam Quaide: It is in the minutes.

The Taoiseach: For example, my office was referenced in some newspaper reports, and it was completely false.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Will the Taoiseach at least speak to the Minister about this?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik is on her feet.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Will the Taoiseach agree to an independent assessment?

The Taoiseach: I do not have three minutes to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik is on her feet.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: In a significant ruling today, the High Court found the new criminal legal aid rules brought in by the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, to be "grossly unfair" and "demonstrably illogical". This judgment must be desperately embarrassing for the Minister, and it confirms that what we have described as his Rambo approach to reform has failed.

We all agree on the need for reform, but the Minister's approach has caused chaos in the criminal courts over some months now, with impacts on vulnerable witnesses and persons in the system. We can all recall the very distressing case of the female complainant cross-examined in person by a man who allegedly threatened to kill her and made appalling threats of violence, so the impacts on the administration of justice have been very serious. Now that this judgment has been given, and I know the matter is listed for hearing next week, how does the Minister propose to address this? We have all been pressing the issue. The Labour Party has been pressing for meaningful engagement with the Law Society to resolve matters and ensure that there can be no more chaos and impacts on the administration of justice. How does the Government propose to address this?

The Taoiseach: We will first consider the judgment the High Court delivered today. The court has requested further submissions from both sides in advance of any final orders being made. It should be noted that the aspects of the new scheme which have been the subject of adverse commentary have already been adjusted or are the focus of ongoing discussions with the Law Society. As the Deputy knows, arising out of earlier engagements with the Law Society, the Minister has already changed aspects of the new scheme, including increasing the flat fee from €455 to €520. He also agreed to split the payment of the fee and confirmed that separate and distinct cases appearing for the first time on different days would attract a new legal aid certificate for the same accused person.

The Minister is entitled to reform the system, particularly following the review of the Department, which raised very significant issues, in particular that cases with criminal legal aid were taking significantly longer than those without it even though the sentencing outcomes were similar, and that there were more appearances and longer trials due to an appearance-based fee structure. That needs to be reformed.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The 2006 wind turbine guidelines are 20 years out of date. As somebody who believes that wind has to be part of our renewable energy future, I have been asking questions on this now for nearly 16 years.

3 o'clock

Various Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and Ministers and taoisigh have said the new guidelines are coming soon. I have received loads of parliamentary question replies on this. Meanwhile, massive wind turbines and wind farms are being built without proper regulations or guidelines. Last November, I brought forward this Wind Turbine Regulation Bill to the Dáil. The Government did not oppose it but said we would have guidelines within three months. I asked the Taoiseach again in March and there was still no movement on it. In that reply, the Taoiseach actually said he understands the issue but let us be honest; when these guidelines emerge, they will probably lead to a reduction in the number of wind farms.

Here we are 12 months later and there is still no progress. When will have these wind turbine guidelines?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Is the real reason for the delay for the past 16 years what the Taoiseach said to me here in March-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is in other Members' time.

Deputy Brian Stanley: -----that they may put restrictions on development? When will we have them?

The Taoiseach: I note the Deputy's commitment to renewable energy, which we articulated at the beginning of his question when he said he was in favour of wind farms. The Minister for climate has been working on this with the Minister for housing, who is responsible for new national planning statements.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It has been 16 years.

The Taoiseach: Let me finish. My understanding is that the Minister for climate and the Department have concluded their deliberations on this. It is now with the Minister for housing and he is beginning the formulation of a new national planning statement. Planning statements will now replace guidelines. On the exact timeline for this, I would hope we will have this national planning statement before the end of the year.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It might happen before Christmas.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is pointless to ask the question if you will not allow the answer, Deputy. I thank the Taoiseach and call Deputy Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: People with intellectual disabilities are at the very bottom when it comes to services. That includes social housing, where Before We Die, BWD was set up, to transport, where adults with disabilities are left at home because there is no transport service available. Look at the proposed day-care centre for adults with autism in Dunmanway. It was promised and is not being delivered, even though people gave the grounds to the State for free. Respite services in west Cork for adults with intellectual disabilities is at a level of zero. Families are seriously stressed, from Bandon down to the Castletownbere. This led to a peaceful protest two weeks ago in Bantry town. There is real frustration and serious burnout among families whose care, in some cases, is being carried out around the clock. Millions of euro have been collected down through the years from the west Cork people for respite. They were proud to give it but they expected delivery that never happened. Local CoAction management can only do so much with the funds it has. In areas like Bandon, Clonakilty, Bantry, Skibbereen and Castletownbere, will there be a fair and equal rollout of much-needed respite and will the Government match funds collected to deliver? If so, when?

The Taoiseach: There was substantial funding allocated last year to the section 38s and section 39s in respect of disability, both respite and residential, and also in terms of the financial issues many had. In terms of intellectual disability and housing, the Minister for housing has engaged with the local authorities across the length and breadth of the country and has engaged with the Minister for disability with respect to new quotas, essentially, or ring-fenced housing for people with disabilities. Every year, we are building about 10,000 new social homes. A portion of those will have to be ring-fenced for people with disability, particularly intellectual disabilities. We met with the Before We Die campaign recently. This is a commitment of Government. Working with local authorities, we will ensure that will become a reality on the ground in every local authority area.

In terms of transport, as the Deputy knows, the Minister for Transport has announced a new mobility grant scheme where grants will be available for adaptation to cars.

Deputy Michael Collins: What about respite?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to engage further. Time is up.

Deputy John Connolly: Yesterday, the last remaining judicial review challenging the planning permission for the Galway city ring-road was withdrawn from the High Court. For the first time, a much-heralded and much-needed transport project for Galway city now has full planning permission, which is very welcome. I would like the Taoiseach to take the opportunity to reiterate the Government's commitment to the completion of the project in the shortest possible timeframe. In doing so, I ask that the Taoiseach joins with me in seeking those authorities responsible for implementing the compulsory purchase order with the homeowners

involved would do so in an empathetic, expeditious and engaging manner. There is much concern among those homeowners, as the Taoiseach will accept.

The last thing that is complementary to the ring-road is that it forms part of the Galway transport strategy of 2016. That is the only transport strategy of the regional cities that has not been reviewed. The NTA has recently commenced the review of the Galway transport strategy but it is unclear when there will be an opportunity for public consultation. It is even unclear when there will an opportunity for local authority engagement on the issue. I ask the Taoiseach to take up that issue.

The Taoiseach: First, I pay tribute to the good Deputy. I remember earlier this year, he raised the issue of the Galway ring-road and the need for engagement and conciliation in respect of the judicial review. The Deputy identified the possibility of making a breakthrough in respect of it and he said that to the Minister involved. That has come to pass. I welcome the breakthrough on that. The Government is absolutely committed to its completion. This is critical infrastructure for Galway, in particular. There is also the situation concerning homeowners who, for a long time, have essentially not been able to do anything with their homes and who did not have any long-term clarity in respect of this. We are possessed of the need to engage with those homeowners, working with the local authority, to get their issues resolved as quickly as possible. I will see what I can do on the strategic review. A public consultation should be part and parcel of that.

Deputy Colm Burke: The programme for Government commits to developing a new national cardiovascular health strategy. The previous one expired in 2019. That commitment is particularly timely following the EU's safe hearts plan and the Commission's recent proposal for a Council recommendation on cardiovascular health checks and early detection. With Ireland currently holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we have an opportunity to show leadership in this area and ensure our national policy reflects developments at European level. Can the Taoiseach indicate when the national cardiovascular health strategy will be published? Will it reflect the EU focus on prevention, screening, early detection, treatment and ongoing care?

The Taoiseach: I do not have the exact timeline. It will cover all of the above and the issues the Deputy outlined. I remember the first national cardiovascular strategy. I had the honour of implementing it from 2000 to 2004. Brian Cowen had published it in late 1999. It was a game changer for cardiovascular health in this country. I believe in national strategic approaches to the key diseases. At that time, the two big killers were cancer and heart disease in Ireland. That was for lifestyle reasons and a whole host of reasons. We did not even do cardiac rehabilitation after surgery.

Deputy Colm Burke: The previous one expired in 2019.

The Taoiseach: We have made huge progress. One of the reasons for the lifespan extension and growth in Ireland has been those strategies. The stroke strategy followed on. There will be a further strategy. I will talk to the Minister about it and we will get it published. They are a good approach so we are for them.

Deputy David Cullinane: The West Waterford Athletic Club has ambitious plans to develop a new regional athletics facility at St. Augustine's College in Dungarvan. The club has secured a 50-year lease and is working towards an eight-lane, 400 m track, full track and field facilities and a clubhouse with an estimated investment of €4 million. There is currently no athletics facility in west Waterford or east Cork. I know many of the athletes travel to either Waterford city or Clonmel. I know Waterford City and County Council is supportive of this project, as are many athletic clubs. Given that it straddles two counties, it would be fantastic for the people in west Waterford and also east Cork. I ask the Taoiseach to contact the relevant Minister and ensure this is properly looked at in relation to funding. The cost is €4 million. Obviously, the clubs themselves will try to fundraise, which they are doing. Any support they can get from the State would be really welcome.

The Taoiseach: The Government is extremely supportive of sport. Over the past number of years, and particularly with sports capital grants or the large-scale sports capital grants, we have been responsive to a lot of big submissions. Athletics is a key sport and I think the group involved have been in touch with all of the Waterford Deputies. I knew there was a movement in Midleton for something as well. I do not know whether they are engaged in this particular project or not. The Deputy is saying this project has the premises and land. We will have to look at it in more detail to see whether it is more suitable for large-scale sports capital grants as opposed to the sports capital grants. It probably would not be in the ballpark of what is required. It is a good initiative and we will endeavour to be supportive.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Irish people ought to have a referendum on the Government's proposals to get rid of the triple lock. The Taoiseach has said in the past he is tired of being reminded of his comments that the triple lock is at the core of our neutrality but I do not think it is any harm to remind people that was his position. The Taoiseach has also acknowledged in the past that concessions in relation to neutrality were essential to the government passing the Lisbon treaty the second time around. Given those commitments were made, relied on and that the Taoiseach has acknowledged they were relied on, this should be put to the people.

Talking to people in Cork over the weekend, and people have all sorts of different views on the triple lock, the primary issue they had on such a fundamental change to our foreign policy, neutrality and defence policy was that there ought to be a referendum.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is wrong there. He is incredible in his capacity to present a false narrative and almost make it a truism. We have never had a referendum on something that is not part of the Constitution.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There is nothing to prevent it.

The Taoiseach: We have never had one, so the idea we would have a referendum that neither amends, deletes nor adds to the Constitution is undermining this House.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: No, it is not.

The Taoiseach: It is, because we have parliamentary democracy, which means governments can legislate.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is for the birds.

The Taoiseach: When we passed the Nice referendum, we made a constitutional change which prevented Ireland from being part of an EU mutual defence pact. That is in the Constitution. That is what we agreed back at Nice, not anything else.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There is nothing stopping this.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is saying we want to be part of a warmongering Europe. We cannot be. There is a constitutional prohibition on that, but the Deputy never says that because he is just interested in false narratives.

Deputy John Cummins: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Third, I was the person who negotiated Lisbon. We amended the European defence Act-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: You relied on that, and you went to the Irish people on the strength of that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Whitmore is next. The Taoiseach's time is up. The Deputy is on her feet.

The Taoiseach: I was principally responsible for that debate. I know what was agreed. There were a hell of a lot of issues there, including getting our Commissioner back, if you remember the posters - or did you oppose that as well?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Including that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Whitmore is on her feet.

The Taoiseach: I would say you campaigned against that

An Ceann Comhairle: Through the Chair and with respect for the Chair's direction. The Deputy is on her feet.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The promises you made are the ones you are reneging on.

The Taoiseach: I apologise, a Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, reported today that electricity prices have risen by over 18% since last October. At the same time, the International Energy Agency has warned of gas shortages across Europe due to the war in Iran if that issue is not resolved. We already have hundreds of thousands of people who are struggling to pay their electricity bills at the moment. There are 324,000 people and households in arrears on their electricity bills. That is 14% of the population. There is a crisis in this country when it comes to the cost of living and the cost of energy.

The Taoiseach's Government established the national energy task force to look at energy affordability and ascertain what can be done to help people. That was set up in June 2025, and we have seen nothing substantive from it. When will it produce its energy affordability action plan, and how high do gas and electricity prices have to get for the Taoiseach's Government to start treating this with some sense of urgency?

The Taoiseach: We are treating this with urgency. It is the biggest issue facing the world, never mind Ireland. It is the cause of enormous issues in terms of cost-of-living pressures. We are in difficulty because we depend too much on imported fossil fuels; that is a fundamental challenge for us. All across Europe, there are huge cost-of-living pressures on societies, families and households. In the budget, we were in a position to do more than most across Europe in endeavouring to alleviate the pressures on people through fuel allowance increases and the fuel income support schemes, which we have again extended from August to December 2026 for particular sectors of our economy, such as haulage and food production. There is also the exceptional aid for farmers in terms of fertiliser and energy costs, the deferral of certain aspects of carbon tax increases and the measures we took in the budget in social protection and carbon tax.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I raise the issue of constructive evictions taking place as a result of the Government's new rental laws introduced this year. The Taoiseach told the Dáil that new rental measures would not impact negatively on renters in existing tenancies. He said, "The legislation will not have any impact on the 240,000 people who are currently renting", yet I have been contacted by existing tenants who are being forced out of their homes because of the Government's new rules. I have here an eviction notice served by IRES Real Estate Investment Trust, one of the State's largest vulture fund landlords, which issued to one of its tenants because IRES has refused to allow the tenant to replace a tenant who has left. Large corporate landlords are refusing to allow tenant swap requests, forcing tenants to leave in order to get around the new rental rules so it can charge full market rent to new tenants.

I raised this with the Minister for housing five months ago and he failed to act.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Government's housing policies are resulting in the highest level of evictions. Will the Taoiseach intervene on this?

The Taoiseach: First, I do not agree with Deputy Hearne. The housing policy is increasing far greater supply than anything the Deputy has proposed would do.

Deputy Rory Hearne: There is the highest number of evictions since the pandemic.

An Ceann Comhairle: You know the rule, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: In fact, most of what the Deputy has proposed would actually reduce supply and create more pressure on the marketplace. On any specific issues, the reforms were needed. The Housing Commission recommended the need to reform the existing rental sector. A review was then done on foot of that recommendation, which the Minister moderated in favour of tenants by bringing in greater protections for them. There can be anomalies in any given situation that emerges, but we will examine that specific case the Deputy has raised.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Communities across Celbridge and Maynooth, particularly Crodaun, are experiencing power outages consistently and far more frequently. This is quite frustrating given the issues with water in the past. Those issues have improved but significant numbers of housing units are being built, and while that is extremely welcome, it is leading to interruption when it comes to power supply and what we have seen with water supply.

Considering the investment the Government is making in improving the grid, communities are looking for a sustainable and quality service when it comes to power, particularly for those working from home and those who have healthcare issues. I ask that there be increased engagement with the ESB to ensure that these power outages are reduced and that communities can be certain of an improved service.

The Taoiseach: That is a very serious issue and we do not want that happening to large towns like Celbridge and Maynooth. I will certainly engage with the ESB to see what is happening there and the background to it, as well as what can be done to alleviate the situation.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: In August 2024, the autism innovation strategy was published by the Government following the publication of the report of the Joint Committee on Autism, which I chaired. We have a commitment in the programme for Government to legislate for that strategy. One of the recommendations of the strategy related to the autism innovation fund, which was set up to support parents' groups that have been doing so much work to support families throughout the country. To date, €2 million was allocated in 2025 and €2 million was allocated in 2026, but the application process has never opened for parents' groups to apply for funding.

I work with a group that has been set up in my local area, Orbit Autism in Longford, in which parents work to support their kids. When can these parents' support groups apply for funding to support the work they do in their communities before the end of this year, so that this money can be spent to benefit the children it was intended to benefit?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Carrigy for raising this issue, which is a very important one. I am told officials are finalising the most effective approach to administering the funding, including the consideration of an open funding call. However, I will engage on this and make something happens now because the Deputy is saying this has gone on for two years. That is unacceptable, so something will have to be sorted.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The people of Clonmel in Tipperary are fine, hardworking, decent businesspeople, but we have been a scourge of a drug problem, with gangs dealing drugs on the streets. I appeal to the Taoiseach to meet with all five of us Oireachtas Members from south Tipperary regarding Garda numbers. They have never been as low in Clonmel and south Tipperary, in Carrig-an-Suir, Cahir or Cashel - never.

We got two new recruits recently and there were three in for transfers. We had a crime task force, which is being stood down because of a lack of numbers. We need this badly. Gardaí are telling me we are in danger of losing the town of Clonmel to these criminal, marauding gangs, who also go out into the surrounding areas marauding and terrorising people. It is an awful situation. I am pleading with the Taoiseach to try to get more gardaí in there and I urge him and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to meet with the Oireachtas Members. We do not want a situation like Waterford, but we are on the verge of it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: First, I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. Certainly, the scourge of drugs is a horrible one, particularly in its impact on families, communities and society more generally. We have progressively increased the number of gardaí, which is close to 15,000, and as more and more recruits come out of Templemore, the Garda Commissioner is allocating gardaí the length and breadth of the country. Obviously, it is not everywhere yet. He has not been able to do it in sufficient numbers everywhere but we will have a further number of graduates in the next output from Templemore. We will see what we can do in respect of Clonmel.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Last night Dublin City Council rejected an emergency motion brought forward by my colleague, Independent Councillor Kevin Breen, calling for urgent intervention to protect Trinity Sports and Leisure Centre. We are looking down the barrel of losing another swimming pool in north Dublin. We have already lost the pool at the Northside Shopping Centre in Coolock. We simply cannot afford to lose another one. It is a vital community facility, relied on by local schools, swimming clubs, sporting organisations, families, and hundreds of people throughout my constituency. With the meeting scheduled for late November, I ask the Taoiseach to instruct the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, or the Minister, Deputy Browne, to engage directly with Dublin City Council before we see another pool close. We need action in north Dublin. I am constantly talking about sports clubs and facilities. We cannot afford for another pool to close.

The Taoiseach: I do not know the background to this. Is this a council-owned facility?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: It is a council-leased facility.

The Taoiseach: I do not know the background as to why the council is closing it.

An Ceann Comhairle: You have to engage, Deputy. We cannot have back and forth. The Taoiseach to engage.

The Taoiseach: I will speak to the Minister to see what the story is, or what the background to this is. I cannot commit the Minister to action until I know the full import of what is involved. I do not know the reasons behind the city council's decision but I will certainly speak to the Minister for sport in respect of it.

National Minimum Wage (Inclusion of Construction and Construction-related Craft Apprentices) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I move:

> That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the inclusion of construction and construction-related craft apprentices within the application of the National Minimum Wage Acts 2000 and 2015 and, for this purpose, to amend the National Minimum Wage Act 2000.

When the National Minimum Wage Act 2000 was introduced it was determined that apprentices would be excluded from the Act in recognition of the unique nature of apprenticeships which combine practical work with structured training. However, there is substantial research showing a relationship between low apprenticeship pay and poor completion rates. Surveys carried out by Connect Trade Union and my colleague, Teachta Mairead Farrell, alongside discussions at committee level have highlighted the financial difficulties facing apprentices.

Connect Trade Union reported that apprentices cannot afford to stay in their chosen craft and that some are being forced out of their training or to emigrate because of low pay and exploitation by unscrupulous employers. The findings are concerning. Some 46% of respondents to the Connect Trade Union survey reported earning less than €7 per hour during a stage of their apprenticeship. More than one quarter reported being paid less than agreed minimum wage apprenticeship rates and more than 90% reported being paid less than the national minimum wage during a stage of their apprenticeship.

Apprentices are dropping out at a higher rate than third level students. The average age of someone starting an apprenticeship is now approximately 21 years. Many apprentices are adults with rent or mortgage payments, household bills and family responsibilities. Expecting them to survive on less than €8 per hour during the early stages of training is increasingly unrealistic in the cost-of-living crisis. Low pay makes apprenticeships less attractive, contributes to drop-outs, and undermines efforts to develop the skilled workforce Ireland urgently needs.

The Low Pay Commission has recommended abolishing sub-minimum wage rates for workers under 20 years of age while the National Youth Council of Ireland has also called for the abolition of sub-minimum rates of pay. Furthermore, the committee for further and higher education, following meetings with apprentices, providers and stakeholders, has recommended introducing a minimum wage floor for apprentices.

Construction and construction-rated craft apprentices should be the starting point for reform. Ireland needs more skilled craft workers to address the housing crisis. Improving pay would help retain apprentices, increase completion rates, and strengthen the future construction

workforce. The Construction Industry Federation at WorldSkills Ireland 2026 stated, "Ireland will continue to struggle to tackle its housing shortage unless it makes a much bigger commitment to apprenticeships."

We all know of the crisis in housing but future housing requires a skill commitment today and we need to encourage young people to enter construction apprenticeships. We know from costings that it may not be feasible to introduce in one go placing all apprenticeships in minimum wage, so prioritising construction and construction-rated craft apprenticeships would provide a practical first step with other apprenticeship programmes considered for inclusion in the future.

This Bill will place those in craft and construction apprenticeships on minimum wage during on-the-phase jobs only. Year 1 is 13 weeks paid on-the-job phase and year 2 of the on-the-job phase is 26 weeks. The estimated annual cost of this is €43.16 million. The proposed funding source for this is through the National Training Fund which has a recorded surplus of €364 million in the previous year. This fund is financed by employer contributions and is intended to support training and skills development. The exemption introduced in 2000 recognised the distinctive nature of apprenticeship training. However, evidence of financial hardship, low pay, and apprentices leaving their chosen trade demonstrates the need to reconsider that approach.

Introducing a minimum wage for construction and construction-related craft apprenticeships would be a targeted and practical first step and would help apprentices meet living costs, improve retention, and support Ireland's need for skilled construction workers. With an estimated cost of €43.6 million under the proposed 2027 rate, funding through the National Training Fund could provide a route to reform, with the longer-term aim of extending minimum wage protection to other apprenticeships.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Finance (No. 2) Bill 2026: Financial Resolutions

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I move the following Resolutions:

THAT section 10 of the Finance (No. 2) Bill 2026, which relates to the measures contained in Schedule 3 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 40 of 1997) providing a definition of

the relevant capital sum be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 531AA of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for definitions for the purposes of Part 18C, which relates to Domicile Levy, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution by providing that a donation qualifying for tax relief under section 847AA Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 will not be deducted from an individual's "world wide income" for the purposes of Domicile Levy.

THAT section 847A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for tax relief on donations by companies and individuals to "approved sports bodies" for funding certain projects be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution to impose an upper limit on the tax relieved donations made by an individual in a year of assessment of €1 million or, where the donor is associated with the approved sports body, 10 per cent of the donor's total income.

THAT section 847AA of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides a scheme of tax relief for donations to certain sports national governing bodies (NGBs), be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution to impose an upper limit on the tax relieved donations made by an individual in a year of assessment of €1 million or, where the donor is associated with the NGB, 10 per cent of the donor's total income.

THAT schedule 25B of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which contains a table outlining the specified tax reliefs available to certain individuals which are restricted under Chapter 2A of Part 15 of that Act (limitation on amount of certain reliefs used by certain high income individuals) be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to the Resolution to provide that donations made under section 847AA of that Act, for the purposes of the high income individuals' restriction, cannot be used to reduce an individual's taxable income.

THAT section 667D of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which contains provisions in relation to succession farm partnerships, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 413 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, which contains definitions and interpretation provisions relating to the group relief measures in Chapter 5 of Part 12, and section 752 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, which contains provisions designed to prevent a tax avoidance scheme involving a dividend stripping device, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) be amended by the insertion of a new Part 27A to provide for the establishment of individual investment accounts, to be operated and taxed in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) be amended by the insertion of a new section 739DA to provide for the tax treatment of investors in investment undertakings whose units are held in a recognised clearing system in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT Part 35B of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, which provides Controlled Foreign Company rules to prevent the artificial diversion of profits from controlling companies to offshore entities in low or no tax jurisdictions and also provides for certain exemptions from the application of those rules, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT Chapter 5 of Part 29 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which deals with the taxation of companies engaged in knowledge development, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 247 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which contains provisions providing relief for companies for interest paid on certain loans, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT Schedule 1 of the Finance Act 2024 (No. 43 of 2024), which provides the rate of e liquid product tax, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 67B of the Finance Act 2002, which provides for the imposition of betting intermediary duty be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 132 of the Finance Act 1992, which provides for definitions of categories of vehicles for the purposes of Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT), be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution by providing that an increase of 1 per cent be added to the rates of VRT charged for Category A vehicles from rate band 3 to rate band 20.

THAT section 84 of the Finance Act 2025 (No. 18 of 2025), which provides for an amendment to section 125A of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999) is to be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 125A of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999), which provides for a stamp duty to be levied on health insurance contracts that are entered into or renewed between authorised insurers and their customers in each quarter, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT section 126AB of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999) which contains provisions in relation to stamp duty levied on certain financial institutions be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) be amended by the insertion of a new Chapter 4A, Part 42, to be referred to as "Administration of permissible ceiling of general de minimis aid and agricultural de minimis aid", having the effect of restricting reliefs or entitlements in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT the provisions contained in Part 4A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for the implementation of Council Directive (EU) 2022/2523 of 15 December 2022 on ensuring a global minimum level of taxation for multinational enterprise

groups and large scale domestic groups in the Union, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

THAT the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) be amended by the insertion of a new Part 22C to provide for a new tax, to be referred to as "derelict property tax", to be charged, levied and paid in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [75642/26]

2. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [75629/26]

3. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [75655/26]

4. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [64308/26]

5. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [64833/26]

6. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [64287/26]

7. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [64343/26]

8. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [68790/26]

9. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [69879/26]

10. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [69903/26]

11. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [69904/26]

12. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [69992/26]

13. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [70048/26]

14. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [70058/26]

15. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [71965/26]

16. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [72035/26]

17. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [76176/26]

18. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [76648/26]

19. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [76679/26]

20. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [76549/26]

21. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [76696/26]

22. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will next meet. [76737/26]

23. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [77412/26]

24. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [77481/26]

25. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [77499/26]

26. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on infrastructure will meet next. [77534/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 26, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on infrastructure last met on Monday, 19 October and is scheduled to meet again on Monday, 19 November 2026. The Cabinet committee drives infrastructure delivery, ensuring that our unprecedented investment is delivering real results and addressing our infrastructure deficit. The revised national development plan provides for more than €275 billion in investment in critical infrastructure throughout the country until 2035. This includes more than €24 billion to be invested in key transport programmes nationwide. A further €12.2 billion will be invested in the water sector, improving water quality and rural water services and enabling new housing and upgrading of our water and wastewater infrastructure. The landmark investment of up to €18.9 billion, approved by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities in its price review 6, is supported by a Government investment of €3.5 million equity in our overall grid. This is the largest single investment in the country's electricity network in its history.

More than €20 billion of Exchequer capital investment was allocated in budget 2027, an increase of €1.1 billion plus 5.9% on the 2026 allocation. That is the highest annual spend in the history of the State on the lines of the Government's commitment to delivering the infrastructure our country needs. We have allocated €5.5 billion to the Department of Transport for next year to enable a record level of investment in public transport services and the road network throughout the country.

Some €1.28 billion has been allocated to accelerate the transition to a secure, sustainable and affordable energy sector. We have committed €2.35 billion to Uisce Éireann for 2027. This investment will progress more than 400 projects next year, including the eastern and midlands region's water supply project, the greater Dublin drainage scheme and the wastewater treatment plants upgrades in counties Limerick and Waterford.

Large, once-in-a-generation projects, such as MetroLink, are advancing at pace with an additional €6 billion allocated in the budget over the period 2027-2030. Tendering is progressing and significant enabling works are to start onsite from early next year.

The housing activation office is accelerating delivery of critical infrastructure needed to unblock housing supply through 82 projects which are being funded under the €1 billion housing infrastructure investment fund to directly enable the delivery of 86,000 new homes.

We are coupling all of this investment with the reform of our delivery systems so that critical projects and programmes are completed as efficiently and as quickly as possible. This includes many legal, regulatory and process reforms such as the introduction of a scale of fees for environmental judicial review, which provides a clearer cost framework for applicants. It aims to prevent unpredictable costs for the taxpayer and reduce the burdens of prolonged delays to public infrastructure. In addition, it is now possible to designate strategically important projects as critical infrastructure allowing them to be fast-tracked through approval processes. In July, the Galway city ring road was among the first transport projects to be designated as critical infrastructure.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Last year, the Taoiseach told this House that the Kilkenny northern ring road extension was extremely important for a growing city like Kilkenny. I welcome the fact that the project is now on the move with surveys starting on the ground this month. As the Taoiseach knows, the completion of this road is of vital strategic importance to Kilkenny. It will give the city a new crossing over the Nore taking traffic out of the city centre and making our streets safer for everyone. It is also key to opening up new housing and planned growth on the northside of the city and giving local businesses the access they need. The council and the people of Kilkenny are 100% behind this project. As the project develops, will the Taoiseach commit to ensuring the Government makes the necessary funding available to see this road completed? He is very familiar with the road.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A first-year economics students in any of our universities will tell you that price, rent and access to housing are determined by supply but also demand. At a time of static supply, the Government is purposefully increasing demand through the issuing of tens of thousands of visas into the country. A total of 50% of people in emergency accommodation at the moment are non-Irish citizens. In Dublin, this figure is 58%. A total of 45% of mortgage drawdowns in some areas are taken up for people who have recently come to the country. In 2024, the Government issued 40,000 working visas and 60,000 student visas. The Government is building 30,000 homes. Can it not draw the dots between the two difficulties?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Dublin Mid-West is one of the constituencies in the State that is delivering more and more housing growth. While this is very welcome, it is also putting unprecedented pressure on our local infrastructure. On many occasions, I have raised with the Taoiseach the need for concerted investment in a medium-term strategy to deliver DART+ South West as soon as we can by bringing forward funding for that and to ensure that the Luas line to Lucan gets over the line in terms of the emerging preferred route being published this year, along with a railway order as soon as possible afterwards. Houses are being built and people will need the public transport links to back those houses up. It is important that DART+ South West and the Luas line to Lucan are prioritised.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The south Galway flood relief scheme is a critical scheme to protect homes in the south Galway area from flooding, which has had a devastating impact in the past. This scheme has been delayed for many years. Last week, we were informed that construction works as part of the project are not expected to start until 2029. This is hugely concerning for residents in the area whose homes are at risk and left exposed to potential flooding. I am asking the Taoiseach to commit here today that this scheme will be designated as a critical infrastructure project to ensure that OPW and planning approval can be expedited so that people's homes are adequately protected.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Wastewater capacity is a major obstacle to housing delivery across Ireland with towns like Edenderry in my constituency unable to reach their full potential. The Government has found a practical solution through modular wastewater treatment units. I raised this at a meeting of the Oireachtas Committee on Infrastructure and National Development Plan Delivery where we heard that no developer-led schemes had yet progressed. Having listened to people in the industry, I believe the remaining obstacle is financial. We have

the solution. Will the Taoiseach consider safe funding for these units to unlock badly needed houses across the country and not increase the price of housing to purchasers?

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I wish to raise the ongoing delays with the BusConnects project in Cork. This project was initially announced in 2021 with the initial consultation phase but over five years later, we have seen little or no implementation. It was hailed as being transformational for Cork bus services with a 53% increase in the services available, 11 dedicated sustainable transport corridors and so on, but implementation has been chronically slow. I ask the Taoiseach to take the matter up with the NTA so that we can get a firm timeline on the implementation from here on.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Underfunded and underdeveloped wastewater treatment in Dundalk is impacting the delivery of housing and future industrial development. I think of my own estate, Bay Estate, and places like Cluan Enda, which are at constant risk of flooding. While we need catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, protections, the fact is we are impacted because 80% of Dundalk consists of joint control systems that are not up to scratch in any way, shape or form. If we are talking about the Coes Road pumping station or the treatment plan, what was previously 2027 is now 2029 and what was 2029 is 2034. We need to see delivery.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Dunsink urban area plan is potentially one of the most ambitious public housing projects seen for decades. This is an opportunity for thousands of affordable homes. However, the way it has been dealt with so far does not bode well. First, the density increased from 7,000, indicated two years ago in a question that I put on the council, to 18,500. It has now gone down to 16,000. It was to be dealt with in one day and councillors had to insist on five more meetings. The way this has been handled does not bode well for the future of the project. The Government needs to step in and see that the infrastructure is delivered.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Digital infrastructure is a critical component of the AI transition we are seeing in our economy and society. I acknowledge the Taoiseach's establishment of a Cabinet subcommittee for AI and the success of the AI summit, which should be a yearly event. One of the recommendations of the Oireachtas Committee on Artificial Intelligence was for a citizens' assembly on AI. I have proposed it in the discussion document that I generated for my party's Ard-Fheis this Saturday. Is a citizens' assembly something the Taoiseach might consider as a way of getting through the misinformation and misapprehension and involving the public trust that is out there regarding the AI transition in our economy and society?

Deputy James O'Connor: The route stop selection of the N25 Midleton to Youghal scheme is due for publication before the end of this year. This is an important infrastructure and national road upgrade that we have long fought for with the Taoiseach's co-operation. Could we get an update about the status of Government support for this project? We estimate the cost could be anywhere from €250 million up to €400 million. We need to see it completed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: For many years, we campaigned to get social and affordable housing on the Shanganagh Castle site. The Land Development Agency, LDA, has finally built it but now serious problems are already emerging in this flagship development. The council just did a survey of the 100 cost-rental homes and found that 40% of them did not meet standards. There are problems with disability access and heating systems and residents are being charged €120 a month for parking. The council asked the LDA to come in twice to discuss these problems but it did not turn up and neither did the private company that has been hired to manage it. Could the Taoiseach tell the LDA to hold itself accountable to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and the people of the area for these serious problems?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The data centre construction companies that the Taoiseach and his Government have been trumpeting as success stories have turned out to be rogue employers of the worst sort. Thanks to an Investigate Europe investigation, we know that workers on Irish-run sites have suffered serious injuries, including electrocution, a TB outbreak, rat-infested accommodation, unpaid wages, excessively long hours and union busting. Unions have won €1.3 million in compensation from Irish company BenBau at a Microsoft site in Sweden. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Is the Taoiseach confident, like his former Cabinet colleague Tom Parlon, that these companies comply with labour legislation?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The Taoiseach knows my work on private wires, plug-in solar systems and long-range storage but, ultimately, it is all undermined if our electricity grid cannot keep pace. Two weeks ago in the Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, I questioned EirGrid about renewable connection offers that depend on PR6 being delivered on time. We have seen PR6 and previous infrastructure being delayed so I asked EirGrid, which refused to answer my question three times, whether it will ensure that ESB and EirGrid provide clear connection platforms and if they fall short, who is responsible.

Deputy Michael Collins: Roads in west Cork have serious infrastructural deficits. Bypasses in Innishannon and Bandon, the northern relief road, the southern relief road and the Bantry bypass have all been talked about for the past 20 years. The last bypass involving any real expenditure was the Skibbereen bypass, which was built in 2003. The condition of the Ballydehob Road is shocking. There are no passing bays on the M71. I do not understand why we are left behind.

I see today the Boher-Scart R572 road near Castletownbere and the Dromdeegy and Dunmanway roads have now been put off so the people in Castletownbere will not get their roads surfaced this year as was promised. What is wrong?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The failure to provide adequate wastewater infrastructure and the failure of Uisce Éireann to properly manage and upgrade existing facilities is contributing to the discharge of untreated and inadequately treated sewage into our waterways in Meath and Louth. This issue was very well addressed at a large public meeting in Navan last night. What is the Government going to do to address this failure? Will the Taoiseach commit to direct intervention with Uisce Éireann, an urgent assessment of wastewater infrastructure failures affecting Meath and Louth and a clear, funded timetable for necessary upgrades?

Deputy Liam Quaide: Cobh, one of Cork's largest towns, remains dependent on a single road connection to the mainland. The proposed Great Island connectivity scheme has been under consideration since 2019 yet the Government's current timetable does not envisage construction beginning until 2030. There is a serious resulting constraint on housing development, economic activity and the safety of residents. Will the Taoiseach intervene to accelerate this project, provide the necessary funding and publish a credible timetable for delivering a second access route to Great Island?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Households, families and businesses in Dungarvan have endured repeated water outages, including prolonged ones, over the last week. I want to acknowledge the Uisce Éireann workers on the ground restoring supplies and the work of my colleague, Councillor Kate O'Mahoney, in supporting affected residents. However, serious questions now need to be answered about the causes of these outages, the conditions of the network serving Dungarvan and the investment required to prevent a repeat. Households and businesses have faced considerable disruption with communication from Uisce Éireann also falling far short of what people should expect. This cannot be treated as an isolated operational difficulty. The people of Dungarvan deserve answers.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: People are shocked by the decision by Iarnród Éireann to facilitate the greenway along the disused railway between Collooney and Charlestown. We have serious concerns about the future of the western rail corridor. Can the Taoiseach clarify the Government's long-term intentions for the strategic rail corridor, when the Claremorris to Athenry section will be delivered and whether he will commit to a clear timeline for extending the rail services northwards to Sligo?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is 21 Deputies for the Taoiseach to respond to, please.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for the variety and range of questions presented. I am familiar with the north Kilkenny ring road. I must have said to Deputy Cleere a couple of months ago that I thought it was very important and now he has put the words back into my mouth to reinforce my commitment to the completion of the road. Lesson learned. The Deputy can be assured that the Government is committed to getting this road completed.

Deputy Tóibín raised the issue of student visas and work visas. A lot of the work visas relate to our health service. Some of them are renewables. They are high but work permits generally are for the areas of the economy that need extra workers – our health service, some technology areas and so on.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Hotels, pubs, restaurants.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Not really actually, no. I mean-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The general ones are higher.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, are you-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Educational.

The Taoiseach: The issue will be whether we want to try to work out a programme to switch off the economy to a certain extent. These are the choices facing us. We cannot slow things down. We can reduce students into the country. We can reduce work permits if we wish but then we would have to be prepared for the implications of that. We need to map out the implications of that in terms of services and so on. It is not a simple issue and it is not something that can be done just at the switch of a button.

Deputy Shane Moynihan raised the DART+ South West. He has raised this consistently in the House. I have been pressing the Minister for Transport and for climate on this. I hope we will have some good news on this soon as well as the Luas line to Lucan, and the importance of public transport more generally.

Deputy O'Hara raised construction work on the flood relief scheme. If he had been told it was 2029, I presume this was by the engineers. We cannot rush a flood relief scheme. We cannot skip crucial milestones in terms of public consultation in flood relief schemes.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: We have to expedite the planning.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is rhetorical, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, on this and to the OPW. These are very complex engineering projects. They have to be done right. What happens is people give a timeline and then we say, "We were told it will not be until". The date that is given is the date at which people feel they will complete it, I presume, or else when they will start construction or whatever, but these all have to do with the planning, design and so on.

On wastewater treatment plants, I think Deputy McCormack was suggesting that we would now support-----

Deputy Tony McCormack: It was wastewater modular units.

The Taoiseach: Yes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, it does not work like that.

The Taoiseach: I am just seeking clarity. That is all.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know but there are still 17 other Deputies.

The Taoiseach: Do not worry. The point is the Government has been funding a lot in the construction sector. Eighty percent of all housing built in the country is now supported by the State. We want to get some action on these modular plants. There has not been enough delivery

yet and the nature-based approach has not yet yielded results considering we have given it the green light. We are working on that with Uisce Éireann and the EPA.

Deputy Michael McGrath raised Cork BusConnects. It is fair to say there was huge consultation on that. There was a lot of public consultation before the documents were ready for planning to go in. That probably took a lot of time since the announcement in 2021. I was involved in a lot of representations on behalf of people, as no doubt the Deputy was too. It created a lot of heat in different communities but ultimately I think they have arrived at an accommodation with a lot of communities and residents. I hope we can progress it as quickly as possible. It would be a transformation with bus corridors and transport in the city.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised Dundalk and CFRAM.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Uisce Éireann as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy had a lot in his question. He probably got the most in in 30 seconds of anybody. I will see what we can do with Uisce Éireann, and the OPW I presume, in relation to the implementation of CFRAM.

On Dunsink, again, the Government does not run every local authority. We are asked repeatedly in the House to intervene on what is happening in local authorities. The Deputy is saying it has gone down to 16,000 houses. Is this the rezoning?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: No, the-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That was rhetorical.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach was asking me.

The Taoiseach: In any event, I will ask my team to try and find out the issue there.

The AI summit was a very successful summit with some very heavy hitters and good insightful speakers. A lot of companies came to Ireland. I am not so sure that doing it annually is the correct way to deal with something. Sometimes, you will not repeat the same thing again and again but you do need to have sequels, follow-ups and things like that. I have asked my officials to look at the prospect of sectoral approaches to AI. We have an Oireachtas committee as well. I will keep an open mind on the citizens' assembly but I know the Oireachtas committee is bringing in a lot of people which is where the action is at the moment in respect of public policy.

It is amazing that Deputy James O'Connor campaigned for something that had small beginnings in terms of money, and now he has quoted somewhere between €250 million and €400 million.

Deputy James O'Connor: Ballpark.

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

The Taoiseach: I think this road has to be done and this issue has to be dealt with because of the traffic queues, the number of workers on that corridor and the towns that have expanded beyond compare in very recent times. That will be needed and the Government will have to find the money to make sure we do that, but I think we are in a position to do it over the next number of years.

On social and affordable houses in Shanganagh, I have not had the same account as the Deputy. Is he is saying 40% of houses are defective?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The cost rentals.

The Taoiseach: It is 40% of the cost rentals. I will engage with the LDA on that and try to get a report on what is happening there.

On data centre construction, I do not know what companies Deputy Murphy is talking about. He said companies.

Deputy Paul Murphy: BenBau, Collen and others.

An Ceann Comhairle: Rhetorical.

The Taoiseach: Again, I will have to get a proper presentation on that. I am not so sure everyone in Ireland engaged in data construction. Many of these companies are global, not the ones the Deputy is talking about but other ones, and I do not think we can be branding everybody under the same title of rogue employers. I do not think that is fair. I have not seen the report the Deputy referenced.

The good news for Deputy Heneghan is the Minister is making a lot of progress on private wires legislation and plug-in solar. The electricity grid and EirGrid were mentioned. We met EirGrid last week. It has outlined significant investment plans after 2030. The issue with EirGrid for everyone in the House is that the only thing that will slow things down is objections. Whether they are to power lines or connections, they are a big factor in progressing any grid infrastructure. We will have significant issues in the time ahead trying to get proper grid resilience and trying to strengthen and extend the grid and have a stronger grid. That is one of the big issues facing us.

Deputy Collins named a lot of bypasses and I am familiar with all those areas. We are allocating a lot of resources. There is a lot of inflation in road construction and it is eating into the resources, but we will engage with Cork County Council about progress on a number of those roads.

On sewage in Meath and Louth, we are working with the OPW and Uisce Éireann to try to deal with those issues. I do not have the specifics of the issues he referenced in Meath and Louth, but the Government, working through the agencies, is allocating unprecedented resources to deal with these issues.

The Government is supportive of the Great Island connectivity scheme. There were planning issues in respect of it which had an impact on housing and relocation of industry from the docklands in Cork city to the east. We are supportive of the second access route. A lot will depend on the planning, design and so forth.

Deputy Conor McGuinness praised the Uisce Éireann workers on the ground in Dungarvan who restored the water. The reorganisation of Uisce Éireann, as regards it moving out of the local authorities and so on, was a factor for a number of years. I think it has been completed so I hope we will continue to see an enhancement and improvement of the water network.

The greenway is important. A lot of people wanted it and these are not mutually exclusive objectives. The all-island rail review predicted this stretch will not be in a position to accommodate a railway until approximately 2050. It is 2026 so meanwhile a greenway could do a lot for the area. We have already sanctioned funding for the extension of the western railway. We have made substantial progress on it and will continue to do so. We have allocated substantial resources to it. We should not lose sight of that either. The greenway can be an important amenity and create additional economic benefits for the region.

Cross-Border Co-operation

27. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [75643/26]

28. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [75656/26]

29. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [64936/26]

30. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [64349/26]

31. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [64302/26]

32. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [64352/26]

33. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [68791/26]

34. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [69880/26]

35. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Shared Island unit in his Department. [70051/26]

36. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [70059/26]

37. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [75815/26]

38. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [76177/26]

39. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [76649/26]

40. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [76697/26]

41. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [77413/26]

42. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [77482/26]

43. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in his Department. [77502/26]

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies will appreciate that we are now three minutes into the time for the next question. If it is okay with the Taoiseach, we will take his full response as read into the record.

The Taoiseach: I would like to be able to read some of it. We can take three minutes off the whole lot or we can go for three minutes longer.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well then, we will add on time. I remind Members we cannot have a back and forth once Deputies have asked their questions.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputy Paul Murphy will try not to do that.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, everyone needs to undertake not to do so. We have fewer Members, but to get an honest answer.

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 27 to 43, inclusive, together.

The programme for Government and the revised national development plan set out an ambitious agenda for building our shared island, backed by a total €2 billion commitment to

the shared island fund to 2035. We are forging ahead with this investment and co-operation agenda across all sectors.

The Narrow Water Bridge reached a major milestone in its construction on 20 October. Major steel components of the bridge arrived from Belgium at Carlingford Lough for assembly on site in the coming months. The bridge will do far more than connect two shores. It will bring communities closer, strengthen links between the Mourne Mountains and the Cooley Peninsula and help to unlock new opportunities for recreation, sustainable tourism and economic development across the region. I look forward to seeing the bridge take shape in the months ahead and to the lasting benefits it will bring for communities on both sides of the lough.

On 23 June, the Government made a funding commitment of more than €377 million from the shared island fund to resource 12 new projects to be delivered as part of the initiative between 2027 and 2030. Among these capital allocations are €193 million to improve rail infrastructure and travel times between Dublin, Belfast and Derry; €35 million for the continuation of the hourly frequency service between Dublin and Belfast to 2030; €40 million investment in offshore renewable energy servicing facilities at eligible ports North and South; and a €3.5 million contribution to cricket grounds development in Belfast as part of the joint hosting by Ireland and the UK of the International Cricket Council, ICC, Men's T20 World Cup in 2030. There are also shared island fund contributions to enable major new co-operation programmes up to 2030 on water quality in Lough Neagh catchment areas North and South, with €33 million allocated; early years education; digital creative industries; industrial sustainability; a new support centre as part of the North West Cancer Centre at Altnagelvin; Border-area tourism development; and a docklands bridges delivery partnership. This brings to more than €1 billion the total investment by the Government from the fund to date, with more than 50 major all-island projects and programmes being supported by the fund.

The latest dialogue phase of the shared island initiative, the shared home place programme, commenced this year. This invites people across the island and beyond to explore, through a heritage and culture lens, the question of what a shared home place means to them, past, present, and future. A number of components are being taken forward by the Heritage Council, national cultural institutions and a diaspora voices project through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The shared island media initiative, led by Coimisiún na Meán, has a new shared island sound and vision strand, which will also include options for programming and productions in response to the shared home place programme.

The shared island research programme continues to provide high-quality evidence and analysis of the island as a whole in economic and social terms. All research is available at a new repository, *gov.ie/sharedisland/research*, which I launched on 29 June, to host and increase accessibility to the more than 50 shared island research programme outputs to date. Further ESRI shared island work is in train on health inequalities, economic trends, productivity, regional inequality, gender-based violence and care of older persons, to be published over the coming months.

Finally, implementation of the programme for Government commitment to a new North-South statistical series is being taken forward by the Central Statistics Office, CSO. There was a first publication on 3 June, Ireland and Northern Ireland: A Regional Economic Comparison.

The series by the CSO, in consultation with its Northern Ireland counterpart, will provide further comparable data on social and economic measures across both jurisdictions.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): The first speaker is Deputy Devlin. There are a lot of speakers. I ask each one to take 30 seconds and then we will have a transfer and answer.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Taoiseach. Given the popularity, success and demand for shared island funding, including the €10 million the Taoiseach referenced for the digital creative industries innovation programme announced by the Minister, Deputy James Lawless, in mid-October, will he outline some of the key priority schemes for the period 2027 to 2030?

Deputy Brendan Smith: The shared island initiative is not just a concept now. It is an important programme of investment which will help to realise the potential of many of the natural resources on this island. I particularly welcome the focus on broader tourism development, especially in the area of regenerative tourism. The Taoiseach was in the Cuilcagh Mountain area with me on the Cavan-Fermanagh border, where he saw first hand the Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark. I welcome the investment he approved for that tourism initiative.

I also welcome that he approved the commissioning by the National Economic and Social Council of a study of the opportunities and challenges facing the central Border region. We have particular challenges in that region, both North and South, because we do not have any major urban centre. I hope the work will proceed as rapidly as possible to identify the opportunities because far too often in the past, currency fluctuations and so on destroyed our economies on both sides of the Border at different times. I therefore welcome that development.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: There is no volume.

A Deputy: There is no microphone.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Can the clock be stopped?

The Taoiseach: We can hear the Deputy.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Yes, but it might not be recorded.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: He is going over to the Opposition benches. The flexibility of Deputy Crowe is to be commended.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I think this was Deputy O'Gorman's seat so it is a kind of in-between seat.

The shared island unit has demonstrated the immense power of cross-Border investment from the A5 upgrade to the landmark €50 million investment in Casement Park.

4 o'clock

However, as we build world-class shared sport infrastructure, our competitive sporting structures must also evolve. The success of the women's all-island cup proves that cross-Border football works. It commands a massive public appetite and it can break down those age-old divisions. However, the men's domestic game remains structurally fractured and an all-island national team remains a distant ambition. If rugby and hockey can compete, win and unite as one island on the sporting stage, why not soccer? Will the Taoiseach commit that the shared island unit will actively engage with both the FAI and the IFA to explore the possibility of a fully unified league structure here on this island under a single historic all-island football association that truly represents everyone across this island?

Deputy Erin McGreehan: The shared island initiative has real potential to strengthen the Irish language and our shared heritage. Omeath Park House has huge history. It was built by John Obins Woodhouse from Portadown and later hosted Coláiste Bhríde, founded by Eoin MacNeill, where Pádraig Pearse is believed to have written the Irish Proclamation. Omeath is the home of the Irish language in the north east and right along the east coast. The Fadgies came from Omeath and set up the first urban Gaeltacht in Belfast. I want the shared island unit to invest in this community, in the Irish language and in protecting this history.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the new Government body that is tasked with scoping out models and, I assume, challenges in relation to different constitutional futures in Ireland. Perhaps the Taoiseach could give details. This means research and preparations on the possibility of Irish unity. I assume this is Government leading out in relation to the issue. This does not take away from any work being done as regards reconciliation. Are there plans for a forum where we can have the conversations that need to happen on what a new Ireland would look like? This should not be held up by particular issues happening within political unionism at the moment.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The one thing we share on this island is a danger of gender-based violence and we have the femicide epidemic. By my count, there have been four femicides in the North and 11 in the South this year. By femicide, I do not just mean women being murdered; I mean women murdered by men because they are women. The rate in the South has doubled since last year. Women's Aid has had an increase of one third in calls but not in funding. Why has Women's Aid in the North had its core funding cut completely and utterly when there is a femicide epidemic?

Loredana Morosanu, the latest femicide victim, exhibited signs of violence and distress and sought help, but still got killed. Why did the justice Minister see fit to spend his time pulling up the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre about a consent advertisement when there is a femicide and gender-based violence epidemic on this island? I really think he needs to be held to account for that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I was in Newry last night meeting with People Before Profit members who are part of the SOS Daisy Hill campaign, which is about the hospital in Newry from which the Southern Trust has decided to relocate maternity services to Craigavon hospital. Thousands of people have been marching in Newry because of this. The shared island unit comes into this because 71,000 people in the Republic use Daisy Hill Hospital. For them, it is the nearest acute hospital. The problem is with consultants. Is the Taoiseach engaged with this very serious issue which is affecting, on a cross-Border basis, the acute and maternity services for Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry. Will he engage with it? Should we not use the shared island fund to try to assist in developing an all-Ireland health service which will not dismantle maternity services and other services in Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I ask people to stick to their time if we are to have any chance of an answer.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Someone living in the North who loses a loved one can contact one government service, called Tell Us Once, and it informs all relevant state bodies. No such thing is available in the South. Instead, people have the upset about correspondence still coming to the loved one who has passed away and the hassle of contacting multiple State agencies. Will the Government commit to introduce a similar tell-us-once service in the South to enable those whose loved ones have passed away to contact the State once and it then informs all relevant Departments?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I join the Taoiseach in welcoming the repeal and replacement of the legacy legislation in the UK House of Commons. It was notable that some MPs raised concerns on committee stage over the Irish Government's commitment to fulfil its obligations to work with the UK Government as a result of this Act. Will the Taoiseach commit to ensuring that the Irish Government will fulfil its obligations to ensure that legacy is something we properly address? A core part of reconciliation has to be restorative justice. I was reminded of that as Brian Stack's family were here two weeks ago. Will the Taoiseach commit to ensuring that restorative justice is a part of the legacy and the resolution in relation to the Troubles?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the announcement of the new Government body to be tasked with scoping out the models and challenges for different potential constitutional futures. I ask the Taoiseach to indicate a timeline? Will it be before Christmas, which is the expectation? What opportunity will the people of Ireland have to submit to this research and planning exercise because the people of Ireland want to be part of this conversation?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Talking about a shared island goes back to the need to talk about our shared electricity grid. There are ongoing delays with the North-South interconnector. If EirGrid is issuing grid connections for renewable projects that depend on major transmission upgrades, it should be reassessing those delays. I have asked this repeatedly of EirGrid and I ask the Taoiseach to ask EirGrid. We are talking about €19 billion in planned grid investment for our shared island, for the North-South interconnector and for all of Ireland. My question is simple: who is ultimately accountable for delivering that infrastructure on time? If EirGrid is issuing connection offers and the grid is delayed, can the Taoiseach ensure it reassesses those

offers? I understand we need investment in our grid from renewable projects, but we need guarantees that the grid will be able to take them.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Taoiseach has acknowledged that the shared island initiative is not enough to prepare for Irish unity. Will the body that is proposed to examine the case support a proper process of planning for a united Ireland? Will that process involve all communities and all perspectives? Will there be an opportunity for people from all across this island to feed into that process and to have their say? The conversation has been ongoing for a long time, but it has certainly gathered pace over the last number of years. People want to have their say and feed into that process. That road to Damascus conversion to the planning process is really welcome, late in the day as it might be, and people are up for the conversation. I am eager to have space provided for communities all across the island of Ireland to engage in the process.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I also welcome the announcement for the preparation for the constitutional future and I look forward to getting the details of that. The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, has significant investment capacity but its statutory remit currently restricts investments to the Twenty-six Counties. Given the considerable infrastructure and economic development needs and opportunities that would benefit the whole of the island, can ISIF's remit be expanded to allow for investments in projects in the North, thereby complementing the shared island fund and supporting balanced economic development across the island?

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for their contributions. I appreciate Deputy Devlin's comments in respect of shared island. I outlined some of the key allocations that will be focused on over the next number of years in my earlier reply. The Dublin-Belfast-Derry rail infrastructure will involve an investment of about €193 million up to 2030. The Minister for Transport and his Northern Ireland counterpart are taking forward this major investment project to boost rail connectivity between Derry, Belfast and Dublin. The work on a set of agreed projects, North and South, will increase line speed, capacity and service resilience, in line with the all-island strategic rail review, which we produced some years ago under the shared island unit, and the joint rail project prioritisation strategy.

This is co-funded with aligned investment by the Department of Transport and the Northern Ireland Department for Infrastructure in both the Dublin-Belfast and Belfast-Derry lines. It builds on the strong partnership approach between the Government and the Executive on planning a co-ordinated investment in rail infrastructure and services, including the €700 million Enterprise fleet replacement programme, the contract signing for which I attended in Belfast in May, and which is in receipt of €165 million from PEACEPLUS. There is, therefore, significant stuff on rail.

The continuation of the hourly frequency service to Belfast is a significant impact of shared island funding. We are now providing funding for the next three years, until 2030, for the Belfast-Dublin line. The hourly frequency service was introduced in October 2024. It effectively doubles rail connectivity between Dublin and Belfast, as the two largest cities on the island, supporting economic and societal connections. There has been a 40% increase in passenger numbers in its first year.

We have an offshore renewable energy ports development scheme. A total of €40 million has been allocated to that. The idea is that the Minister for Transport, in consultation with his Northern Ireland Executive counterpart, is overseeing progress of a new offshore renewable energy ports development scheme. It will enable progress next year with eligible projects at an advanced stage of development. By investing on an island-wide basis, the scheme will increase the capacity, agility and resilience of offshore renewable energy, ORE, in many areas and support the development of island-wide supply chains for ORE.

We are contributing to the cricket grounds in Belfast in terms of the redevelopment of cricket facilities at the Stormont Estate in Belfast. That will support the hosting of the T20 Cricket World Cup 2030. The programme for Government commits to an all-island approach to that. The Executive, Cricket Ireland and the Northern Ireland Civil Servants Sports Association are also funding the project.

I can go on to the issue of water in Lough Neagh-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Please do not. We have a lot of questions.

The Taoiseach: A total of €33 million was allocated to improving water quality in the Lough Neagh catchment area. That is now under way until 2031. Both Departments are also contributing funding. Over €10 million is being provided by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and over €13 million is being provided by Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Some €13 million has been provided to early learning skills and early learning and childcare services across the island. The digital creative industries has been allocated €10 million to strengthen those industries across the island, delivered by the Higher Education Authority. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, and I announced that on 16 October. The sustainability challenge fund has been allocated €20 million, and so in. There is also healthcare co-operation.

Deputy Brendan Smith raised the issue of Border tourism and Cuilcagh UNESCO Geopark. He first brought this to my attention and the shared island initiative enabled for that to be purchased by the State to create, in essence, a nationally controlled park. We are now developing a tourism project there as well. There are also other tourism projects, particularly in Carlingford and Mourne, to complement the work of the Narrow Water bridge so that these areas become areas of destination in future from a tourism perspective.

I hear Deputy Smith loud and clear in terms of the central Border region. That study is extremely important. There is a lot we can do into the future to create greater economic output and activity, which would benefit North and South.

Deputy Crowe raised the issue of the A5 upgrade, which we are fully committed to. That is being funded directly out of our NDP-----

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I referred to football associations.

The Taoiseach: I am coming to that, but the Deputy also mentioned the A5. In terms of football, we do not try to prescribe or overly interfere with the running of things. There is a long history. David McCullagh's recent book, *From Crown to Harp*, is a very good publication.

From the very beginning, following partition, both football associations went their separate ways, almost independent of the politics of what was going on at the time. There have been different attempts over the years to try to create greater synergy and harmony between the two football associations. I would love to see that. I will put it this way to the Deputy. Shared island funding is available for cross-Border collaboration and shared programmes between soccer in Northern Ireland and soccer in the Republic. I hope the two associations could continue to engage on that.

Deputy McGreehan raised the interesting history of Omeath Park House. I will engage with her in respect of that in terms of the Irish language and the heritage there.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised reconciliation, which is very important. The shared island initiative is separate from any work. One of the successes of the shared island initiative is that all shades of opinion and all traditions have engaged with it in different communities in an open and constructive way. It is important that we protect that, without any preconditions. In terms of a new pathway and how we approach the future constitutional frameworks on this island, we need to bring as many voices as possible to the table, and do it in a way that is not just nationalists and republicans talking to each other. That has failed in the past. The Good Friday Agreement was based on the principles of people coming around the table to get-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): There are seven questions outstanding. I ask the Taoiseach to please try to get to them.

The Taoiseach: Under the shared island initiative, we have worked with Women's Aid and provided funding for a joint approach between the National Women's Council of Ireland and Women's Aid in respect of gender-based violence. We want to do more projects with Women's Aid in respect of this issue. The Deputy is correct; it is a grave issue. We have real issues here, North and South, in respect of it.

In response Deputy Boyd Barrett's question, we do not run the health services in the North. That is a matter for the elected representatives of Northern Ireland and for the Executive. There may be a background issue to the relocation of maternity services. Every health service has had strategic reconfiguration of services. It does not mean the end or closure of any particular hospital, but it can mean different things are going on in different hospitals. We contributed significantly to the cancer and heart centres in Altnagelvin Hospital. We do invest-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Engage on Daisy Hill Hospital.

The Taoiseach: -----in Northern Ireland hospitals, but we do not interfere with the policy. That is a matter for the Executive and those in government in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is to do with training consultants. They need help.

The Taoiseach: There are lots of tricky and complex issues in respect of that.

In response to Deputy Murphy, I will ask our public service to look at that service in Northern Ireland, with a view to seeing whether we can establish something similar here. It is

a good initiative. The whole project is about learning from each other. Different jurisdictions can do things better and we can learn too and adopt some of what is going in Northern Ireland. They have been very helpful to us in emergency preparedness, for example, and supporting us when we have had emergencies in the Republic.

Deputy Eoin Hayes raised restorative justice. We will commit to implementing that. Legislation has been agreed to by the Government in terms of implementing the framework agreement in respect of legacy. We are committed to doing that. I hope the Minister will be able to bring legislation to the House sar' i bhfad.

Deputy O'Rourke raised the timeline. Again, my comments are similar to what I said earlier to Deputy Ó Murchú. All voices are important. We have further work to do at Government level on this. We will revert as soon as the proposals are fleshed out.

Deputy Heneghan raised the interconnector. I am not quite getting what he is hinting at. There have been strong political issues around the delay on the interconnector for a long number of years. We need the interconnector for houses, industry, farming and agriculture. I have said to EirGrid that it needs to communicate with communities up and down the country. We need a comprehensive engagement with communities in respect of energy needs into the future and the needs of our electricity grid, which are going to be critical.

There are three dimensions to Deputy McGuinness's question. The shared island funding has been very impactful. I think we need reform of the institutions in Northern Ireland. It is a critical next step. I have been saying that for the last four to five years. We then need to have a pathway, as per the constitutional change we made in 1999. We desire unity in our Constitution. Our Constitution states that we want to pursue unity, but in peace and harmony. Some of the rhetoric we saw in recent times does not lead in that direction. We need to be very conscious of all of that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh raised ISIF. There are organisations within Northern Ireland, such as Invest Northern Ireland and so on, which are working with new starts and the enterprise sector. I am not ruling anything out, but we would have to be careful that we are not cutting across Executive functions within the North.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I thank the Taoiseach. I am only the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I will not be asked to Chair proceedings again after going this far over time.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its consideration of the Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025, and has made amendments thereto.

Our Rural Future: Statements

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I call on the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to make his statement under Standing Order 56.

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh Gníomhach. It is good to see you in the Chair. We will all give the Ceann Comhairle a reference to say how good you are.

Is cúis áthais dom deis a bheith agam labhairt sa Teach inniu maidir le Ár dTodhchaí Tuaithe, beartas forbartha tuaithe náisiúnta nua an Rialtais don tréimhse ó 2026 go 2031 a sheolamar seachtain ó shin. Gabhaim buíochas le hoifigigh mo Roinne a d'oibrigh go díograiseach chun an beartas seo a fhorbairt le roinnt míonna anuas. Nuair a sheolamar Ár dTodhchaí Tuaithe in 2021, bhraitheamar ollmhéid na hacmhainne a bhaineann lenár gceantair thuaithe. Leagamar amach cur chuige uaillmhianach uile-rialtais i leith na forbartha tuaithe. Cuireann an leagan nua de Ár dTodhchaí Tuaithe leis an dul chun cinn suntasach atá déanta go dtí seo. Leagtar amach fís ann i gcomhair ceantair thuaithe na hÉireann atá bríomhar agus ina gcuirtear daoine agus pobail tuaithe ag croílár na forbartha tuaithe.

Our Rural Future 2036-2031 brings together commitments from across Government to ensure that rural communities have the infrastructure, services and supports they need to prosper. It includes a range of new measures and initiatives to support rural enterprise and employment, improve access to essential services in remote areas, tackle rural isolation and strengthen community resilience through innovation and technology. Before I get into the details of the new policy, I would like to spend a few moments reflecting on what has been achieved so far. In the past five years, Our Rural Future has delivered vital investment and supports to rural areas, strengthened local economies and improved quality of life for people across rural Ireland. Through sustained investment and strong partnerships with local authorities, State agencies and rural communities, the Government has delivered real improvements across rural Ireland. Government has provided an unprecedented level of investment in rural communities, with more than €1 billion allocated to support thousands of projects since 2020. These investments range from small-scale local improvements to large-scale regeneration initiatives, all delivering tangible social, economic and environmental benefits for rural communities.

The first Our Rural Future policy set out an ambitious set of actions over its lifetime and our approach to implementation was successful. One hundred and fifty measures, or 84%, are either fully completed or being successfully implemented. This has shown we can and will deliver for rural Ireland. Through the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, and the town and village renewal scheme, over €560 million has been invested in rural regeneration projects, helping to tackle vacancy and dereliction, revitalise town centres and support economic activity in our rural towns and villages. The development of a national network of over 400 remote working hubs has opened up new opportunities for remote working, while the roll-out of the national broadband plan has improved digital connectivity.

We have seen significant improvements in essential services. The connecting Ireland rural mobility plan, for example, has delivered 185 new or enhanced services since its launch in 2022, linking over 240 towns and villages to the public transport network. We have also strengthened the infrastructure at the heart of community life. The community centre investment fund has invested over €112 million in supporting upgrades to over 1,600

community facilities, helping to ensure that communities have welcoming, accessible and comfortable spaces in which to come together. We have allocated funding of over €150 million under the local improvement scheme, funding work on over 3,000 road projects and benefiting over 16,000 people. This year CLÁR has been expanded, bringing the total population under it to over 1 million people for the first time. We can see the benefits of this investment on the regeneration and revitalisation of town and village centres and the enhancement of community facilities and public amenities, such as community centres, walking trails, libraries, playgrounds and public realm works.

The funding and supports delivered under the rural development investment programme will continue to have a critical role to play in the implementation of the new Our Rural Future. One of my priorities is to ensure that funding available under the programme is responsive to priorities at local level. We will roll out further calls for proposals across all schemes under the programme to support small, medium and large-scale capital projects in rural areas, delivering €500 million in capital funding over the 2026-2028 period. We will implement improvements to the rural development investment programme to ensure this funding is more accessible to community groups on the ground. This will ensure that the communities most in need receive funding.

One of the greatest privileges of serving as Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht is the opportunity to visit communities across the country and see at first hand the impact of our investment. Behind every project and every big figure are real benefits for real people and tangible improvements that are making a meaningful difference to people's everyday lives. Last month, I visited Leitrim and turned the sod on the Glenfarne wood project. This project received €2.45 million in RRDF funding and will transform the woodland and lakeshore of Glenfarne into a major visitor attraction within Ireland's hidden heartlands, bringing more visitors, more footfall, more spending and, consequently, more jobs to the area. I opened the new narrow gauge trail in Drumshanbo, which received €400,000 in outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, ORIS, funding and demonstrates the real and lasting impact that investment in outdoor recreation can have on rural communities. In the heart of Manorhamilton, I had the privilege of opening the Manor youth hub. This previously vacant building has been redeveloped, providing a fully accessible, dedicated and vibrant youth hub. This demonstrates the change and transformation that can happen when a local authority, Government and, most importantly, a community work together to bring their vision to life.

Ní gá a rá go bhfuil tiomantas daingean againn leanúint lenár n-uaillmhian a thabhairt i gcrích i leith ceantair thuaithe na hÉireann. Ní hamháin atáimid ag tosú; is ag cur leis an méid atá déanta le blianta beaga anuas agus feabhas a chur air atáimid. Cé gur cheart dúinn an méid atá déanta againn go dtí seo a aithint, tá a fhios agam nach bhfuil an obair críochnaithe.

We know that rural Ireland is continuing to face severe challenges, including access to essential services, housing, climate pressures and the need to create sustainable economic opportunities. This is why Our Rural Future 2026-2031 is so important. The overarching objective of the policy remains to support the continued economic, social and environmental development of rural Ireland. It brings together commitments from across Government to support balanced regional development, protect and enhance our rural environment and ensure that rural communities have the infrastructure, services and supports they need to prosper.

We will build on the momentum and progress that have been achieved to date to deliver targeted, meaningful and practical benefits that improve the everyday lives of those living and working in rural Ireland. The policy is structured around five interconnected pillars which provide a clear framework for our continued whole-of-government approach to rural development.

The first pillar, thriving rural places, focuses on investing in our rural towns, villages and communities, ensuring they remain vibrant, attractive and sustainable places to live, work and raise families. Through this pillar, we will build on the significant investment already being delivered through our rural development investment programme with a particular focus on revitalising our towns and villages, improving essential infrastructure and harnessing the opportunities presented by digital connectivity.

The second pillar focuses on access to high-quality public services. It recognises that the availability and accessibility of these services is fundamental to the quality of life of people living in rural areas. This will include further improvements in rural transport, ensuring that health and disability services respond to the needs of rural communities and supporting access to education and childcare.

Rud atá tábhachtach ná go n-aithnítear faoin cholún seo nach mór cinntiú gur féidir rochtain a fháil ar sheirbhísí poiblí d'ardchaighdeán trí Ghaeilge. Tá an plean gníomhaíochta ina thaobh seo i bhfeidhm anois, le sprioc maidir le 20% cainteoirí Gaeilge sa tseirbhís phoiblí faoi 2030.

A strong and diverse rural economy is fundamental to Ireland's overall prosperity and competitiveness. Our third pillar thus focuses on supporting rural enterprise and employment, developing key sectors of the rural economy and ensuring that rural Ireland is well positioned to respond to a changing economy, new ways of working and challenges that may come. We want to see rural businesses grow and succeed, new opportunities for enterprise emerge and for people across rural Ireland to have the opportunity to build rewarding and successful careers without having to leave their communities. Through Our Rural Future, we will build on the strengths of our rural economy, support innovation and enterprise and ensure that rural Ireland continues to make a vital contribution to our national economic success.

Our fourth pillar, resilient rural communities, recognises that the greatest strength of rural Ireland lies in its people and in the communities they call home. Across rural Ireland, we see the enormous contribution of local communities, voluntary organisations and community groups whose dedication and commitment are central to our rural areas being vibrant, inclusive and welcoming places. Through this pillar, we will build on that strong community spirit, empowering local communities to shape their own futures and equipping them to respond to new and emerging challenges. We will also focus on supporting the well-being and safety of people living in rural areas while celebrating the rich cultural heritage and diversity that make our rural communities so unique.

The final pillar, sustaining our rural environment, recognises the vital role that rural Ireland will play in delivering on our climate and environmental ambition. Rural Ireland is home to some of the world's most valuable natural resources and landscapes. We have a responsibility to protect and enhance them for future generations. Through this pillar, we will support rural communities to become more resilient to the impacts of climate change while harnessing the opportunities presented by renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and forestry and the

growing bioeconomy and circular economy. Protecting and restoring biodiversity will also be a key focus, recognising the importance of our natural environment to the well-being and future prosperity of rural communities. We want to ensure our rural communities are not only supported through the transition to a greener economy but are empowered to benefit from the opportunities it presents.

The new policy is about building on the momentum of the past five years, strengthening what is working but responding to the changing need and ambition of rural communities. We have focused on bringing all new and existing activity together in one place. This is how we will ensure that there is an effective focus on our rural communities across the full breadth of Government activity. The policy brings together a mix of new interventions and supports, with an expansion and improvement of existing activities in key areas such as rural transport, digital connectivity, enterprise support, support for inclusive community-building, the regeneration of our towns and villages and increased investment in our community facilities.

One of the most important developments is the introduction of a new strategic rural investment fund for rural Ireland within the RRDF. This will provide a new approach to investment in major strategic investments at a regional level. It will broaden the fund's remit and is aimed to help unlock major strategic capital projects and consequently attract investment and support enterprise and employment creation in rural areas. The goal of the fund will be to improve the long-term economic competitiveness and sustainability of regional and rural areas. We are currently finalising the full detail of this intervention. However, my overall aim is to provide support for a small but targeted number of projects of significant scale that deliver on our ambition to drive economic growth in regional and rural areas.

We recognise the particular challenges facing some of our most remote rural communities. I believe a community-led or social enterprise-type approach can help support things like community cafes, community pubs or community shops in rural towns and villages. A new pilot initiative will be developed to support the establishment of social enterprise and community-led approaches in our most remote rural areas where gaps in local services are most acute. Community-led initiatives such as community shops and community cafes are becoming more and more prevalent. I want to be there to support them. Support will focus on areas where these key services may no longer be present in a rural community. This support will help to address unmet local needs, create employment opportunities and strengthen community resilience.

Throughout our consultation process, the issue of rural isolation was mentioned and raised extensively. To respond to this, a new joint pilot initiative between my Department and Department of agriculture will explore locally based innovative approaches to addressing isolation in farming and rural communities and to strengthen social connections and well-being. Some €600,000 is earmarked for this in year one. Our approach will complement existing interventions in this area such as SICAP, Tidy Towns, CCIF, LEADER, CLÁR, men's and women's sheds, etc. The pilot will be place based and informed by local circumstances. The focus will be on new and innovative elements rather than simply funding existing activities or extending existing activities. We will see what is effective and what works well and then take our learnings from this pilot to inform ongoing initiatives that can be integrated into wider programmes such as SICAP and LEADER. Through a new community-led rural innovation fund, we will support locally driven initiatives that harness innovation and technology to

address new challenges and build resilience in rural communities. I want to tap into local knowledge to see how new technologies will address specific local challenges in rural communities.

We have set out the Government's 34 commitments for delivery across all Departments and agencies over the lifetime of this policy. These commitments are supported by clear and practical actions. They are backed by substantial investment targeted at securing a more sustainable and resilient future for rural communities. Over 230 actions are set out for delivery over the first half of the policy period to the end 2028 across a wide range of areas from health, housing and education to digital connectivity, enterprise development and our culture, heritage and language. The development of these actions was rooted in a set of principles which guided our policymaking. These principles were informed by our consultation process, our experience of delivering policy and international best practice. It is very important to me for this policy to be people centred and placed based. This means putting people at the centre of this policy and understanding that there is a huge variety in the rural places we all call home. We recognised the unique circumstances and needs of different rural communities throughout the development of these actions.

Another one of our principles is progression. We will build on our achievements; however, we will retain the flexibility needed to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities across the wide variety of rural contexts. The policy is grounded in participation and inclusion. It recognises the importance of addressing exclusion, isolation and inequality. We recognise the interdependence of our urban and rural areas. The success of each contributes to the prosperity of the other. Based on this principle, we took an integrated approach to policy development to ensure Our Rural Future 2026-2031 is in line with national, local and sectoral strategy, so we can co-ordinate the delivery of our goals.

Our policy is reflective of the core principles of the EU's long-term vision for rural areas. This vision is for rural communities that are stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous, with local people actively shaping their futures. Rural communities must be at the heart of Europe's economic, social and environmental development. Indeed, I have just come from our EU Presidency event taking place in Naas, Europe's Rural Future, where over 200 people from across the EU have come together to discuss integrated approaches to rural development. At the heart of these discussions is the recognition that rural development must remain a strategic European priority. We must translate our shared vision into co-ordinated policies, effective investment and meaningful opportunities for rural communities across Europe. That is the central principle of our approach to rural development, combining national ambition and co-ordinated Government action with local knowledge, local leadership and local initiative. I will be returning to this conference tomorrow and our discussions will focus specifically on LEADER, including its contribution over 35 years to rural development, with a showcase of projects that are supported through the programme.

Táimid fós faoi ghealltanas daingean tacaíocht a thabhairt dár bpobail Ghaeltachta agus na hoileáin, aitheantas a thabhairt dá sainriachtanais chultúir, teanga agus gheografacha, agus cinntiú go bhfuil na seirbhísí, an bonneagar agus na deiseanna acu chun go mbeidh rath orthu. Mar Aire Gaeltachta, chinntigh mé gur tháinig na méaduithe is mó riamh ar bhuiséad na Gaeltachta le dhá bhliain anuas. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire, an Teachta Jack Chambers, as a thacaíocht sa réimse seo. Through that support, we can invest €35 million in the new pier on

Inis Oírr. Progress throughout this summer has been significant and gives a sense of the large-scale investment in rural communities.

Our Rural Future 2026-2031 is firmly rooted in a comprehensive public and stakeholder consultation process. This process captured the views and the inputs of more than 2,000 participants. The process included an online public survey with more than 1,200 responses; a series of eight stakeholder and public events across the country; online and bilateral meetings with key stakeholders, representative groups and public bodies; and a debate within this House. We particularly sought to capture the voices of the new generation. The voices of young people were captured through the rural youth assembly, an initiative itself born out of the first Our Rural Future policy. This engagement has ensured we had a consultation process that lasted over a year, and was followed with engagement with a range of Departments. It was also informed by the OECD's 2026 Rural Policy Review of Ireland, which highlighted the strengths of our whole-of-government approach. The OECD review had said, "Ireland has built one of the OECD's most sophisticated rural policy frameworks and has a unique whole-of-government approach that maintains visibility on rural impacts across all departments in Ireland."

I present this policy to the House and I look forward to the debate. However, I also intend to continue the debate across the country. We will host five regional events in the midlands, the west, the south, the mid-west and the Border region during January and February, alongside an online event to make progress and get feedback on this plan. Our Rural Future will continue to be underpinned by funding through my Department's programmes, and will also have the support of Government colleagues through their programmes in each individual Department. The new policy seeks to respond to the emerging opportunities. It seeks to prepare our rural communities for challenges that we anticipate but also those that we cannot, through a place-based approach which recognises that rural areas are unique and that each of our areas has different needs, priorities and strengths. We will ensure that the distinct needs, opportunities and challenges of each rural community are reflected in delivery across all Government sectors to strengthen rural outcomes. I intend to ensure delivery of this and to ensure accountability to the House and to the various committees of the House, but most important, I intend to assure accountability to communities across the country whose futures are intertwined with this document. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá straitéis náisiúnta láidir de dhíth orainn chun todhchaí na tuaithe a chinntiú. Is léir sin dúinn go léir. A strategy for rural Ireland is important. It should set a clear direction, identify the challenges facing our communities and establish how the Government intends to address them. Our Rural Future 2026-2031 is an opportunity to do precisely that. Unfortunately, while it contains some welcome commitments, it falls short of what rural communities need and deserve.

The central weakness of this strategy is that it does not adequately address the biggest challenge facing rural Ireland, namely, the ability of people to remain in, return to and build a future in their own communities. Young people cannot afford homes, families cannot find suitable sites to build on, and older people are increasingly isolated as local services disappear. The Government's own consultation identified housing and generational renewal as major concerns, yet there is remarkably little in this strategy that explains how those challenges will actually be addressed. Young people want to stay in their communities. They want to build a home, to raise a family, to make a future where they grew up but, increasingly, they cannot

afford to do so. They cannot secure planning permission or find a suitable site to build on. Ba cheart go mbeadh sé de cheart ag daoine óga teach a thógáil, agus clann a thógáil, ina bpobail féin faoin tuath agus sa Ghaeltacht. The Government has to answer some very basic questions, and this plan needs to answer those questions too. How many additional affordable and social homes in rural Ireland will be facilitated under this strategy? How many serviced sites will be provided? What measurable targets are being set in the housing space? If this is to be a whole-of-government approach, it really needs to answer those questions. It is not enough to say this is a matter for housing. That needs to be seen as core to developing, protecting and enhancing rural Ireland.

We have heard plenty about housing delivery, vacant property and planning reform, but there is nothing sufficiently concrete on affordable housing for younger families, for serviced sites for local people, as I mentioned, or for tackling dereliction. The consequences are already evident. Research commissioned by the National Youth Council of Ireland found that 68% of young adults aged 18 to 24 are considering moving abroad, while 71% believe they would have a better quality of life elsewhere. That should be a serious warning to the Government. Generational renewal is not simply about attracting new businesses or promoting tourism. It is about whether young people can afford to remain in the places they call home.

There are other significant weaknesses too. Small rural schools need certainty about their future. Rural families need access to childcare and school transport. People need access to GPs, primary care, community nursing and mental health services. Digital healthcare has a role to play here, but it cannot replace appropriate face-to-face care. The plan, and we in this Chamber, need also to talk about infrastructure. Rural communities are increasingly frustrated by the centralisation of services and the failure to provide basic infrastructure. Water services, roads, public transport and broadband are fundamental to sustaining our rural communities, yet people are too often left waiting while investment and decision-making are concentrated elsewhere.

That is not to ignore the ageing population. Post offices, banks, shops, pubs and Garda stations have disappeared and are disappearing from communities. These are much more than commercial premises and public service buildings. They are part of the social infrastructure that allows people to remain connected and supported, that allows people as they get older to remain independent and to continue living independently in rural Ireland.

On that point, I wish to acknowledge something positive in the strategy. I welcome the inclusion of a pilot initiative to tackle isolation in farming and rural communities. As the Minister will know, I have raised this repeatedly with him and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and have called for Government support for the farmer's yards initiative as an example. That model, developed by Dr. Shane Conway and Dr. Maura Farrell and piloted in Mountbellew mart, demonstrates the value of familiar community spaces in bringing people together.

Is fiú fáilte a chur roimh an tionscnamh seo, ach ní leor tionscnamh píolótach amháin chun dul i ngleic leis an bhfadhb seo. Isolation is not confined to farming communities. It affects older people and younger people. It affects people living alone and families across rural Ireland. We need a sustained whole-of-government response to tackling isolation and loneliness, supported by proper resources and investment in community services, public

transport and local services. It is really good to see that pilot scheme included, but it needs to be more than a pilot scheme. Hopefully, it will develop as such in time.

Rural Ireland has enormous strength. Its people, its communities, its businesses, its culture, its primary producers and its contribution to our national economy should never be underestimated, but those communities cannot thrive on goodwill and resilience alone. They need the Government to match commitments with investment and delivery. The ultimate test of this strategy is straightforward: can people remain in, return to and build their futures in their own communities?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This policy did not get off to a great start, and I will tell the Minister exactly why. I looked at the picture of the people who launched it, and the Minister knows what I am going to say, but it was the junior Minister, Jerry Buttimer; the Minister, Peter Burke; the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin; the Minister, Deputy Calleary; and the junior Minister, Seán Canney. I made a remark on social media about it. I said, "There they are now.. there's all the lads at the lads launch.. launching the document for lads.." It did not look great. As a woman who represents a significant rural constituency, I looked at that, as did my constituents, and we thought, "Where are we in all this? Do we feature? Do we figure?" That did not send a good message at all. It is bad practice to exclude women. There are laws about it but we will not get into those. It was not a great look, and that is where the Government started from.

I went on from there to read the strategy. As the Minister knows, I am a Dublin TD. There would be absolutely no point in my trying to deny that. I am blue and navy. However, I represent a constituency with a significant rural population. They are also very proud to be blue and navy. Many of my constituents, like the people living in Ballyboghil, Balscadden, Garristown and Oldtown and right across Fingal West, cannot rely on public transport. They do not have it. There is a myth that everyone in Dublin has a bus that goes past their front door. That is not true and it is most definitely not true for my constituents. They have absolutely no choice. They have to use their cars. Public transport is not an option. They must use their car or get a lift. The relentless rise of energy prices is absolutely creasing people. They live in Dublin and they pay Dublin prices for their homes but they do not have any of the facilities that one might imagine would be available. They do not live in an urban setting. They want to live in rural Ireland. They want to be able to raise their families there. They want to be able to build a decent life. As Deputy McGuinness has said, the real test of this strategy, and the one I think it will fail, will be whether it facilitates people to build a life for themselves where they were born and where they grew up. People who live in rural Ireland are the very same as those of us who live and grew up in urban Ireland. They want to live near their families and they are being priced out. It is the same for my constituency.

One third of households right across the State rely on home heating oil. The cost of it is very high for the people I represent. Only two weeks ago, at the social protection committee, meals on wheels volunteers told us they cannot afford to use their own cars. They are worried they will lose volunteers simply because they cannot afford the rising cost of diesel and petrol for their cars. Rural Ireland depends on meals on wheels. It is an absolute mainstay. The Government talks about wanting to combat rural isolation, but if they are losing volunteers simply because they do not have the wherewithal to put diesel or petrol in their car, that is not a good place to be. I know we have spoken many times about the cost of home heating oil and the cost of heating one's home. This is very acute. People who depend on home heating oil do

not have the option of allowing arrears to build up; their homes simply go cold. In order for rural Ireland not just to exist but to thrive, they need sustained investment, and that is not writ large in this document.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: When I speak about our rural future and the future we have for our rural communities across this State and, as the Minister will know, across County Galway, the one thing that always springs to my mind is the basic, essential, fundamental infrastructure that any community needs in order not only to survive but also to thrive. One of the key issues that is raised with me continuously is the state of our roads across Connemara. The Minister will know Kylemore Abbey. Everybody has heard of it. Near Kylemore Abbey is Kylemore bridge. Over the winter, every few months, we see flooding at Kylemore bridge that makes the bridge impassable for local communities. It really concerns and terrifies the local community when they are not able to pass over the bridge. This has been going on for a long time and it is high time that all ducks were put into a row and that action was taken in relation to Kylemore bridge.

Chomh maith leis sin, táim cinnte go bhfuil aithne mhaith ag an Aire ar Ros Muc agus go bhfuil a fhios aige cé chomh deacair is atá sé nuair nach bhfuil an buninfreastruchtúr ar fáil i leithéidí Ros Muc. Má bhreathnaímid ar Ros Muc mar shampla, is dócha go léiríonn sé na deacrachtaí atá ar fud Ghaeltacht Chonamara freisin. Is léir an easpa infheistíochta sa bhuninfreastruchtúr. Tá bóthar ag dul tríd Ros Muc atá i ndroch-chuí. Tá gá le hinfheistíocht cheart ann ionas go mbeadh sé sábháilte don cheantar agus go mbeadh sé sa chaoi gur chóir dó a bheith. Teastaíonn an infheistíocht sin. Aon uair a ardaím leis an gcomhairle contae é, deirtear liom nach bhfuil an t-airgead ann. Ba mhaith liom go gcuirfí an t-airgead ar fáil do bhóthar Ros Muc.

Deputy Pat Buckley: The Minister mentioned that the Government has five interconnected pillars. The first is "Thriving Rural Places", focusing on investment in our rural towns, villages and communities. Pillar 2 is to include improvements in rural transport. We in Sinn Féin believe that you should have a chance to build your own home, raise a family and make a future in the place you call home. That means action on affordable housing, serviced sites, dereliction, infrastructure and removing the planning barriers.

On that, we still have massive issues with flooding in east Cork, particularly in my town, Midleton, but also in Whitegate, Rathcormack, Mogeely and other places. We do not have good rural transport. As regards the N25 from Cork to Midleton, the most dangerous road is probably from Midleton to Youghal, after which you hit Waterford. We do not have a railway because it was got rid of in the seventies. People are struggling. You cannot build confidence once you cannot get in and out of a town. Our post offices in rural areas are gone. Our pubs are gone. Those were the meeting places. I know of people in rural areas who during the Covid pandemic wrote to themselves so the postman would visit them. The postman was the only person they were seeing.

I hope the Minister is right when it comes to this strategy for rural Ireland but I know for a fact that there is an awful lot more to do. We have had boil water notices for nearly ten years. In the Whitegate area it was affecting around 10,000 or 12,000 people. That is on and off. We are on about trying to build local communities and local areas and what we have here is zero confidence among commuters.

There is, however, also a plus to this. If you were to have a proper public transport rail line from Midleton to Youghal, taking in Killeagh, Castlemartyr, other towns and the surrounding areas, with a spur out to Mogeely or Ballycotton, that can grow. The price of houses could come down. People could have a better chance to commute to and from college in UCC or wherever they are going. You can now get on the train in Midleton and go to Mallow. It takes the pressure off the hospitals in Cork city. There is a possibility of growing, but the most important thing here is that if we do not invest in the interconnectedness - one of the pillars - on rural transport, we are starting at a low base. There is a lot to be done.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: For too long, rural Ireland has been left behind. Those of us who live in rural Ireland have all watched that decline. We have watched the post offices close, we have watched the banks disappear and we have watched essential services being stripped away - many times, essential government services being taken from our communities. Businesses have struggled, young people have been forced to move elsewhere and towns and villages that were once thriving communities, once known throughout the world for their outstanding beautiful Irishness, proud of their traditions, are becoming unrecognisable. We cannot accept that as inevitable. We need to turn the tide and we need to give people a genuine opportunity to live, to work and to raise their families in rural Ireland. That means investing in local services, improving our transport infrastructure, investing in water infrastructure, supporting employment and ensuring that people can access housing that is affordable in their own communities. A thriving rural community needs schools, shops, post offices, healthcare sevices, banking facilities and places where people can meet and socialise.

5 o'clock

These are the things that make a community a place to live rather than somewhere people return to at the end of the day. We also need to recognise the importance of supporting local businesses in creating employment opportunities so that young people are not forced to leave in search of a future elsewhere.

Our Rural Future must be about more than just words and ambitious targets. The plan the Government has announced has the same types of ambitions as the old plan but the reality is, when I look at the communities around me, I see more decline. I see fewer post offices, banks and other services. There needs to be real delivery and a change of direction here. It needs to be about turning the tide. It needs to be about improving services, supporting local communities and giving people a genuine reason and opportunity to stay in rural Ireland.

Déanann an Ghaeltacht suas cuid mhór dár gceantair thuaithe. Tá an Ghaeilge i mbaol. Caithfidh an Rialtas infheistíocht mar is ceart a chur isteach i gceantair Ghaeltachta ó thaobh scéimeanna agus infreastruchtúir de. Caithfidh sé cead a thabhairt do dhaoine atá ag iarraidh a gcuid chlann a thógáil leis an Ghaeilge a bheith ábalta bheith ina gcónaí sa Ghaeltacht. Ciallaíonn sé sin go gcaithfear dul i ngleic leis an fhadhb thithíochta i gceantair Ghaeltachta.

Deputy Liam Quaide: There are elements of the new Our Rural Future strategy that are welcome, particularly the commitments to rural enterprise, community development and the regeneration of towns and villages. However, there is a considerable gap between the Government's ambitions for rural Ireland and its willingness to systematically provide the infrastructure and amenities that rural communities need.

One of my main concerns is the extent to which the Government has come to depend on the unpaid labour of volunteers to provide essential community facilities. Across my constituency of Cork East, I meet extraordinary people who spend countless hours fundraising, preparing grant applications and navigating planning processes for basic community amenities. There is something seriously wrong with a system in which providing a playground or community centre depends on a handful of volunteers having the time and expertise to pursue it. Some communities have well-established voluntary organisations with substantial fundraising capacity. Others, including communities that are largely made up of newly arrived young families, do not. The Government should not be allocating investment according to how effectively local volunteers can compete for funding. We need predictable multi-annual investment based on population need that takes account of disadvantage, remoteness and existing gaps in amenities.

This system also reinforces an outdated clientelist form of politics, where community groups spend years lobbying for funding and, when a grant is finally approved, the local Government TD arrives for the photo op with the oversized cheque. Public investment is presented almost as a favour bestowed on a grateful community rather than something determined through proper planning and an objective assessment of need. People should not have to spend years campaigning for sports facilities, reliable water, public transport or action against dereliction.

On housing, the strategy recognises the importance of enabling people to remain in, return to and establish their lives in rural communities, but where are the specific housing delivery targets for rural towns and villages between now and 2031? Young people are being priced out of the communities in which they grew up. Meanwhile, derelict properties are left to rot in our towns and villages. Castlemartyr in east Cork is a particularly striking example. It is a beautiful heritage village whose main street has been disfigured by long-standing dereliction, much of it associated with properties owned by one family. How can one family be allowed to retain control of so many neglected properties while the wider community pays the price? Their deterioration damages Castlemartyr's architectural heritage and restricts opportunities for housing, business and tourism. Why have the statutory powers vested in the local authorities to tackle dereliction not delivered meaningful results? If property owners can leave buildings deteriorating indefinitely without effective consequences, we will continue losing the character and vitality of rural Ireland. We need proper enforcement, effective levies and compulsory acquisition where owners persistently refuse to act.

On water supply and other basic services, residents in Ballyhooly, near Fermoy, have endured serious water supply problems for over a decade. Low water pressure, amounting at times to a loss of supply, has left households struggling with everyday essential tasks, including showering and washing clothes. We are talking about a reliable supply of water to people's homes in 2026. Despite repeated remedial works by Uisce Éireann, residents are still waiting for a lasting solution. The rural strategy promises modern and resilient water infrastructure. What use is that commitment to Ballyhooly residents without a funded programme and a date by which their supply will finally be reliable? The extent of Government neglect is extraordinary when communities are still campaigning for services this basic.

My third major concern is rural public transport. Local Link has transformed daily life in some areas but in substantial parts of my own constituency it has never developed into a

meaningful regular service. For somebody travelling to work or college, attending medical appointments or just participating in community life, an occasional bus is inadequate. For people without a car, particularly older people, disabled people and young people, the consequence is often deepening isolation. The strategy commits to completing Connecting Ireland and further expanding Local Link. That is welcome but where is the minimum standard of public transport provision that every rural community should reasonably expect based on population need? The National Transport Authority should produce a funded plan identifying underserved communities, the routes they need and delivery dates.

I welcome the strategy's recognition of the diversity of rural Ireland and its commitment to inclusion. Too often, self-appointed representatives of rural Ireland suggest that certain opinions and traditions are more authentically rural than others. Concern about climate change, nature conservation, river pollution or animal welfare can be portrayed as an attack on rural communities. Having grown up in the countryside myself, I find it particularly galling to be told that caring about nature somehow makes somebody less authentically rural. Many of us developed our appreciation of nature precisely because of where we grew up and our connection with the land.

We also need to stop blaming individual farmers for environmental destruction when so many have been locked into a system that rewards ever greater intensification. Farmers face rising costs, volatile markets and agricultural policies that have too often treated hedgerows, native trees and wildlife habitats as obstacles to productivity. There is a different way forward. Hedgerows Ireland has proposed rewarding farmers for protecting and improving hedgerow quality rather than simply measuring their presence, while the excellent BRIDE Project in east Cork brought farmers together to restore biodiversity across the River Bride catchment demonstrating what can be achieved through co-operation, practical support and payments linked to environmental results. We should build on these initiatives, supporting farmers to earn a decent living while restoring nature, protecting water quality and developing more sustainable agriculture.

Rural Ireland includes people of every background, profession and outlook. The Government's commitment to inclusion must be reflected in how investment is distributed, particularly to disadvantaged and isolated communities. The real measure of this strategy will be whether people can find a home in their community, access reliable public transport, turn on a tap and expect water to come out, and enjoy the basic amenities that give them a decent quality of life. Rural Ireland does not need more romanticising, political gatekeeping or praise for its resilience. It needs serious systematic investment in the everyday foundations of a decent life distributed fairly across communities.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Ireland is probably quite unusual in that no matter where you are born, be that in the middle of the city or in a large town, you are only a generation or two away from rural Ireland. Many of us have family or community connections even if we do not live in rural Ireland ourselves. The face of rural Ireland has changed quite significantly over the last number of years. There has been some positive change, as there has been across the country but, in some ways, there has been change that is quite regressive.

My colleague mentioned sustainable agriculture and the intensification of agriculture we have seen over the last 20 or 30 years in Ireland. That is hugely problematic for those

communities the Government is trying to make vibrant, strong and resilient. In order to do that, we need to take another look at agriculture and how it has been forced into developing into a more intensified system than is positive for the community. If you go into any supermarket in this country looking for vegetables or fruit, the first thing you will notice is that most of it is coming from overseas. It is coming from the UK. There are apples from Fiji and New Zealand. Those sections of the supermarket are a pure illustration of how broken agriculture is in Ireland and how much we need to do to make it more secure, more resilient and better able to meet the needs of the communities that survive on agriculture and the farmers within those communities.

We import 83% of our fruit and vegetables, many of which we could and used to produce in this country. We hear all the time how food secure Ireland is - I think we are in the top 1% or 2% of countries when it comes to food security - it is a really lazy narrative because it does not show what it pretends to show. In fact, if our food supply lanes were shut down in the morning, we would be surviving on beef and dairy, and that is the reality.

While there are positives, and there is a huge economy is exporting beef and dairy, what we and what previous governments have done is turned our backs on the more traditional sectors like the fruit and vegetable sector. In the 1990s, we had 600 producers. We are now down to 70. Alarm bells are ringing about how food insecure we are. There is a huge piece of work to be done to look at our farm and agricultural sector and reform it in light of not just climate change but the global instability that we are seeing. We are not doing that work, and I ask that the Minister participates in it and raises it with his colleagues.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I welcome the opportunity to speak today on the publication of the Government's new strategy, Our Rural Future 2026-2031. I welcome this five-year strategy which sets out an ambitious and positive vision for the future of rural Ireland. It recognises the importance of our towns, villages and rural communities and, importantly, the need to ensure that people can continue to live, work, raise families and prosper in the communities they grew up in.

As a Deputy representing Cork North-West, I know only too well the enormous contributions that rural communities make to our country. We have strong agricultural traditions, local businesses, thriving community organisations, sporting clubs and a tremendous volunteer spirit. These are the foundations of rural Ireland and deserve continued support and investment.

The new strategy contains 34 high-level commitments supported by an action plan with 234 practical measures and timelines. I particularly welcome the fact that this is a whole-of-government strategy. Rural development cannot be the responsibility of one Department alone. It requires co-ordination across Government with investment in infrastructure, housing, transport, enterprise, education, health and community services.

I wish to highlight a number of areas where the strategy can make a real difference to communities throughout Cork North-West. The commitment to thriving rural towns and villages is particularly welcome. Towns such as Kanturk, Millstreet, Macroom, Newmarket, Charleville and Buttevant, and the many smaller villages throughout my constituency, have enormous potential. We must continue to tackle vacancy and dereliction, bring unused properties back into productive use, support town centre regeneration and encourage new

businesses to establish themselves in rural locations. Our towns and villages should be places where people want to live, shop, work and socialise.

I particularly welcome the proposed strategic rural investment initiative to help unlock major capital projects at a regional level. It is important that this funding is not just accessible to large projects but also to local authorities and community organisations with worthwhile projects that can make a lasting difference.

Supporting rural employment and enterprise must also remain a central priority. Agriculture continues to be important to the economy of Cork North-West but we must also support diversification, food production, rural tourism, small businesses and new forms of employment.

The expansion of broadband has already transformed opportunities in many rural areas across Cork North-West, and over the next week or two, we will celebrate the completion of the rollout of fibre broadband in rural Cork. It also allows people to work remotely, establish businesses and access services without having to leave their communities. We must continue to build on that progress to ensure that rural communities have the connectivity needed to compete in a modern economy.

I also want to welcome the emphasis on a high-quality public service and essential infrastructure. Balanced regional development cannot happen without infrastructure on housing, wastewater, water, public transport and local amenities. In many villages throughout Cork North-West, the availability of wastewater treatment remains a significant barrier to the development and population growth. We must address these infrastructure deficits if we are serious about encouraging people to settle in our rural communities.

Finally, I welcome the strategy's commitment to sustaining our rural environment. Our farmers, landowners and rural communities have a central role to play in protecting biodiversity and improving our water quality.

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcome the publication of the Our Rural Future strategy. It is a really important document at this time. From where the Minister comes from, I know he understands rural communities really well, and people understand that as well.

Picking out the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, in particular, which has brought the Minister and I up and down the Roscommon-Galway constituency to Boyle, Ballaghaderreen, Ballagh, Roscommon town and Monksland, as well as to An Chistin, the project in Castlerea. In Boyle, the An Ríoga project involved the conversion of the old Royal Hotel, a derelict site in the heart of the town. It is the start of a regeneration of that town and it includes working and art spaces, and a new library is now coming along there.

It is really important that we provide sites in towns like Boyle, Castlerea, Monksland and Ballinasloe for people to work remotely in, so they can live in their towns and close to their communities because the heart of our communities is our agriculture communities. While many of our agricultural enterprises in the west might be considered marginal and supported by jobs that people to commute to, it is important that commute is as short as possible. Sustaining rural farming is also hugely important as a social exercise because it is the backbone of our rural communities, and it is extremely important that we do so.

In terms of the regeneration of housing, the croí cónaithe scheme has been hugely successful in county Roscommon and east Galway. At almost every site, crossroads and boreen, we see old houses being brought back into life. It is hugely encouraging to see young couples setting up in rural Ireland where there were thriving communities before and which are being regenerated but we need to press that on. It is extremely important that the children of farmers will have the opportunity to build on their land providing they satisfy the adequate planning authorities to again keep our communities strong and resilient.

Transport is a huge issue in rural Ireland. We have a situation in Ballygar in east Galway where if someone wants to go to their local hospital, Portiuncula, they have to get a taxi into Roscommon town, and trains to Athlone and then Ballinasloe for a 17-mile journey. We need to develop the rural link transport network. It is extremely important to maintain people in rural areas and to allow them to use public transport to get to college, hospitals and health clinics.

In addition to that, I have met traders, such as publicans, in Roscommon town, for example, and they are having difficulty around attracting trade in at nighttime because there is no taxi service. We need to have a look at our hackney licence laws to encourage people who would take a hackney licence and provide services. We should also extend the pilot programmes for the Local Link buses which are very successful in places like Sligo, Longford and Buncrana.

Wastewater treatment plants are extremely important to enable villages and communities to grow. Many communities have been left unable to develop over the past number of years, so I welcome that investment.

Deputy William Aird: I welcome Our Rural Future 2026-2031 and its focus on building stronger rural communities. As a Laois TD and a member of the Oireachtas committee on social protection, rural and community development, I believe that rural development must remain a national priority. We must ensure that rural Ireland has the jobs, services, investment and infrastructure needed to thrive.

Three priorities must underpin this strategy. The first is supporting rural enterprise and employment. Laois has enormous potential, a skilled workforce, strong rail connections, a strategic location on the M7 and M8, and the proximity to major population centres. We must translate these advantages into jobs, investment and opportunity for our young people. How? By supporting small businesses, attracting new investment, developing local enterprise and expanding remote working opportunities.

Agriculture must remain at the heart of rural development. Family farms are vital to food production, rural employment and local businesses. Farmers must be able to remain economically viable while meeting environmental targets. Agriculture and rural development policies must work together.

The second thing is improving access to essential services. A thriving rural community needs more than just jobs. It needs reliable public transport, accessible healthcare, childcare, education, and affordable and appropriate housing.

Access to these services allows older people, people with disabilities and those without a car to live independently and stay connected in our communities. Social inclusion must be central to rural development. That means tackling rural isolation and disadvantage, investing in

community transport, strengthening local health services and community facilities and supporting voluntary and community organisations.

Third, it means revitalising our towns and villages and creating opportunities for the future. We must maximise regeneration through LEADER, town and village renewal and the rural regeneration and development fund. Revitalised town centres bring vacant properties back into use, improve public spaces and strengthen local amenities but regeneration must go hand in hand with greater housing availability, improved infrastructure and sustainable population growth. Young people should be able to live and raise families in their own communities with access to affordable housing. We must also protect our rural environment and natural resources, maintain viable family farms, support climate action and create green jobs and new opportunities for rural communities.

The success of Our Rural Future 2026-2031 will depend on delivery, not promises. Clear actions and accountability must be backed by adequate funding, strong co-ordination between the Departments and engagement with local authorities.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy William Aird: We need to see tangible results, more jobs, better services, more vacant properties brought back into use and more vibrant towns and villages. I want to see rural communities-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Aird.

Deputy William Aird: A strong rural Ireland means a stronger Ireland.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on Our Rural Future 2026-2031 but I must be frank. We have seen a habit form with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in this Government and the previous one of rolling out grand strategies where the follow-through has left us wanting. As someone who grew up in rural Ireland and who is raising a family in a rural community, this strategy is particularly relevant to me and my family's life. I would strongly welcome increased support and resources for rural communities but I am worried this plan is, at best, half-hearted.

Look at how Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have stood by while the issues affecting rural communities have only worsened. Our schools are being put into increasingly difficult positions as they lose teachers and SNAs because they fall slightly below the student threshold. That threshold is the same whether it is a school in Ballyhale or Donnybrook. That is deeply unfair. The inflexible school transport limit has ensured that scores of children just over the limit are denied school transport, putting their parents in an impossible position. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's handling of rural infrastructure has ensured parts of Kilkenny have endured years of drinking water bans. Irish Water's track record across Kilkenny has been shocking. It has squandered public funds and what does the Government do? It gives the CEO an €118,000 pay rise. Communities like Castlecomer have endured water restrictions and drinking water bans for years. Garda numbers across Kilkenny and Carlow have still not reached previous levels, despite our population greatly increasing. Rural communities are not looking for the

Minister to reinvent the wheel. It is clear what is required. As I said at the start, I have a vested interest in this strategy succeeding. I am raising four boys in south Kilkenny and I want them to have opportunities to stay, live, work and raise their own families in the community that raised them.

Our bus service, Expressway route 4, has been stripped in half. This happened this year, the year the Government brings out this plan. What does that say? I would clearly hope the Minister takes the time to talk to communities across rural Ireland and asks them what future they see for themselves and the next generation because too many of these plans are being drafted by people who have little to no experience of rural Ireland. I encourage the Minister to get out to the people who live in the heart of our rural areas. They need to have their say because what we have seen is not giving us any hope at all. We have not seen it.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the opportunity to talk to the Minister this evening on behalf of the Labour Party about the Government's Our Rural Future policy statement. As the Minister knows, I made a public consultation submission where I highlighted a number of improvements the Labour Party would like to see, especially around the area of transport and housing. From the outset, I welcome any commitment to address the number of issues that are impacting rural communities throughout the State like many of those in my own area of Kildare South. The five pillars are all areas that nobody will disagree with as being vitally important to rural Ireland. However, this policy statement is unfortunately very light on a real commitment to multi-annual funding which would allow many of the organisations mentioned here tonight to plan for the future.

For too long, many rural communities across Ireland have been left behind by their urban counterparts when it comes to investment. Not for the first time, the Minister will hear me raise the need to modernise our community rural halls and bring back into life those rural schools that have been left behind. I acknowledge the community centre investment fund but with any investment comes the need to ensure these vital centres in our rural communities can continue to operate. For example, Brownstown community hall on the edge of the Curragh is struggling due to the high increase in insurance and heating costs and it needs help. That is just one example of what is happening in my own area. These rural communities need assistance with the high increases in overheads just to keep the doors open.

Once again, I want to put on the record of these Houses the success of many of the Rural Link transport projects that have made such a difference to many rural communities. In many rural areas, they have been a real life game-changer, allowing rural residents to connect with their local major urban areas for employment, GP services, shopping and social gatherings, to mention a few. We need to see a realignment of the school transport system with these Rural Link routes to provide the school transport that is missing and needed at this time in many rural communities. Joined-up thinking and joined-up travel times could make a difference. However, we now see many of these new Rural Link routes stopped or put on the long finger. Once again, I raise with the Minister route 893, which is the service to the rural areas of Suncroft and other rural locations and villages like Nurney and Kildoon. It is a game-changer for those living there. When will we see this service begin?

We are still waiting on the updated rural planning guidelines to allow those born in the countryside to live there and support the many rural schools, pubs, shops, parishes and sports

clubs that are on their knees at the moment. Too many genuine rural people are being told to go and live in larger urban settlements and this needs to stop or rural Ireland will not have a future in many places. Our rural older population needs special and continued support. I have mentioned rural transport already but they also need to see the security of additional Garda patrols in their communities and an enhanced community alert system. They also need a grant for security lighting and house alarms, something I have raised with the Minister in the past. This would prevent the many and growing terrifying incidents our rural population is subjected to.

While so many communities in Kildare South continue to see more and more housing development, we are seeing a lack of social infrastructure to live with this. Examples are clubs in Kilcullen where they have not got the additional pitches to support this additional housing. We need to see investment on this. For many rural dwellers, their commute to work is now nothing short of mental torture. We need to provide a real right to remote work as we ramp up our public transport.

Rural Ireland is very important to the Labour Party. Many of our councillors, TDs and Senators live there, including myself. We will continue to advocate for those who live there. I look forward to working with the Minister further on these important matters.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I welcome the publication of Our Rural Future and echo the words of my colleague, Deputy Mark Wall. Rural Ireland is important to the Labour Party. Rural Ireland does not need another strategy full of promises; it needs delivery. I represent communities across north Cork and I know their enormous potential but I also see challenges facing families, businesses and young people every day. On public transport, in recent months, I have submitted parliamentary questions about services in Whitechurch and Mourneabbey, in particular. In Whitechurch, new homes are being built and the population is growing, yet residents are still looking for adequate public transport. In Mourneabbey, I have raised the need for proper Local Link connections and requested one specific link in Mourneabbey. I would appreciate if the Minister could intervene on that.

Local Link has been a tremendous success, but we need genuine rural transport guarantees with affordable reliable services connecting our communities. We must also support rural pubs. I welcomed the contribution towards rural pubs in budget 2027, but we must ensure further support is found for our shops and small businesses in rural Ireland. These are at the heart of our communities, and rising costs are threatening their survival.

As the Labour Party's spokesperson on education, I also want to highlight school transport. No child should be disadvantaged because of where he or she lives. We need universal, free, school transport with adequate capacity to meet demand. Looking at my hometown of Mallow, some €4.1 million has already been spent progressing the long-awaited Mallow relief road, yet we are still waiting for a planning application. That project demonstrates why rural communities are frustrated by endless delays. As I said, I welcome this publication but it needs delivery.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I take this opportunity to raise an issue with the Ministers related to local authorities in rural areas. This Friday, I will meet the chairperson of Tipperary County Council, my colleague Councillor Fiona Bonfield, whom the Ministers have met previously,

with Councillors Louise Morgan Walsh and Michael Chicken Brennan. We had to have a crisis meeting in the past couple of days on where the council is going from a budgetary point of view. Tipperary County Council, one of the largest councils in Ireland, is heading into its worst ever budgetary situation. It needs intervention from the Government.

The cost of inflation for the roads budget in Tipperary this year is €3.8 million. The cost of doing business is €750,000 extra. The Uisce Éireann transition cost is €900,000, and the 40% cut in centralised management charges for water services is costing €675,000 because it runs out this year. That is deeply unfair. The costs related to concentric cabling are increasing every year. Over a number of years, it will cost the council up to €15 million.

This is a local authority that is maxed out on the LPT, at 15%. It is increasing rents and rates and may have to cut services. This is not sustainable. Tipperary is a massive county. There is going to have to be some form of intervention. I have never seen a local authority management team come to me in the manner in which it has on this. Our meeting has been pulled forward to allow me and others to raise this issue with the Ministers. Intervention is needed because without it, the situation will be stark for all Tipperary County Council members and its executive over the coming year.

Deputy George Lawlor: In this strategy, the Government is announcing dozens of commitments and hundreds of actions for rural Ireland, but rural communities in the likes of my county, Wexford, have heard many promises before. As we know, people judge policies by what is delivered on the ground, not by the number of commitments listed in a document.

Rural Ireland does not need another plan; it needs delivery. The Government talks about balanced regional development, yet major public investment continues to be concentrated around Dublin and the greater Dublin area. In places like Wexford and other rural areas, businesses, commuters and workers contribute just as much *per capita* to the economy but frequently find themselves at the back of the queue when it comes to infrastructural funding, public transport improvements and economic development projects. It would appear that when Dublin needs investment, the Government writes a cheque, but when the likes of County Wexford need investment, the Government writes a strategy.

The strategy speaks about building resilient communities, yet when I proposed a Bill a short time ago in this Chamber to give a real right to remote work to assist people living in rural Ireland to work there, it was rejected outright by Government. Now, it is talking about creating digital hubs. Post offices have faced untold pressure to survive, rural Garda stations have been decimated, local bus services remain inadequate in many areas and accessing healthcare often means lengthy travel, and that is if you are lucky enough to secure the services of a GP. The Government cannot tackle isolation while withdrawing or failing to support the services that keep rural communities connected. Community resilience starts with keeping services in communities, not just talking about them.

The real test of Our Rural Future is not in how many commitments are printed in a Government document. The real test is whether a young family in Gorey, a farmer in Enniscorthy, a pensioner in New Ross or a small business owner in Wexford town can see a tangible improvement in their daily lives. Right now, many people in Wexford would say the Government's actions simply do not match its words.

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome the strategy, Our Rural Future 2026 to 2031. However, if I cast my mind back ten years, there was a dark cloud hanging over many rural communities that did not see a future and had no hope. The establishment of the committee for rural affairs and the Department and Minister for rural affairs has made a real and material difference in how we invest and improve rural Ireland for the better. I have heard other speakers talk about pubs and post offices, and there is no doubt that consumer behaviours and attitudes are changing. It is important, however, that we give them a hand up rather than a handout. In fairness to the Government, there have been supports for post offices and pubs. It is a model which, if we get it right, can be extended to other businesses on main streets in villages and towns across the country.

Several of the different funding schemes and the hundreds of millions that have been allocated were mentioned, as was their importance to community groups led by local authorities in many instances. However, one particular scheme that was not referenced in the document is the local improvement scheme. In County Offaly, we are waiting up to 12 years for some applicants to receive a local improvement scheme. I ask the Minister to include this in the strategy and ensure there is a greater level of financial commitment to it in future.

I acknowledge and thank the Minister for visiting County Offaly and for the €2 million community centre in Moneygall and the €15 million library in Edenderry. However, there is a real problem regarding volunteers. The Minister referred to volunteer fatigue and an over-reliance on a small number of individuals in every community. I could name them in nearly every community. I acknowledge Birr Tidy Towns, in particular Bernie Flannery and Bernie Taylor Lynch, the team who won a gold medal in the recent Tidy Towns competition and all the groups in the county. We need a promotional campaign around civic engagement and responsibility to encourage the next generation to get involved.

I will raise the cost of community projects versus public sector expenditure. In Edenderry, we have a lot of projects on the go. Last week, we got a quote of €30 million for a local swimming pool through the local authority. The local committee made a few phone calls and a provider from outside this country is coming to meet it this Thursday. It will do it for half that price. There is something seriously wrong with our public procurement process when tenders are coming in at double the price for community projects.

I also want to address insurance. Huge progress has been made with the likes of Tidy Towns. At one time, municipal grants that were coming in were being paid out with the other hand to insurance companies. IPB Insurance then stepped into the breach and now covers Tidy Towns groups. That model needs to be extended to other registered PPN groups and facilities.

I ask the Minister to look at the community employment scheme. It is a measure that needs to be secured into the future. Local authority enterprise parks, working with the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, need to be addressed to allow businesses to scale because many are simply not viable now. We must also see further housing development in smaller villages, unlocking opportunity for smaller builders and embracing energy and national digital infrastructure. There is a huge opportunity here for community benefit funds but we need to get it right. We need to ensure that where energy is invested in, we see lower prices in our energy bills.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I warmly welcome the Government's updated Our Rural Future policy spanning from 2026 to 2031. I commend the Minister for the ambition and confidence this

Government has shown in the future of rural Ireland. As somebody who was born and raised on a farm in County Galway, I know the greatest asset rural Ireland has is its people. There is a community spirit in rural Ireland that is irreplaceable and undeniable. It is something you truly have to be a part of to understand. It is the volunteers, sporting organisations, community development committees and neighbours who look out for one another. That spirit is the foundation upon which we must build our real future.

We have already seen the positive impact of Government investment through the rural regeneration and development fund, the town and village renewal scheme, investment in broadband and the revitalisation of our communities, the investment in sports capital and the investment in our community centre investment fund.

All of these primarily end up in rural communities.

This new policy builds on that progress, with commitments to stronger public services, rural enterprise, better connectivity and resilient communities. I will highlight three priorities I believe must be central to its delivery. The first is public transport. Across Galway East, in communities like Athenry, Tuam, Headford, Gort and Loughrea, we need better bus and rail connections, more frequent services and greater capacity. Public transport should connect rural communities employment, education and opportunity. We have seen marked progress in these domains in the last few years but there is a real opportunity to expand the rural link services across east Galway to capture more communities.

The second priority must be investment in our villages and community infrastructure. Our community centres, village streetscapes, footpaths and public spaces are the lifeblood of rural communities. As the Minister will be aware, many schemes throughout east Galway are struggling to get participants. That is good because it is a sign of the number of people in employment but, at the end of the day, we need people who will be able to help maintain our villages. We need to look at the structure of village maintenance as it cannot always be left to Tidy Towns committees. There has to be a structure in place for regular maintenance. Some villages are thriving and succeeding in getting through that, while others are being left behind. There is a balance to be struck there.

The third priority must be to provide an opportunity for younger people to build a future in rural Ireland. I want young people across Galway East to have the opportunity to build a home, find meaningful employment, raise a family and thrive in the communities where they grew up. This means that housing, serviced sites, wastewater infrastructure and practical planning policies that support rural communities are essential. So often, young people go for planning permission only to be turned down and some planning policy to be referred back to them as to why they failed, without there having been an engagement at the start from the planning authority to explain how they should qualify. Even in the case where they may have had a pre-planning meeting, it is not a case of the authority asking how it can give planning permission. It is often a case of it asking how it can refuse it. There needs to be a shift in mentality in our local authorities.

I am immensely optimistic about the future of rural Ireland. I have seen the impact investment has had in rural Ireland and I am excited for the future and to see what comes next.

Deputy Paula Butterly: Like many colleagues in the Government and in Opposition, I welcome this new rural policy. We are developing and increasing our commitment to rural communities on the foundations of the investment that has been very much at the heart of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil policy over the last number of years.

I will highlight three essential points and I ask the Minister to take them into consideration. Regarding transport, in County Louth we have had both strategy and funding and we have been very lucky to be able to build on a good transport system that goes from north to south on a regular basis. We have trains and buses that go by on an hourly basis, yet we still cannot connect the county from east to west. Indeed, we cannot connect County Louth to County Meath from east to west. I cannot get a bus from Clogherhead to Dunleer or Ardee or even on to Trim. People who would like to rely on public transport for meeting friends – we know socialising is very important - attending a GP appointment or even changing medication or bandages, whatever is needed by our older population, have to rely on family. I have raised this again and again. We need to be able to connect our counties, not just north and south but also east and west.

That leads me to my second point. Strategy is fundamental. Without strategy we do not know which services we need and how much they will cost. However, no strategy is worth anything if we do not take into consideration who it needs to serve, and that must be the people and community. At the heart of that are our loved ones, particularly those who are older and those who are more disadvantaged or disabled. Fundamentally, what we need is a statutory home-care policy that will allow older and disabled people to be cared for in their home. We talk about social prescribing and we know it is good for people to get out into their community and take part in activities. It is, however, equally important, if not more important, that our loved ones get to stay in their home. Until now, we have not developed the right policy to allow this to happen. People who live in rural areas will not find it easy to get a carer. Indeed, they will not be able to stay there indefinitely and die in their own bed. This must be a priority when we talk about rural Ireland.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: *The Death of an Irish Town* is otherwise known as *No One Shouted Stop*. I was thinking of John Healy's seminal work today, a book that has never been as relevant as it is today, other than when it was first written almost 60 years ago. Rural depopulation and emigration are once more sucking the lifeblood of rural Ireland, with our young people being pulled toward our congested capital city or the emigrant plane bound for Sydney or Perth on the other side of the world. Dublin-centric policies are causing the managed decline of rural Ireland and some GAA clubs are even facing extinction. Some 78% of GAA clubs are in rural areas with declining populations. Gaeltacht communities, which have represented the essence of Irishness for 2,600 years, are being sidelined and absolutely decimated, scriosta amach is amach. Ní bheidh Gaeltachtaí ann a thuilleadh má tá siad bánaithe ag an imirce nó murar féidir leis an aos óg maireachtáil agus teaghlach a thógáil iontu. We cannot have Gaeltacht communities if the young, native Irish-speaking population cannot build or live in them. Bheadh sé sin tragóideach.

Hearts are being ripped out of many rural villages which are being stripped of essential services. Young Irish people cannot buy, build or rent a home, and many cannot get planning and live locally in rural Ireland. Sadly, seven out of ten young people recently surveyed said they did not see a future for themselves in Ireland. This has to change. The success of this

new rural strategy will be judged on whether young Irish people can remain in order to live and start families in rural communities. Sin é. Otherwise it is meaningless.

We also need roads that do not wreck our cars, policies to safeguard family farms and support those of us who are reliant on home-heating oil, basic public services, including affordable public transport, school transport for all and pubs that can survive. We need banks and post offices, so that a family in the west or in Wicklow or Wexford is treated the same as a family in Dublin.

In terms of wastewater, small developers are often prevented from building desperately-needed housing due to a lack of wastewater treatment plants. I could mention several areas where this is happening, for example, Aughrim in County Wicklow or Ferns and Camolin in County Wicklow, to name but a few. In the case of Camolin, the lack of housing means a lack of families and fewer children to sustain the local primary school. This was being discussed when I started on Wicklow County Council in 2014, and the situation has not developed any further, which is unbelievable. That is symptomatic of a wider broken and bureaucratic system. We need action. We need easily accessible grants to regenerate our towns, village centres and rural Ireland, and a system that looks beyond repurposing neglected hotels and community centres as IPAS cash cows for the local speculator. In short, we need to complete revival of rural Ireland.

Deputy Brian Stanley: This debate on the future of rural Ireland is important, but for years this issue has been debated and plans have been brought forward in various reports and reviews. However, the problems still persist. Missing from many of the programmes and plans is the need to create functional and vibrant rural villages.

The approach of various Governments through the years has been somewhat disjointed. Villages continue to lose vital services such as shops, pubs and post offices. There are not enough people to sustain the core of villages. Improving rural areas in counties such as County Laois, for example, would mean bringing life back to villages like Ballacolla, Camross and Ballybrittas, where wastewater treatment services are needed. If we want to retain local shops, pubs, schools, etc, we have to have people. That is the missing piece. We can come up with these Mickey Mouse schemes every now and then to put a sticking plaster on the problem but if you have people, you have businesses. This means having affordable sites and serviced land to buy, along with social and private housing. Villages need to be places where people can walk to school, the shop, the pub, the church or their local employment office, if needed.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has a target of 11,200 homes in Laois in the next seven years. That means a population increase of one third in the county - about 33,000. However, not all development has to be in Portlaoise. The services in Portlaoise are stretched beyond their limit. The sensible and sustainable approach should be to increase population in our villages. This means improving wastewater treatment and water capacity. It means having that land serviced for small modest housing schemes. Ballybrittas does not even have a wastewater collection network despite the fact that it is almost beside the motorway. This offers the prospect of regenerating these villages and bringing life back into them. Other villages such as Ballylinan Camross and Ballycolla do not have any or are short of wastewater infrastructure. We need housing to sustain services. We also need to improve the linkages between villages and towns with bus connections. That needs to be improved. Good work is

being done but it needs to be expanded. We need EV charging points, which we not have in wide strips of Laois. In short, we need to get people back living in the villages. That is the solution here.

Deputy Charles Ward: As a rural TD, I am, of course, very interested and invested in support of any policy development in rural areas, particularly in Donegal. We need our rural towns and communities to be places of opportunity for people. Right now, that is not happening. We need our rural towns to be prioritised, particularly when it comes to tourism. We want them to be places where people can live; work; thrive; reach their full potential; grow socially, mentally, physically and personally; and build fulfilling lives going forward. Too often, young people in rural Ireland do not see their hometown as a place of opportunity. Rather they see it as a place that is limiting them and holding them back and that attitude needs to change.

The lack of significant investment is reflected in many aspects of life in Donegal from limited public transport to poor broadband to poor road infrastructure. In particular, the north west is years behind. We are the forgotten county, yet tourism has the opportunity to grow in Donegal if it is invested in. Tourism will grow if we invest in it and take the chance. There is an urgent need for greater investment, particularly in Donegal. While destinations such as Killarney have become established tourism hotspots, they are increasingly experiencing capacity pressures. This highlights the importance of developing alternative destinations and spreading the benefits of tourism to other areas and alternatives such as Finn Valley or Malin Head. The Malin Head visitor plant management plan was rolled out in 2018 but has still not progressed. This needs to be progressed but for it to be progressed, Donegal County Council will need funding. Funding these projects is vital. I know the Minister of State has been to Finn Valley in the past. I ask him to come and see the potential in Inishowen and the islands over the next year. Donegal can thrive just like Kerry but we need investment.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Any discussion or debate on the future of rural Ireland has to be welcomed and is obviously very important. While rural Ireland is a fine place and a great place in which to live and work, we obviously need to identify issues that need to be addressed. There are various issues across rural Ireland that pop up in every constituency, including south Tipperary, which would be described as a rural constituency. The various services that give rise to difficulties would be housing; water services; vacancy and dereliction; the number and the resourcing of An Garda Síochána; rail and road transport; and industrial development and jobs.

The poor situation in south Tipperary with regard to water services is fundamental and is hugely difficult. Many of our schemes are under boil water notices. In Tipperary town, 5,500 consumers have been on a boil water notice since 11 February. The Ardfinnan regional water supply scheme has been on a boil water notice since 7 June and has just come off a "do not consume" notice. Glenary in Clonmel and Newport in the north of the county have just come off of a boil water notice. There are significant difficulties. This is something that very many TDs in this House both Opposition and Government have raised on an ongoing basis. Irish Water is not fit for purpose and should be abolished. It should never have been established but it should certainly be abolished and the services returned to the local authorities, which looked after these services in the past.

I refer to the question of vacancy and dereliction. Pushing the derelict site tax out to June 2028 is not good enough, particularly in relation to large-scale derelict areas. We have one of those in Market Place in Clonmel. It has effectively been a ghost town for the past ten years and even prior to that was the subject of an auction. I think a developer has been sitting on that for years. The derelict site tax should be brought into being immediately with regard to large developers that are sitting on properties.

We also have a problem with gardaí right across the constituency. The new Garda districts, which in our case means Clare and Tipperary, are simply not effective and we have fewer gardaí now than we had in 2024, so that is something that needs to be dealt with. Other issues include transport, for example, the western and eastern sections of the N24 and rail services from Limerick to Waterford through south Tipperary. Those are some of the issues that need to be dealt with.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the publication of Our Rural Future 2026-2031 and the Government's commitment to supporting rural Ireland. Rural Ireland is essential to our national identity. It is where our communities, culture, traditions and local sporting organisations have been built over generations. I welcome the five strategic pillars outlined in this policy, particularly the commitments around thriving rural places, high-quality public services and resilient rural communities.

However, as a TD for County Kerry, I want to highlight the very real challenges facing rural communities in north and south Kerry, particularly the Iveragh peninsula. We need to be honest about what is happening on the ground. In September 2025, just 83 children started across 12 primary schools in the Iveragh region. That is a stark indication of the demographic challenges we face. We are also seeing the impact on our GAA clubs, which have been the backbone of rural communities for generations. I acknowledge the work of Joe McCrohan, chairman of the South Kerry Board; Michael Murphy, demographics officer with the Kerry County Board; and former Kerry footballer Bryan Sheehan from Cahersiveen, who have all highlighted the challenges facing our clubs and communities. I first arranged a deputation as a member of Kerry County Council back in 2024 where these three men came before the meeting of Kenmare Municipal District and outlined the issues facing our county, in particular the Cahersiveen-Iveragh region, which historically has been ravaged by forced immigration and now rural depopulation. Bryan, Michael and Joe were subsequently interviewed by Marty Morrissey on "Six One News" in regard to this matter. We are now seeing clubs having to amalgamate and field underage teams. These amalgamations are not happening because communities want to lose their identity or independence. They are happening because there are simply not enough young people living in these areas and that should concern all of us. When the rural school struggles to maintain its numbers, when a GAA club cannot field a team and when young people cannot see a future in their own community, we have to ask ourselves what more can be done.

6 o'clock

I previously called on the Taoiseach and the Minister for rural and community affairs, Deputy Calleary, to establish a dedicated task force to address rural depopulation in Iveragh, south Kerry. I believe that call is even more relevant today. We need a co-ordinated approach

involving Departments, Kerry County Council, local communities, the GAA and other organisations that understand the challenges facing rural Ireland.

I would also like to see south Kerry considered as a pilot area for targeted interventions to tackle rural depopulation. I have called for this previously. Housing must be central to that approach. I have called for the exploration of a community-led cluster-type housing model working in partnership with local GAA clubs and community organisations. I sincerely hope that the new rural planning guidelines go far enough. There are plenty of young couples out there who are in the position to build and get a mortgage big enough to build a house. They should be given every opportunity to do so. We need to look at how we can utilise local assets, address planning and infrastructure barriers, and create opportunities for our young people to build their lives in their communities where they grew up. I welcome the commitments in this policy around rural housing, the local improvement schemes, the expanded Local Link services, digital connectivity and the new strategic rural investment fund. These are all very important measures but we must also ensure we deliver tangible outcomes for the communities that need them most. The policy contains 37 high-level commitments and I ask that the demographic decline is addressed especially.

Deputy Seán Kyne: Cuirim fáilte roimh phlean an Rialtais don tuath, Ár dTodhchaí Tuaithe. Tréaslaím leis an obair atá déanta ag an Aire, an Teachta Calleary, ag an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Buttimer, agus ag feidhmeannaigh na Roinne.

Rural Ireland is varied and is intertwined and connected with our large towns and cities. There is no one solution to solve the challenges of rural Ireland. You would have to go to each town and parish to identify the issues and challenges they face. Some places are very strong. Again, a lot of that depends on location. My own area of Moycullen, Killannin, Oughterard, Bearna, Oranmore, Claregalway and Athenry are strong urban areas with their own challenges due to the pressures of growth but have the advantages of being close to Galway city, which has a strong influence and strong job opportunities. Other areas are more isolated and have their own particular challenges.

We got good news this week about the Galway city ring road. This will have such a positive benefit to the whole region, not just Galway city but also the county, including Connemara, in increasing connectivity and opportunities for further investment as well as tourism opportunities. We want to see that project built as quickly as possible. We have seen the benefits of the Moycullen bypass, the western rail corridor and further plans for that, which will be of huge benefit to the region with the investment in rail services there.

We look at the investment, an infheistíocht, atá déanta agus atá ag dul ar aghaidh in Inis Oírr. Tá sé sin fíorthábhachtach. Tréaslaím leis an obair atá déanta ag an Aire, an Teachta Calleary, agus ag an Rialtas air sin. Tá fadhbanna fós ar Inis Meáin ó thaobh shábháilteacht an dá chaladh atá ann. Cén plean atá ag an Rialtas maidir le hinfheistíocht ar Inis Meáin? Teastaíonn plean go géar. There is also investment in other piers, such as Cleggan Pier, which has a hugely important role in accessibility to Inisbofin as well.

The rural broadband plan is working. It allows for remote working or for people to work from home. I acknowledge the Government's investment in that. We want to see completion of that next year. The croí cónaithe scheme has been hugely beneficial with people renovating run-down cottages and houses and in providing opportunities for people to acquire a house in

rural Ireland. There is investment in sports capital. I was hugely involved in the community centre fund with the then Minister, Heather Humphreys, and Deputy Calleary, in relation to maintenance, refurbishment and new community centres. Rural Ireland has challenges but all in all there are also many positives for the area.

Deputy John Connolly: Cuidím leis an méid atá ráite ag mo chomhghleacaí ó mo Dháilcheantar féin maidir le cúrsaí céibhe. Tá sé luaite sa phlean mar sprioc áirithe go mbeidh muid chun an ceann ar Inis Oírr a chríochnú. Cuirim fáilte roimhe sin ach feicim sa phlean chomh maith go bhfuil dhá chéibh i gContae Mhaigh Eo luaite, ceann ar Oileán Chliara agus ceann ar Inis Toirc. Ba bhreá liom sprioc mar sin a fheiceáil sa phlean d'Inis Meáin. Ar mhaithe le sábháilteacht na ndaoine atá ina gcónaí ann agus iad ag baint úsáid as seirbhísí báid, ba cheart go mbeadh céibh cheart ar Inis Meáin. Mar is eol dúinn agus mar atá luaite ag mo chomhghleacaí, tá taighde ar bun faoi láthair ag an gcomhairle contae ar an mbealach is fearr chun sábháilteacht a chruthú agus a choimeád do mhuintir Inis Meáin agus iad ag baint úsáid as seirbhísí báid. Ba bhreá liom a fheiceáil sa phlean seo go mbeimid ag cur leis an obair sin agus ag cur leis na céibheanna eile atá luaite sa phlean chomh maith le céibh Inis Meáin.

Agus cúrsaí Gaeltachta ardaithe agam, ba mhaith liom focal nó dhó eile a rá maidir leis an nGaeltacht agus a todhchaí. Labhraíonn an plean seo faoin ról lárnach atá ag Údarás na Gaeltachta agus faoin obair chun tacú le heacnamaíocht réigiúnda na nGaeltachtaí. Tá an t-údarás ag déanamh an-obair air sin ach ceapaim go bhfuil deis eile ann don Ghaeltacht. Baineann an deis sin leis an gcuspóir atá in Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) go mbeidh inniúlacht sa Ghaeilge ag 20% d'earcaithe nua don earnáil phoiblí faoin mbliain 2030. Dar liom, is deis é seo don Ghaeltacht. Tá dúshlán ag an tír an sprioc sin a bhaint amach ach níl muid ag baint úsáid cheart as na ceantair Ghaeltachta chun é sin a bhaint amach. Ba cheart dúinn breathnú ar na seirbhísí Stáit agus smaoineamh ar chuid acu a dhílárú go ceantair Ghaeltachta.

The policy the State had previously of decentralisation was a very successful one in terms of the development of public services outside of the Dublin region and the creation of industry and jobs in regions through public services. We should look at our Gaeltacht regions to see if we can use the opportunity of the available workforce in those regions that would help us to achieve the 20% target for those employees in the public sector to be proficient in the Irish language by decentralising some services there. We do face a significant challenge. This would be one way for the challenge to be overcome quite easily, with the technology involved now and the availability of broadband throughout rural Ireland. This is an opportunity we should examine.

I would like to mention one other issue before I finish, that of water. Around 10% of households in the country are still not connected to a public water supply or a group water scheme. We need a scheme like the national broadband plan to extend public water services to those households. It is a public health issue as well as one of the availability of water.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Rural Ireland is the backbone of this country. The people of south Kildare are proud of their rural communities, their heritage and way of life. Families have lived and worked in these areas for generations and we have a responsibility to ensure that those communities not only strive but thrive. Unfortunately, this strategy does little to

achieve that goal. It is a polished document full of good intentions and worthy aspirations but it fails to address fundamental challenges facing rural Ireland today.

The two core issues that were raised during the consultation process were housing and generational renewal, yet both remain largely unaddressed. The Government chose to ignore the reality on the ground and created another fluffy policy document that will just gather dust. The reality is simple. People can no longer afford to live in the communities where they grew up. Young people are priced out of the rental market and buying a home is completely out of the question for the vast majority of people. What rural Ireland needs are measurable targets for affordable housing, serviced sites and the refurbishment of derelict and vacant properties. We have to follow through with delivery and not another strategy.

Until we see a step change from the Government in this regard there will be no rural future to speak of. This plan does not commit resources to tangibly improve the public services that people are crying out for in Kildare South, such as childcare places, primary care and out-of-hours GP services. South Kildare has some of the lowest garda numbers *per capita*. Water infrastructure in Derrinturn and Allenwood is at breaking point. Narraghmore and Moone have lost their post offices in recent times.

The strategy will not deliver for these communities. There is no concrete commitment to expand the oversubscribed school transport scheme, nor is there any further investment in special educational placements to allow children with additional needs to attend school with their siblings in their local area instead of being shuttled across towns and sometimes counties to attend school, and that is if they can attend school at all.

While little in the document is objectionable, little in it inspires confidence. It provides no real hope for communities struggling to retain their population, attract young families or maintain essential services. A genuine rural future means affordable homes, accessible public services, thriving local communities and dignity for our older people. This document falls well short of that standard and is further evidence of how out of touch the Government is.

Caithfimid todhchaí ár gceantair tuaithe a chinntiú. Ní chabhróidh an straitéis atá os ár gcomhair anseo leis an aidhm sin mar go bhfágann sé na ceisteanna is tábhachtaí ar lár, is iad sin maoiniú seirbhísí poiblí agus cúrsaí tithíochta. Leanfaidh bánú na tuaithe ar aghaidh fad is a theipeann ar an Rialtas tithe inacmhainne, áiseanna cúraim leanaí, cúram sláinte poiblí agus áiteanna scoile do chách a chur ar fáil.

Deputy Michael Collins: This is another rural plan; let us hope it delivers. How much time do I have?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): You have five minutes.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach.

What will make this any different from what has come before, which is a lot of talk, promises and non-delivery? That is a serious matter. People would like to get to the nuts and bolts of this and where the money will be spent.

I remember the regeneration fund which was in place in the past. We had a project in Schull. There was a meeting here and pictures were taken of all the committee members. A senior Minister was sitting inside. His seat was in trouble, the money was shifted that night back to his constituency and the poor people who had come up from Schull lost everything. That is the kind of game that goes on here in relation to funding. It is not equally given out. The Minister of State was not there so I am not pointing the finger at him, but I know it for a fact because I saw the pictures and the carry-on. I rang the committee and was told we had it, which was fantastic, but the committee did not have it in writing and the next day, when the announcements were made, Schull was not in the game or at the races and the people were stunned. That was a serious error because it led to a big downfall in west Cork and projects in Schull. It was an off-season project that would have worked all year round on the pier in Schull. However, we are where we are.

The problem we have now is that tomorrow we will be talking about the Short-Term Lettings and Tourism Bill. I would like to think there was something in this that might salvage a lot of the businesses the Government is going to destroy tomorrow evening when it sets the train in motion. I have spoken to the Taoiseach about this on numerous occasions. He promised me that the planning aspect of it would not be included. Now we have seen the Bill. We have combed through it and had public meetings. There were full houses in west Cork of people who deliver short-term lets like through Airbnb. The Government will destroy their businesses within two years with the new planning guidelines that are coming in. What has the Government got in this document to solve that? The best thing I have heard of it doing is that it will put a tax on beds to make sure that if tourism does not go down, the Government will take it down. I do not understand what its plans are. We need to get to the nuts and bolts of this.

Will there be funding for rural roads? Earlier I brought up with the Taoiseach the N71, the Innishannon bypass, the Bandonbypass, the northern relief road, the southern relief road, the Bantry bypass, passing bays in Castletownbere and promised funding being withdrawn. It is in the public domain that funding for roads that needed work has been withdrawn. It looks to me as though some parts of rural Ireland will get some of this money, maybe, but the decent parts of rural Ireland will be forgotten.

We will be back to square one on the wastewater treatment plants. We want to grow villages like Goleen, Ballydehob, Rosscarbery, Shannonvale and so on, but we do not see the money being invested there in the wastewater treatment plants. People see raw sewage in the tide. If that was a farmer, he would be closed down straight away, but when it is the State it is different. A blind eye is turned to it.

In farming and fishing, too, we have a serious crisis. I spoke today about a fisherman who went out in his trawler on five days last week and it cost him €22,850 in fuel. That is game over as far as he is concerned because it is not sustainable. The price of fish we buy in the shop will not go up that much.

The Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, will have serious and devastating consequences. We are leaders in Europe at the moment and we are not able to lead the ship to safety. We are not able to lead farming into safety. Instead, CAP is being cut by 25% while in the last ten years the money that farmers pay to buy a lorry load of ready-mix or fertiliser has doubled. Everything has doubled and now the Government wants to cut farmers' money by 25% because

the rest of Europe wants arms to go to war. What the hell is going wrong in Europe? Europe is starting to turn against the people it should protect.

I will turn to greenways, as I have the floor. There will be a public meeting on 20 November in Ballinascarty and we will see what kind of public representatives we have in west Cork and whether they will turn out in strength to support people who do not want to wreck their farms. I know a farmer in Ballinascarty who has been told the walkway will go through his farm. He explained that there are farm sheds, calf sheds and milking parlours, and he was told not to worry about them, that they would be shoved sideways. Jesus, what is going on in this country? What is wrong with taking away a ditch at the side of the road to make a walkway? What is wrong with going to meet James O'Mahony in Kilcrohane, who put the most famous walkways around the world, or Jim O'Sullivan in Beara? They did not destroy anyone's farm doing it. They took away ditches, but they did not go down the middle of a farm or put a 5 m tar roadway in the middle of a farm. All of that has to stop, including me.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): Indeed. Deputy Lawless.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The people of rural Ireland do not want any more glossy documents, targets or reports. We need action and delivery from the Government. I will raise three important issues.

The first is the western rail corridor. I welcome the fact that work has begun on clearing the Athenry to Claremorris line, but it needs to be delivered on time. I would appreciate if in his reply, the Minister of State could talk about the delivery timeframe for it.

I was deeply disappointed to hear the Taoiseach intervened in support of the greenway between Collooney and Bellaghy because if this goes ahead and the greenway proceeds, I fear we will never see a railway north of Claremorris. That is a huge concern for so many community groups and politicians across the political divide in Mayo.

The second issue is planning. We cannot have a rural Ireland if people do not live there. In the past two years since my election, I have sat with constituents who have come to me with planning documents because they were refused planning permission. Some applicants were refused on the basis of local need. Incredibly, one person who attended the local national school, whose father attended the local national school, whose children are attending the local national school and who is seeking to build in the catchment area of the local national school, has been refused planning permission on grounds of local planning need. This is happening right across the country.

The statements on planning need to happen. They need to be implemented. We need to address the planning system and adopt a permissive attitude to planning. We cannot have a situation where we are looking for grounds for refusal. We have to change the attitude to planning. It is important. If we want to have rural communities and sustain towns and villages, we have to allow people to live there. We need to address the planning attitude. It must become permissible to build. We should be looking for reasons to give people planning permission to build on family land.

The third issue is that in rural Ireland we have significant difficulty with home care packages. It is a reality that we have an ageing population and I know families and elderly

people receiving home care packages under which a different individual attends every day. We must address the lack of housing for older people in our communities.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: If rural Ireland is to survive, it needs a population. It needs to have people who are able to work from home. Increasingly, the jobs will be hybrid ones, especially in the farming sector. We need to encourage people to diversify from agricultural practices. We have for too long focused on beef and dairy, and with the way the global situation is changing, they may not be sustainable.

I have mentioned that our own food security is hugely threatened and, therefore, Government policy needs to push more for self-reliance in producing homegrown tillage products. There is huge potential if we allow people to build in rural areas in properly sustainable homes using wind and solar. It is a win-win for everyone. We should be encouraging people to repopulate the countryside to keep the schools and post offices open.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I welcome the publication of Our Rural Future 2026-2031. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the Department on this ambitious plan. Its five pillars are grounded in reality. Its 34 commitments and 234 actions and timelines will help to ensure its delivery. As the Minister of State knows, Mayo is blessed with remarkable natural beauty, innovative businesses, strong farming communities and vibrant towns and villages that consistently demonstrate resilience and ambition. We have places with strong identities, proud traditions and extraordinary community spirit, which is often shown in the community future plans and through our voluntary groups. Today I think of people like the vivacious volunteer, disability advocate and all-round community person Avril Graham, whom we sadly lost this week. I think of her family, her colleagues across the various organisations she was involved in and her friends. May she rest in peace.

The challenges of rural life in Ireland are very real, including the lack of water services. I think of residents in Newport, who are still waiting on their wastewater treatment plant. I think of frequent power outages. I think of the islanders in communities like Achill. I think of the struggles with transport, the need for upgraded roads like the R312 from Erris to Castlebar and the fact that Mayo is facing double-digit school closures. That is why we need to continue to invest in our rural towns and villages, expand digital connectivity, strengthen transport services and improve essential infrastructure.

I welcome the recognition in this plan that communities in rural areas are different. The needs of the islanders on Clare Island are very different from those of the residents in Ballinrobe. In these rural communities, sometimes smaller investments can make the greatest difference. I think of TFI Anseo in Achill, which I know the Minister of State is quite involved in. It has surpassed 11,000 journeys in its first year. I think of the roll-out of the national broadband plan to Inishturk, which has literally bridged the digital divide across the ocean for its 50 residents and is now enabling enterprise, education and a host of opportunities. I want all rural parts of Mayo to have a vibrant community, vibrant community centres with digital hubs, safe footpaths and roads, and reliable transport. I want young people to be able to build on their own family land, something that has come up repeatedly today. Of course, they need to adhere to policies, but we need to guide them and help them rather than see them engaged in what can be a costly, drawn-out process that can often end up with a negative result.

I want accessible and affordable childcare. In rural parts of Mayo, too many parents, often women, are unable to return to their careers due to a lack of childcare. Mayo has really ambitious plans like the breakwater in Roonagh, the suspension bridge at Downpatrick Head and the regeneration of the Westport convent site, which is well under way. Last week, we saw work start on 18 age-friendly homes. Of course, we really need to see the strategic development zone at Ireland West Airport. I look forward to working with the Minister of State and the Minister to see many of these delivered while ensuring we are not overwhelming our volunteers. They need consistent and accessible funding and less bureaucracy.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I welcome the opportunity to speak on Our Rural Future. I commend the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, on their work on it. I am very proud to have lived my whole life in a rural part of Kilkenny. I know that if a plan like this is executed properly, it can mean a whole lot for towns and villages like mine. As Fianna Fáil spokesperson for rural affairs, I believe this plan has potential to address the most pressing issues facing rural areas. I want to set out what I would like to see delivered in rural areas, particularly in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny.

Everybody deserves to feel safe in their homes and in their communities. We need more gardaí on the streets of Carlow and Kilkenny. People on the ground are telling me that they want to see more gardaí on the beat, particularly in our smaller towns and villages. The funding in the budget for an additional 1,000 new gardaí next year is a really important start, but we need to see a greater geographical spread of these resources. People want to see a garda on their main street. It helps the community to thrive when people know their local garda by name and it makes them feel safer where they live.

More than 2,200 pubs in Ireland have closed in the last 20 years, the majority of them in rural areas. When the pub in a village closes, people lose a vital place to meet. In particular for older people living on their own, that is a huge loss. I have been pushing for support for rural pubs since I was elected and I was absolutely delighted to see €15 million allocated in this year's budget. The details have to be right and the money has to go to the rural pubs that are struggling most. Keeping these doors open is one of the best ways we have of tackling isolation, a key aim of Our Rural Future. I look forward to working closely with all those stakeholders to come up with a scheme to benefit all.

I also welcome new Government guidelines to make it easier for people to build one-off rural homes in their locality. These changes are the biggest overhaul of our rural housing policy in more than 20 years. The guidelines strike the right balance between supporting rural communities and ensuring vibrant towns and villages while protecting the character of our countryside. The reality is that someone born in a rural area, living in a rural area or working in a rural area should be entitled to build in that rural area. As well as saving our pubs, there are other ways that this plan can tackle isolation. Farming can be a lonely life, and I welcome the new pilot to tackle isolation in farming communities.

Our community centres matter just as much. Making the community centre investment fund permanent means these centres can plan ahead instead of scraping by from year to year. I also urge every sports club in Carlow and Kilkenny to get their applications into the community sports facilities fund before 26 February of next year because every club that gets funding is another place for people to come together in and we need that in rural areas.

This plan commits to publishing progress every year. I will be keeping a very close eye on it to make sure it delivers for Ireland, but more importantly, for the people of Carlow and Kilkenny.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I will follow on from the previous speaker and start with rural planning, which is important in dealing with the housing challenge. I have worked through four country development plans in Wicklow and made many changes. I welcome the proposals brought forward by the Minister of State, John Cummins, which should come into force in January. Many aspects are making it difficult and we must make changes. Social or economic need must trump views and prospects in planning decisions. Individual councils can insert this in their development plans, as I did in Wicklow.

We need to identify hamlets to allow clustering of houses in rural areas and broaden the qualification for building in hamlets to include nearby villages and towns. Housing need criteria should not be applied to someone who owns a house in an urban area and wants to move back to their rural area. On multi-unit housing, there should be more support to make it economically viable to build estates in towns and villages in rural areas. The development levy waiver scheme meant that some developments that were not economically viable to develop suddenly became viable. We should look at reintroducing this waiver; otherwise, the only housing developments that can happen in these places are social housing.

I know that Local Link has been discussed a lot this afternoon. While Local Link buses are a great addition to rural areas, I ask that the timetables be reviewed so that they can be availed of by more people. I am particularly talking about connectivity, for example linking in with other buses that go to third level colleges. Many of our student population travelling to college could avail of the service if it was better aligned to existing college-going buses or linking the timetables with train timetables. The 132 bus is the only public transport from west Wicklow to Dublin. The Minister of State is familiar with it. The promised increase has still not materialised. The proposed 199 link bus from Glendalough to Bray has still not happened and hopefully it will in the new year.

Another subject has not been mentioned today and is not widely known around Ireland. It is known only in Wicklow and the south Dublin uplands. It is called the PURE project. PURE stands for protecting uplands and rural environments. It is an environmental project established to combat illegal dumping, fly-tipping, in the Wicklow and Dublin uplands and was officially launched in September 2006. It has been a massive success and has hugely reduced the amount of rubbish seen on the sides of rural roads. It also brings together members of the communities who help to pick up this rubbish. I ask the Minister of State to consider rolling this out across the country.

The rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, is a great scheme but it is not working as well as it should be.

It needs to come with funding for a dedicated person in the council to oversee. In my experience, nobody is taking responsibility and nothing is getting done. Money is not being spent. This loses value over time because of inflation. It is incredibly frustrating.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I looked through the five pillars earlier. I want to reflect on those pillars when I make my comments about what urgently needs to happen for our inshore fishing communities. There are about 2,000 inshore fishermen throughout the State who have licences and a tradition. That tradition dates back hundreds of years in some families. It is a noble tradition. It is an integral part of the culture and the identity of not just our coastal communities but also our country. I have toured the country as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on fisheries and the marine. I have met fishermen at piers and harbours across the State, and what one man said is burnt into my mind. He broke down in tears as he told me that he had to tell his son that there were not the resources for both of them any more and that he would have to fish alone. The tears flowed as he reflected that he would be the last of his family, the members of which have fished for hundreds of years, to stay on the water. It is that serious. When I started out as my party's spokesperson six years ago, there were very few fishermen around the coast who talked about financial assistance, because that is not what they are about. They are about fishing. The truth is that with the cost of fuel, the cost of bait and the unpredictability of markets, they just cannot sustain themselves any more.

There have been welcome initiatives in recent times, including the basic income for the arts scheme. That is a welcome scheme. We need more money and for more artists to be able to avail of the scheme. The National Inshore Fishermen's Association is proposing a similar scheme for fishers. That scheme would reflect the integral cultural heritage that is so important to the Irish people. It would keep them at sea, but they need some financial assistance to do that. We have been assisting farmers for decades through the Common Agricultural Policy. We can do this. I appeal to the Minister of State and to the Government to come forward with a scheme to assist inshore fishermen. Sinn Féin brought forward a proposal in its alternative budget. Approximately €35 million is what it would cost. That is not a huge amount of money to keep all of our active inshore fishermen on the water, as well as contributing to environmental sustainability. There is so much to the scheme that has been proposed. If we are serious about Our Rural Future's five pillars and plan, we have to bring forward a scheme to financially assist our inshore fishermen and to contribute to sustaining everything that they and they families have done for hundreds of years.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Hear, hear.

Deputy Carol Nolan: After years of lecturing rural Ireland, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have finally realised something, namely that the people who built their parties no longer trust them. Rural communities have watched decision after decision being imposed on them and being presented as both inevitable and the price of progress. For years, Government policy was shaped around a political consensus that treated rural concerns as obstacles to be managed. Farmers, motorists and communities dependent on employment in the area of peat were told that they were the problem. The Green Party was allowed to run the show in the previous Government. There is no serious focus on the midlands - as a TD for Offaly, that is of great concern to me - despite it being the region that carried the heaviest burden of the so-called just transition. In fact, the word "midlands" is not even mentioned in the document we are discussing. We know now that the Government's territorial just transition plan did not directly assess employment prospects in County Offaly, which was the county that bore the greatest brunt of the unjust transition. It is the county that is most affected by the end of peat harvesting and peat-fired generation. Thousands of workers were told that new opportunities would

replace what was lost. Yet, years later, the Government still cannot tell us how many equivalent permanent jobs have actually been created in the midlands.

The document also avoids another uncomfortable truth. Over recent years, rural Ireland has been subjected to a relentless stream of policy proposals aimed at reducing livestock numbers and restricting agricultural activity. Farmers listened to discussions about herd reductions, methane targets, rewetting programmes and land use. The Government did not listen. Suddenly, however, it is changing its point of view.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Many young boys and girls cannot get planning permission to build houses for themselves in order to put a roof over their heads. This is happening in areas like Killarney, Killorglin, Kenmare and Dingle. In many places, they cannot get the basic right to planning permission. Draft proposals have been put in place by the Minister. They are supposed to come into force next year. I hope that happens, because many people are depending on it. They have a right to get planning permission, or at least to have a fair chance of getting it. As stated, they cannot get it at present. This is one of the most important things. If we do not have people in rural Ireland and do not have houses for them to live in, we are not going to have rural communities.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State for his helpful visits to Tuosist GAA Club, Réalt na Mara, the national school, Pobalscoil Inbhear Scéine and other places during the summer. Soft talk by any of us is no use whatsoever to rural Ireland. We have a serious problem with depopulation. I thank the people and their voluntary groups, such as the GAA clubs, the small schools that are keeping life in rural areas and South Kerry Partnership, North and East Kerry Development, for their efforts. I refer also to the small businesses and people involved in self-catering establishments that we will be discussing over the next number of days. Rural planning is an important issue. I welcome the initiatives that have been taken in that regard. I refer to small shops, pubs and post offices. It is important to enhance those businesses in order to keep them alive and help them to grow.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am delighted that the Minister got this portfolio. I compliment him on his work so far. He mentioned the community hubs. I hope he will accept my invitation to visit Ballylooby in south Tipperary, where the community is undertaking work on an old pub as a community hub project. The members came together. I hope he will come and see for himself. South Tipperary has benefited from some schemes relating to rural areas in the past. They are good schemes. I know the Minister of State is a practical man. He is a rural man, so he understands what is involved. I look forward to giving him a céad míle fáilte to Tiobraid Árann theas. Beidh mé ag caint leo. I hope he meets the committee in Ballylooby. It is an energetic and ambitious project, and there is great energy among the community to try to resurrect the pub. They had three pubs and a shop there. They have nothing at all now - gach rud imithe. They have ambitious plans to restore that old pub as a cafe and as a centre for the community to operate out of. Beidh fiorfháilte roimhe.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Ar dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas le gach Ball a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht iontach seo chun an tuarascáil maidir le Ár dTodhchaí Tuaithe a phlé. I

welcome the debate. I thank all Members for their contributions. The essence of the debate is that we can agree on many different strands of where we have been, where we are and where we will go.

I will work backwards for a moment. I apologise that I will not get to reply to all the Members' contributions. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae referred to people in rural Ireland. He is right. We need people in rural Ireland. I look forward to visiting him and Deputy Michael Healy-Rae in Rathmore in a couple of weeks' time, because I grew up on a small rural farm with my grandparents on the Cork-Kerry border. I understand the importance of what the Deputies are talking about. Deputy Michael Healy-Rae is right. Soft talk is no good. We need to have a plan. The plan is here. Depopulation did not happen yesterday or today; it has been going on for a long time.

The Minister, Deputy Calleary and I met with the GAA demographics committee in south Kerry. Deputy Cahill referred to it earlier. This is not the plan that was conjured up for a glossy magazine, as Deputy Lawless said.

We are continuing the work done when we created the Department, recognising the importance of rural Ireland. The Minister and I, and the whole of government, are committed to making rural Ireland a better place to live, which needs to happen and which is why the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is drawing up the draft statement and guidelines on Gaeltacht housing and planning. Everybody who says we need more people living in rural Ireland is correct. Second, it is about work. Some Members who referenced rural Ireland are no longer present but I make the point that the majority of Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland jobs are outside of Dublin. To be fair to the majority of Members present, I have met them on visits to constituencies. They are committed advocates for their areas, working to pursue development of people and communities. As Minister of State with responsibility for community, I see first hand the gargantuan spirit, an fuinneamh, the energy, the enthusiasm and the creation of community that is so important. Linked to that is the piece we have been doing around being able to have people work, raise a family and run a business.

This is not a glossy magazine. There are commitments and actions that are accountable and there will be a mid-term review. Some 84% of the previous plan was implemented. Some will not like me saying this but the national broadband plan was delivered on time and in budget, connecting Ireland. The 400-plus remote working hubs give people a hybrid working model where they can choose to work one day, two days or whatever number of days and then commute. Deputy Gogarty spoke about this and he is dead right

As Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I recognise the importance of rural transport. I will give Members some figures. There were 11 million passengers under Connecting Ireland last year, a 225% increase in six years, while TFI Local Link provided 6.97 million passenger journeys last year, a 20% increase. With the Ministers, Deputies O'Brien, Canney and Calleary, I am about connecting people to services and adding new routes. Deputy Wall referred to school transport. We are in discussions to change the delivery model of school transport to ensure we have it linked to rural transport. I am fully aware of the points made by the Deputy - I commend him on his contribution - and Deputy Kenny on the importance of rural transport.

Deputy Daly referred to the rural hackney licence. We have changed it. I modified that earlier this year. I am looking to get more people to become drivers and to transport people. The piece around the pub in the budget came from the conversation about the centrality as a hub of the community.

The new planning guidelines are central to having people living and raising their families in rural Ireland. It is about consistency of approach, as we heard from Deputy Timmins in the context of planning. It is the overhaul of rural planning guidelines that Deputies Mattie McGrath and Danny Healy-Rae spoke about. It is about ensuring people with a connection to rural Ireland remain there. Post Covid, we have seen an increase in the number of people back on the roads stuck in traffic. I gave Members independent figures showing the importance of rural transport.

I will certainly take up Deputy Ward's invitation to Donegal. My good friend, Deputy Mac Lochlainn, and I have a long-standing commitment to go back to Donegal. Regarding the fishers, the rural social scheme provides the opportunity for low-income farmers and fishers to undertake work in local communities. I refer Deputy Mac Lochlainn to page 100 of the document in terms of the actions around what he spoke about. I share his point of view. He is right to raise it and he has articulated it well about inland fishing. I will happily sit down and talk to him further about it, even though it is not my area of responsibility. He is right to raise the point and he has raised it repeatedly. I see first hand in his county, Donegal, the importance of that connectivity.

All of us in this Chamber are proud of rural Ireland. I am optimistic about rural Ireland. Given the day that is in it in the United States of America, I will paraphrase Bill Clinton: we are always thinking about tomorrow and the importance of tomorrow for people. That is why part of what we are doing is developing and increasing our commitment to rural Ireland.

Deputy Butterly spoke about the importance of transport and connecting people. My ambition and motivation as Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport is to connect people to people and people to place. We speak about ending social isolation. Deputy Butler, the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has put in huge work. We have had conversations across Departments about enhancing the transport offering. We are ambitious. The priority for us in government is to deliver and to have more people working, staying and living in rural Ireland.

The debate has been very clear. We are, as a House and as politicians, vested in our local areas and that Kickhams pride in the local place we see every weekend in our sporting and GAA clubs. That is why we need a plan. That is why the document is produced to continue the next iteration of Our Rural Future. It is about addressing the challenges articulated by many Members, which we as a Government face and it is about the core challenges under rural planning, investment in housing and connectivity. It is about continuing that investment and seeking to address the complexities of the challenges.

I was smiling at Deputy Lawless's reference to the five pillars. The five pillars are interconnected. They are about a thriving rural place where people can flourish, which means we invest in our towns, as in the example of the RRDF. We have high-quality public services in healthcare and education. Listening to some Members, excluding those present, you would not realise we have never had more teachers, SNAs and investment in schools and in the

physical public realm. What we are committed to and have achieved up to now is that resilient rural community. Deputy Clendennen is right. I have not heard from anybody in the debate about the fundamental issue we must all face, whether we are urban or rural, which is how we must address the change in consumer behaviour and attitude. I pose the question: how many people in the Chamber use their local post office? How many go into their bank branch? How many go into their local shops and buy there, as opposed to going online? Government has changed and has supported local post offices.

There is much more that unites us than divides us in this report. I thank Members for their contributions. I look forward to us being held to account and to delivering not just a document, but a real plan for the future development of rural Ireland.

Hospital Overcrowding: Motion [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to Private Members' business. It is a motion re hospital overcrowding, safe staffing and winter preparedness. The Minister for Health has tabled an amendment to the motion. In addition, Aontú has tabled an amendment to the Minister's amendment. I call on Deputy Cullinane to move the motion.

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation recorded 12,274 patients without a hospital bed in September 2026, the worst September on record, including 1,994 at University Hospital Limerick (UHL) and 1,008 at Cork University Hospital (CUH);

— the number of recorded emergency department experiences lasting more than 24 hours increased from 33,843 to 36,410, up 7.6 per cent, and for patients aged 75 and over, the number exceeding 24 hours increased from 10,019 to 12,106, a sharp increase of 20 per cent;

— recruitment restrictions, unfilled essential posts and delays in offering graduates permanent jobs are undermining patient safety and winter preparedness; and

— there is a significant bed deficit across our hospitals as acknowledged in the Government's Acute Hospital Inpatient Bed Capacity Expansion Plan 2024-2031, especially in the Mid-West which faces continuing capacity risks at UHL;

considers that overcrowding robs patients of dignity, endangers lives, exhausts staff and safe discharge requires appropriate support along with patient and family involvement;

condemns successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments' failure to deliver sufficient capacity and reform, and recognises the Minister for Health's responsibility to sustainably fund the health service, address capacity shortages, and ensure safe care across every hospital; and

calls on the Government to:

— remove recruitment restrictions blocking the filling of urgent and priority vacant posts, replacement, leave cover, and redelegate recruitment authority to health regions with adequate funding linked to patient needs;

— honour permanent contract commitments to nursing and midwifery graduates, and improve staff training, recruitment, and retention through a funded workforce plan;

— legislate for safe staffing, fully implement the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix, and fund multidisciplinary staffing and surge capacity, ensuring financial controls cannot override patient safety;

— take urgent action on the capacity and patient safety concerns raised at CUH and UHL, with clear responsibility for resolving priority vacancies, addressing service restrictions and providing additional staffed capacity;

— deliver the promised 3,000 additional acute inpatient beds, funded through a multiannual capital plan with hospital-by-hospital capacity targets to meet population needs;

— accelerate elective hospitals in Cork, Galway and Dublin and the opening of surgical hubs to protect scheduled care from cancellations;

— deliver a funded Model 3 hospital with a second emergency department for the Mid-West, alongside immediate improvements and expanded urgent care at UHL, Ennis, Nenagh and St John's hospitals;

— expand regular and out-of-hours general practitioner, pharmacy, primary care, home care and community services to reduce pressure on overcrowded hospitals, deliver care closer to home, and improve early intervention;

— fully fund the National Ambulance Service strategic workforce plan; and

— publish funded regional winter plans and multiannual improvement plans with clear responsibility, published deadlines, demand forecasts, staffing and capacity targets, targets to end trolley waits, and escalation arrangements with a target of achieving consistent population-based capacity levels across each region.

The situation in our hospitals and the context we are having this debate in have never been so stark. The Minister might have noticed that last month that we reached the milestone of 1 million people on some form of acute hospital waiting list. We have 260,000 more on community waiting lists. The month of September, according to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, was the worst on record, quickly followed by October, which was also the worst on record. People are bracing themselves for this month and for December and January.

I have spoken to a lot of healthcare staff who work in hospitals, including in emergency departments, and they are bracing themselves for a really difficult number of months ahead. Last year, we saw over 12,000 patients over the age of 75 waiting 24 hours in an emergency department and tens of thousands left without being seen. That is the context. I know that lots

of good work is being done in hospitals and staff are doing their best to bring down waiting lists but the people with whom I spoke - staff, patients, healthcare trade unions, advocates and campaigning organisations - are saying that things are not getting better. In many ways, they are getting worse. I spoke to a nurse a number of weeks ago. She works in an emergency department. Almost every day she goes into work, she is confronted with patients on trolleys, patients on chairs and, in some cases, patients on the floor and she has to treat and manage those patients in those circumstances. She said to me:

> I treat the patients. I manage them in some cases. I toilet those patients. There's no dignity for the patient. There's no dignity for that staff member. There's no dignity for anybody in that circumstance.

I am sure I do not have to remind the Minister that when we have chronic overcrowding in our hospitals, it comes with consequences for patient safety. We saw it come into very sharp focus, particularly in the mid-west and Limerick, in the past and I sincerely hope we never see tragedies like that again. The only way we can avoid all of that is to properly equip our hospitals for the winter ahead.

In an unprecedented move because I have not seen it in the time I have been health spokesperson, CEOs of hospitals and regional executive officers of hospital groups are raising red flags and telling us that things have never been so bad. They are talking about urgent posts as they see it - priority posts - that are not being filled. The last time this was raised, the Minister compared hospitals and put it back somewhat on hospital managers but if one talks to the staff in those same hospitals, they will tell you that they are working to the maximum. I put down a parliamentary question that the Minister might have seen regarding the amount of money the HSE has spent on overtime, particularly in the area of nursing but also elsewhere. It has gone up each and every year and is at a record amount for this time of the year so that pressure is falling back on existing staff. What is happening at the moment is very dangerous. It is dangerous for patients and it is not good for staff in terms of burnout and morale. When hospital managers say to me that there are very serious patient safety risks because urgent posts are not being filled, I take that very seriously but I do not see the same urgency coming from Government. I and others have raised with the Minister in this House the case of student nurses who have not been given proper contracts. I have never been given an answer as to why that happened. I have not been given a suitable answer as to why it is still the case and why that was allowed to happen in the first place.

The Minister cannot pass the buck all of the time and blame everybody but herself. I accept that hospital managers obviously have their job and the HSE and the Department have their job but the buck ultimately stops with the Minister. I am looking at a situation where one million people are on acute hospital waiting lists; 260,000 people on community waiting lists; and a national children's hospital now stands as a monument to Government failure. This hospital should have been opened years ago but we are now hearing that it could be next year or the year after. The whole thing has become very chaotic and I have not even mentioned the chaotic way in which we fund the health service. I hope that despite the amendment tabled by the Minister, she recognises how difficult things are in hospitals at the moment for patients - for every single patient who is not being treated quickly enough and for those coming to emergency departments and being left waiting for too long and in some cases then getting worse. Their condition worsens because they are not being seen. That is not a good outcome for anybody

and it is certainly not a good outcome for patients so I very much hope that the Minister will listen to what has been said, lift the restrictions on recruitment and ensure that hospitals have the capacity and the staff that they need to get them through a very difficult winter.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Can the Minister answer one simple question? Can she guarantee the people of Limerick that it will be safe to use University Hospital Limerick, UHL, in January and February? That is my simple question to her. As she knows, UHL remains the most overcrowded hospital in the State. To date, 19,215 people this year have been on trolleys there. I have warned that the hospital could face up to 400 emergency department presentations every single day during the winter and it cannot cope with that. My greatest concern relates to January and February when flu, winter illnesses and increased demand will put an already stretched hospital under even greater pressure. If UHL is struggling now, what will happen at the height of winter, which in hospitals is normally January and February? We cannot wait for a serious tragedy before Government acts. These are not just numbers. They are people. They are families and elderly patients who deserve safe, dignified and timely care. The crisis is a result of decades of underinvestment - too few beds and persistent staffing shortages across the entire mid-west. That is documented. We have been underfunded for decades. We need immediate action - more staff, more beds and recruitment of essential staff while the embargo has to go. We need better discharge arrangements and a credible winter plan.

We also need a long-term solution. The people of the mid-west cannot continue to depend on a hospital that is consistently overwhelmed. For the Government to say it is doing all it can is simply not true. It is a lie. The warnings are there. The Minister cannot say that she is not aware of the risks facing the hospital. The people of Limerick deserve much better, our healthcare workers deserve our support and our patients deserve safety. What is the Minister going to do to ensure that UHL can cope in January and February?

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I thank Deputy Cullinane for bringing forward this motion. This motion followed a briefing from the HSE but I would say that this briefing was more of a warning on the failure to address the overcrowding crisis in our hospitals, particularly in the mid-west. How many more warnings must be received before the Minister takes action and how many more avoidable deaths must occur before patient safety becomes a priority? The situation in the mid-west is simply unacceptable.

According to the CSO, people in my own county of Clare must travel further for treatment than people in any other county in Ireland, and that is assuming the service even exists. We do not even have a sexual assault treatment unit in the mid-west. How can the Minister justify such a lack of essential services? What was her response recently when my colleague Deputy Doherty raised the issue of overcrowding, staff safety and the warning of avoidable deaths? She chose to pit hospitals against one another. Pointing fingers and shifting the blame will not put beds or staff in our hospitals and it certainly will not save lives, so let me shift the focus back on the Minister. On her watch, trolley numbers have reached a record four-year high and the number of recorded emergency department experiences lasting more than 24 hours has increased by 7.6%. UHL has been described by patients as chaotic - even like a war zone. I have constituents who are genuinely terrified of being sent there. No patient in this country should have to fear entering a hospital. We have a significant bed deficit across our hospitals

and, with overcrowding and the recruitment freeze, patient safety is once again being put at risk.

This crisis is not inevitable. It is a result of years of failure to provide the capacity, staff and services that our communities desperately need. Comparing hospitals and making excuses will solve nothing and ignoring the warnings will put more lives at risk. I urge the Minister to listen to healthcare workers and patients and to support this motion and the actions within it, such as a second emergency department for the mid-west as close as possible to Ennis for those in the west and north of Clare. I ask her to immediately remove recruitment restrictions and legislate for safe staffing. These are just some of the much-needed life-saving actions because people deserve better. Patients deserve dignity and staff should feel safe at work but, above all, nobody should have to lose his or her life because this Government failed to act on those warnings. We have already had too many avoidable deaths and we cannot and must not allow there to be another.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Mayo University Hospital is heading into winter in a dangerously vulnerable position. I have read the Minister's response to the motion that has been put forward tonight. When she refers to safe staffing, she says that the framework continues to demonstrate positive impacts for patients. That is just not true and it is not true in Mayo University Hospital. The hospital has 85 vacancies, the emergency department is under relentless pressure, patients are facing unacceptable delays, with 42% of patients seen within the six-hour target, and exhausted staff are expected to do the work of three or four people. Let me say unequivocally that they and all public sector workers have Sinn Féin's full support and solidarity in the industrial action they have been forced to take to get a fair pay deal from this Government.

The current crisis is not just a staffing crisis. It is a national patient safety crisis. That is what the Minister is presiding over. I hate to say this because when she became Minister for Health, I thought, "Great, changes were going to be made here. We're really going to see the results of this," and what do I get?

7 o'clock

The Minister promised me last January when Stephen Lavelle died in agony waiting for an ambulance that it would not happen again, yet last week somebody else was six hours waiting for an ambulance - six hours with chest pains and no care, just waiting for an ambulance to come. The ambulances are backed up in accident and emergency because the staff are not there, as the Minister is refusing to put the positions in place. In some cases the positions were given to people. Young nurses were told they could start. They gave up their other jobs to take up positions in Mayo University Hospital but a clamp has come down from a national level to say they are not now going to get the jobs. It is absolute chaos that is happening at the moment.

There are other letters here from people. One person wrote about their mother who was on a hospital trolley from 1.30 p.m., and at 9.36 p.m. she was still on a trolley. What is going on here? I believe there is one carer to get food for all of these people, to get them a drink of water, and to check them in. It is really heart-breaking and it is absolutely wrong.

This is what the people I am dealing with and the people of Mayo have to put up with in hospitals on a daily basis. The Minister promised it would be better; it is worse, and we are only in November. It is much worse.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There are some things that we know for a fact. Number one is that recruitment freezes do not work; they hurt patients and they make working conditions incredibly difficult for staff. The second thing we know is that you cannot gaslight healthcare workers into believing there is no recruitment freeze when they can see it with their own eyes. Fianna Fáil tried this in 2007. Brendan Howlin and the Labour Party tried it in 2013. It did not work then and it will not work now.

I only have a short time to speak this evening and I would like to appeal to the Minister to do what it says in our motion and to expand regular and out-of-hours GP services. There is no hospital in my constituency. The Government has confirmed that it will not be providing a minor injuries unit for Dublin Fingal West, and we have no out-of-hours GP service. There are no private sector providers willing to step into the breach. With the Minister's ideological outlook I understand that might be her preferred option, but there are no private sector providers stepping into the breach here. Could the Minister give consideration to appointing HSE doctors to provide a D-Doc out-of-hours service to serve the people of Balbriggan, Rush, Lusk, Skerries and surrounding areas because, as it stands, once the GP's surgery closes the people in my constituency have to travel to Beaumont, Swords or Drogheda for any service at all, as however minor or major they cannot get it locally? That is wrong.

It is a fundamental breach of what was committed to in Sláintecare. We spent hours – weeks and weeks – devising the Sláintecare strategy as a way to deliver for communities and it has been completely set aside. The latest recruitment freeze is one that completely goes against what is contained within Sláintecare. It is bad for patients. Recruitment freezes hurt patients. We know this. Recruitment freezes also hurt staff. What the staff on the picket line a few weeks ago wanted was to be in work but they want safe staffing. They want the health service to be a decent place to work so that there will be sufficient staff there to deliver for patients. That is all they want. Why should that be in conflict with the Minister? It should not. She should be working with the workers. She should work with the Opposition and ensure this is delivered. Instead, it falls on deaf ears every single time. Healthcare workers deserve so much better than this Government, but so also do patients. It is the patients who will suffer because we know that when a recruitment freeze is put in place the impact is felt by the vulnerable, the elderly and the sick.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Every year, like clockwork, we hear the same thing: winter is coming; hospitals tell us they are under pressure but the Government tells us it has a plan. This winter has barely started and already October was the worst on record for patients waiting on trolleys, on chairs and in corridors. In Mullingar hospital last Tuesday alone, 21 patients were waiting for a bed – 16 of them were waiting in the emergency department. These are sick people who need to be admitted to the hospital but there are simply no beds for the hospital to be able to take them. It is impossible for anybody to say that they did not see this coming. The hospital in Mullingar serves a population of around 200,000 people, yet according to the HSE's own figures, it had the exact same number of beds at the end of 2025 as it had at the end of 2024, and a 98% occupancy rate throughout 2025. There are 48 beds promised but they are not

scheduled to be delivered until 2029 at the earliest. There was not one extra inpatient bed last year in the regional hospital in Mullingar – 48 were promised but none are due to come before the end of 2029. Where are patients supposed to go for the next three winters? What exactly are they supposed to do? What are the staff supposed to do?

Beds are only part of the problem. I have spoken to newly qualified nurses across my constituency who were led a merry dance at the HSE job interview and then blindsided by bureaucracy. While we are crying out for nursing staff, we are leaving newly qualified nurses so uncertain about when they may start the job that they are now looking at Australia and the NHS. I need somebody to make sense of that for me because I just cannot do it. The staff in Mullingar, like in every other hospital, are doing their absolute best, but they cannot be expected to continue to plaster over gaps in a system where the system simply does not have enough capacity. In essence, that is what this motion is about. We need safe staffing. We need the beds to go with it, and we need a properly funded winter plan with deadlines. When I speak to my constituents, they say to me repeatedly that they pay the same taxes as everybody else, and they ask why they are not getting the same levels of services. They have a point. They should not have to settle for less. No patient waiting on a trolley can safely say they are being serviced to the best of what their taxpayer funding should be doing.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I spoke to a lot of staff in Cork University Hospital, CUH, during the recent public sector strike. They are extremely worried. It is not just hospital management alone; the staff and the people of Cork are extremely worried about what they are potentially facing this winter, and rightly so. It is very clear that there are significant challenges there. I commend our spokesperson, Deputy Cullinane, on this motion. I would have hoped that when a hospital leader brought forward concerns about patient safety, the response of the Minister for Health would have been to say: "I hear what you are saying. We are not going to have those patient safety issues because I'm going to address them with these resources. We are going to make sure that does not happen. We are going to make these interventions, investments and the support the hospital needs." I would not have expected a Minister for Health to come down on the hospital and ask it to get back into line. It seems nobody is allowed to shoot from the hip or talk straight except the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. If anyone else does it, it seems to me they are brought back into line.

We have heard about the additional staff. It is very clear that they have been linked to the surgical hub – something that will be of benefit in the long term - but, ultimately, the hospital is looking for 1,000 positions. It is not expecting all of those to be provided overnight but only about seven positions have been filled recently. This is not particular to CUH. To be totally honest, an awful lot of it is just upside down. Direct pay costs are down but they are being swallowed whole by increases in overtime and agency staff – swallowed four or five times over. Instead of permanent staff coming in, taking up positions and increasing the capacity, the Minister is spending twice or three times the amount on time and a half, agency staff and money going out of the system.

It gets even worse. We have things like two CT scanners lying idle while we are looking for radiographers to take up the positions to try to ensure they work. What is happening there is that we are going to have agency staff eventually bringing them back into use while people are waiting on a panel for permanent positions. They are people who want to work for the State

and the HSE but the Minister is going to take them on as agency staff, even though she will not take them on permanently. It is absolutely upside down.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"acknowledges:

— the increased pressure on urgent and emergency care (UEC), given that there has been increased demand in emergency departments (EDs) with patient attendances up 7 per cent (+98,500) nationally, and attendances by people aged 75 plus up 9 per cent (+18,000) compared with 2025;

— the commitment in the Programme for Government to further reducing EDs overcrowding and enhancing urgent care services nationwide;

— the ongoing and important work undertaken by our nurses, doctors and wider healthcare workforce in our hospitals and across the health service, often in challenging and difficult conditions;

— the progress being made providing more care in the community, consistent with the objectives of Sláintecare, and the significant reforms being implemented in primary care, general practitioner (GP) and pharmacy services; and

— that there has been substantial and sustained investment in health service staffing and funding in recent years, with Budget 2027 allocating €29.1 billion for health services as the Government continues its investment in more care, closer to home;

notes that:

in relation to the urgent and emergency care plans that:

— during the first ten months of the year, ED attendances rose by 7 per cent, with 98,300 additional presentations nationally when compared to the same period in 2025, with effective governance and oversight essential in ensuring operational grip is maintained at national, regional and hospital levels;

— for 2026, the top six sites accounted for 51 per cent of the daily average 8 a.m. trolleys, University Hospital Limerick (UHL), Cork University Hospital (CUH), St Vincent's University Hospital, University Hospital Galway, Mayo University Hospital, and Sligo University Hospital;

— the next seven sites accounted for 29 per cent of the daily average 8 a.m. trolleys, Mercy Hospital, Tallaght University Hospital (TUH), University Hospital Kerry, Letterkenny University Hospital (LUH), Mater Misercordiae University Hospital, St James's Hospital and Naas General Hospital, this means that 13 out of 29 sites accounted for 80 per cent of 8 a.m. trolleys; and

— to respond to the winter season demand, the Government is progressing with implementation of additional patient safety and patient flow steps, including a GP

respiratory support programme, additional specific ED plans for each of the ED sites and identifying key unblockers of patient safety flow for the winter period;

in relation to safe staffing and safe care that:

— the Government supports and has invested significantly in the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix (the Framework), noting that the Framework is an evidence-based approach to determine the appropriate nurse staffing levels and skill mix in acute hospital settings and EDs across Ireland;

— the Framework continues to demonstrate positive impacts for patients, staff and organisations where implemented, for example, reduced length of stay, reduction in staff intention to leave, and efficiencies through reduced agency usage;

— Ireland's approach aligns with the World Health Organization guidance, utilising a blended model of Benchmarking and Patient/Acuity-based staffing, the Framework is grounded in a needs-based care principle, measuring nursing workload by systematically assessing individual patient care requirements and levels of dependency, this enables staffing to be dynamically adjusted in response to patient complexity and care intensity, rather than relying on fixed ratios; and

— significant progress has been made, with baseline implementation achieved in all 26 adult EDs, and across 39 acute hospitals nationwide, this means that 96 per cent of identified baseline staffing requirements have now been delivered nationally and is a critical measure of patient safety;

in relation to the Winter Vaccine Plan that:

— vaccination is recognised as one of the most impactful public health interventions available and has led to many lives being saved dramatically reducing the impact of infectious diseases also protecting finite hospital resources, noting that the flu and Covid-19 vaccination programmes are already currently underway for the winter season;

— the flu vaccine is available free of charge to eligible groups from local GPs and pharmacies throughout the flu season, eligible groups include, adults aged 60 years and over, individuals in specified health related at-risk groups, children aged 2 to 17 years, and healthcare workers;

— Covid-19 vaccinations are available to certain eligible groups without charge through local GPs and participating pharmacies;

— the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) infant immunisation programme is also being delivered this winter, helping to protect babies from serious RSV illness and reducing the risk of hospitalisation during the respiratory virus season, uptake to date has been encouraging, with high levels of immunisation reported through maternity hospitals;

— in the week ending 25th October, shows the following - Influenza activity continues to increase but remains at baseline-low levels overall, noting there were 139 cases notified in week 43, with incidence highest in those aged 80 years and older, in terms of uptake, it can be noted that, of adults aged 60 years and older, there are 34.6 per cent vaccinated compared with 36.9 per cent last season;

— RSV activity has remained stable at baseline levels in recent weeks, with 16 cases notified in week 43, (down from 17 cases in week 42), with incidence highest in infants aged under one year, in terms of uptake, it can be noted that, there is 88.3 per cent cumulative uptake in our maternity hospitals;

— for Covid-19, activity was stable and remained at low-moderate levels, with 203 cases notified in week 43 (up from 191 cases in week 42), incidence was highest in those aged 80 years and older, in terms of uptake, it can be noted that, of adults aged 80 years and younger, there are 37.4 per cent vaccinated, compared with 38.3 per cent at the equivalent campaign stage last season; and

— it is widely recognised that flu and Covid-19 vaccinations can significantly reduce hospitalisations by preventing illness and serious complications, in mid-January this year, it was reported in Ireland that around 76 per cent or three quarters of intensive care unit admissions due to the flu were in people who had not received the influenza vaccine;

in relation to investment and recruitment that:

— there has been substantial and sustained investment in health service staffing and funding in recent years, between 2019 and the end of 2025, overall health funding increased by approximately €10.6 billion, or 68 per cent, while the health service workforce increased by more than 30,000 staff, or approximately 30 per cent;

— within acute hospitals specifically, real expenditure increased by approximately 52 per cent and staffing by 33 per cent over the same period, compared with an increase of approximately 14 per cent in hospital activity;

— investment continued in 2026, with Budget 2026 providing for an additional 3,300 Whole-Time Equivalent (WTE) staff, by the end of September 2026, the actual workforce had increased by over 4,000 WTE since the beginning of the year, and by over 6,000 WTE in the past 12 months;

— there has been continuous significant increases in funding of the Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome since 2022 to this year's budget of €292.9 million, which is providing for an additional 263 service posts;

— significant Government investment is being provided to expand healthcare education to address future supply of healthcare workers to ensure Ireland can meet growing healthcare needs, including an investment of €28.5 million to support the delivery of more than 1,100 additional healthcare training places by 2028, representing a significant increase in training capacity across medicine, nursing, pharmacy, social care, and Health and Social Care Professions;

— there is no blanket recruitment freeze in place, the purpose of the workforce and financial controls in place are to ensure that available staffing is directed towards patient needs and priority services, while preventing recruitment and other expenditure from creating unfunded and unsustainable commitments, this arises from recruitment activity that is greater than sanctioned by the Government and the Houses of the Oireachtas;

— each Health Region must manage recruitment within their available pay allocation, taking account of the cost and mix of staff, agency expenditure, overtime and allowances; and

— the most recent Health Service Executive (HSE) data shows that nationally, 1,145 of 1,375 graduate nurses and midwives have been offered positions to date, an offer rate of 83 per cent, and more than 1,000 have accepted, it is likely that this offer rate has improved as we know through the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland registration data, that 1,184 graduates have now successfully completed the registration process and the Department of Health is looking for further ways to enhance graduate recruitment;

in relation to multiannual capital funding that:

— the enhanced National Development Plan provision for the health sector for 2026 - 2030 is €9.25 billion, this multiannual capital allocation is the largest ever capital investment plan in the history of the State and largest investment ever in health infrastructure in the State, this multi-annual investment is translated through the HSE annual Capital and Digital plans; and

— the establishment of the Mid-West Health Planning Board is central to the medium to longer term strategy for the Mid-West Region, the Board is made up of senior regional HSE leaders and multidisciplinary expertise across service delivery, clinical care, infrastructure, finance, and enterprise, it also includes patient and service-user representation to ensure that community needs and lived experience inform the Board's work, it is tasked with developing a robust service configuration and capital development plan for the Region and to put in place a credible roadmap for safe, accessible and sustainable healthcare in the Mid-West, it will focus on how services can be organised across hospital, community, primary care, and pre-hospital services and at how care can be provided closer to home, where appropriate, how pressure on UHL can be reduced, and how existing and future locations can best work together for the whole region;

in relation to moving care closer to the community, that:

— our health service continues to make steady progress towards providing more care in the community, consistent with the objectives of Sláintecare, for example, reforms in primary care through the Enhanced Community Care Programme, the structured chronic disease management programme in general practice and the continued evolution of community pharmacy services have strengthened the healthcare system's ability to meet population needs closer to home;

— notwithstanding demand pressures that remain significant, these investments are creating stronger alternatives to hospital-based care and providing a foundation for more integrated, person-centred services as close to home as possible, – creating a 'home first' approach as opposed to a 'hospital first' approach to the provision of health services, when it is clinically appropriate to do so;

— the Government continues to expand community-based and digitally enabled models of care, offering increased choice and improved outcomes to patients, these approaches focus on preventing avoidable hospital attendance and admission, supporting earlier discharge and are key avenues for relieving pressure on our health services;

— technological advancements such as remote monitoring and telehealth are transforming how healthcare can be delivered, creating new opportunities for remote monitoring and virtual consultations; and

— virtual wards are now operating in every HSE Health Region and have provided care to over 5,300 patients, freeing up over 48,900 virtual bed days, these services are helping to relieve pressure on EDs and acute hospitals while ensuring that hospital capacity is available for those who need it most;

in relation to Surgical Hubs and Elective Hospitals, that:

— significant progress has been made in increasing elective care capacity through the development of new Surgical Hubs and Elective Treatment Centres (ETCs), known also as Elective Hospitals, under the National Elective Care programme;

— four Surgical Hubs are currently operational at TUH, Mount Carmel Community Hospital, Swords and Cork, with hubs in Limerick, Galway and Waterford due to open in the coming months, additional new surgical hubs for Sligo and LUH are in design phase;

— once all surgical hubs are fully operational, the Surgical Hubs will deliver additional capacity across 12 specialties: Gastroenterology, General Surgery, Gynaecology, Ophthalmology, Orthopaedics, Ear Nose and Thorat (ENT), Pain Relief, Plastic Surgery, Urology, Vascular Surgery, Dermatology, and Maxillofacial Surgery, examples of elective procedures include Biopsies, Steroid injections, Carpal tunnel treatments, Hernia repairs, Tonsillectomies and Cataract Surgery, some of the benefits already delivered or underway include:

— the Reeves Day Surgery Centre opened in late 2020, and has become the blueprint for Ireland's Surgical Hub Programme, up to end August 2026, the Centre has treated more than 20,000 patients since opening and was delivering almost 5,800 procedures annually by 2025, the facility has supported a 17 per cent reduction in TUH's total day-case waiting list, with three in four patients waiting less than the 12-week Sláintecare target; and

— the South Dublin Surgical Hub at Mount Carmel Community Hospital is demonstrating that dedicated elective capacity can deliver measurable reductions in waiting times and waiting lists, while simultaneously releasing capacity within acute hospitals;

— since opening in February 2025 to end of August 2026, the Hub has delivered 8,006 procedures, including 4,275 procedures in 2026 alone, reduced average waiting times in participating specialties from 8.5 months to 4 months, a reduction of more than 50 per cent, reduced the number of long waiters by 63 per cent, from 330 patients to 121 patients and supported patients from across the wider Dublin Midlands network, including hospitals with significant concentrations of long waiters;

— the Dublin and North East Surgical Hub commenced operations during the week of 29th June, 2026, and is currently in the early stages of implementation, it commenced activity in specialties with some of the largest waiting lists in the region, including Plastic Surgery, General Surgery, Urology and Pain Management, most importantly the Hub is

being targeted at a region with one of the largest concentrations of long-waiting patients nationally, particularly in Beaumont and the Mater hospitals, where more than 3,100 day-case patients are waiting over 12 months for treatment;

— the Cork Surgical Hub opened on a phased basis from 29th September, with Gynaecology amongst the first procedures delivered, expanding to include General Surgery, Dermatology, Ophthalmology and Neurology, Hernia repair, Carpal tunnel Surgery and pain relief injections;

— plans are progressing for Elective Hospitals in Cork, Galway and Dublin, a Planning Application for the ETC at St Stephen's in Cork was lodged on 12th October, while an application for planning permission for Galway at Merlin Park is expected to be lodged in early 2027, work on the Preliminary Business Cases for Dublin is advancing; and

— separating elective from emergency and acute care means fewer cancellations and delays for elective care and frees up hospital theatres and day beds in Model 3 and Model 4 hospitals for more complex cases and better addresses unscheduled care needs.".

I want to acknowledge at the outset the very real pressures facing our emergency departments. This year, attendances have been almost 7% higher than the same period last year, with admissions increasing by more than 5%. First of all, I want to acknowledge the thousands of healthcare professionals working every day across hospitals, community services, primary care teams, ambulance services and throughout the wider health system, in particular those in emergency departments and emergency care services. Their commitment, professionalism and dedication are extraordinary. We know what the demand growth means in practice. It means that we have to protect our patients' dignity and we have to protect patient safety.

That means we have to manage patient flow even better because patient flow matters and we can all see the impact where it works and where it does not work. I see it for myself. Other Deputies see it for themselves. We visit emergency departments and speak to staff right around the country, sometimes with notice, sometimes without notice. I know the impact of overcrowding on patients and their families and on staff working in the hospital. I know what good looks like and I know what bad looks like. Every patient in an overcrowded or red hospital is one hospital patient too many. Comparisons matter because transparency matters. It matters as much to point out the good practice as the bad practice. That is why that is relevant and important. That comparison of performance across the board is specifically enabled by the regional structure, which I know the Deputy agrees with.

Today, at 8 a.m., there were 454 patients waiting on trolleys for admission from emergency departments, which is lower than 544 on the same day last week and higher than the 375 patients yesterday. That is too high. It is a number that is greater than the demand increase and we have to acknowledge that, but there are three important elements. First, that is not a uniform experience across the country. For example, today, of the 29 hospitals, 17 of them are completely in green. Therefore, what the Deputy describes is not a uniform experience. Eight hospitals out of 29 today have zero people on trolleys and 50% of all of the patients on trolleys today come from five hospitals. In that context, it is very relevant it to make comparisons. There are 34 people on trolleys in the whole HSE Dublin and North East region, which includes Beaumont and the Mater, which are two busy hospitals. It includes

Cavan, Drogheda and Connolly. It is a really busy area. There are 34 in the whole area, but there are 44 in St. Vincent's. Comparisons matter because it matters how we measure progress.

Second, that there has been progress in 2025 and 2026 and those hospitals have stayed improved. There remains serious work to be done at a number of sites. I see, as do patients, the hospitals that are doing well, notwithstanding huge demand pressures, such as Navan, Connolly, Drogheda, Tullamore, Portiuncula and Waterford. There are many with no patients waiting on trolleys. The reality is that performance varies considerably. That matters and it matters that somebody articulates that.

Some sites have demonstrated consistently strong patient flow, effective seven-day discharge practices and robust operational management and they maintain effective patient flow throughout the week by focusing relentlessly on demand and capacity management. However, patients also see, as the Deputy does, hospitals that are not doing so well. Today, just five out of the 29 emergency departments account for 50% of the trolley congestion total. These include Galway, which had been doing much better but had a slip today, St. Vincent's, which has been in persistent difficulty, and Cork, which has recruited 324 people this year and has more radiographers than any other hospital in the country. Cork has recruited more people than Beaumont, the Mater, St. James's and Tallaght combined this year and has more radiographers than those hospitals as well. We have 29 hospitals with emergency departments. Our persistent problem is with eight or nine of them.

Patient flow is the key challenge. It begins with prevention and care in the community. It includes ambulance services, emergency departments and acute hospitals, and it also includes moving people out of hospitals safely and promptly when they can. We have a specific challenge to improve patient flow at specified sites. This year, out of the whole of 2026, 13 hospitals accounted for 80% of the 8 a.m. trolleys. What I am saying is that we have different issues in different hospitals.

Let me highlight, though, some of the additional important patient safety steps we have taken and for which Sinn Féin has called. Let us just acknowledge that we have a shared perspective on that. We are committed to the safe staffing framework. Baseline implementation has been achieved in all of the adult emergency departments. That is a key marker as agreed with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and I know that is what Deputies want. It has also been implemented in 39 acute hospitals nationwide. In practical terms, 96% of baseline staffing requirements are now in place.

In relation to recruitment, the only reason there is a freeze on recruitment or that there is any restriction on recruitment in the last two months of this year is because the HSE has already recruited 5,000 people in the last 12 months. There has been no stoppage in recruitment, and what we will do is make sure that any additional recruitment this year delivers on agency conversion, which I know is a priority for Deputy Cullinane, tries to stay closer to the budget, which I know is a priority of all of the Deputies on the Joint Committee on Health, and responds to specific areas. For example, we are looking at specific positions that can assist with patient flow and patient safety in the winter period along with graduate nursing hiring. Some 83% of graduate nurses have an offer. That figure was actually from a couple of weeks ago and has, in fact, increased in the last number of weeks. We have approved

additional graduate nursing requirements. They should not have had the uncertainty, however, and that will not happen next year.

The truth of all of this is that we are experiencing and will experience a much bigger challenge. Our population will grow from 5.3 million people to potentially 7 million in 2057. More significantly, the number of people aged 65 will continue to grow rapidly. That is a good thing, but we will have to provide care in different ways. Therefore, we have to do two things at the same time. We have to address our current pressures and plan our resources for the future. Yes, we need more resources, but we have to change how care is delivered. Adding resources, while important, is not going to keep pace with future demand. We have to become more productive. We have to separate scheduled care from unscheduled care. We have five surgical hubs opening this year and in the early part of next year in the hope of taking pressures off everywhere. They are already making a difference. In Mount Carmel, waiting time for surgeries, for example, plastic, general and orthopaedic, has fallen by approximately 50% from eight and a half months to four months despite increased demand. The number of patients waiting more than two years has fallen by over 60% in relevant specialties. Therefore, the surgical hubs relieve pressures on hospitals because those procedures would otherwise have to happen in those hospitals. This measure relieves waiting times for the many people who need that care.

It is also why we are trying to shift towards community-based care throughout our network of 180 primary care centres. It is why, in addition to delivering new bed capacity, we are trying to deliver additional innovative ways to help get people out of hospital and help them avoid hospital through virtual care. That is now operating in every HSE region. We have 115 people on a virtual ward today who would otherwise be in hospital. We have provided nearly 49,000 virtual bed days in St. Vincent's, Limerick, Tullamore, Drogheda, Mercy, Kilkenny and Galway. It helps prevent unnecessary attendance. Then, there is also the community care virtual ward in Letterkenny, which is reducing hospital reattendances by 83% for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD, following their diagnosis and keeping them out of hospitals.

It is also why we are trying to make sure that we have full use of facilities and equipment in which taxpayers have invested. That means using all of the four CT scanners that have been invested in by the taxpayer in Cork. It means Beaumont using its CT scanner. It means using what we have on weekends and in the evenings. That is enabled by the significant investment we have made in the public-only consultant contract, now accepted by more than 70% of consultants.

Yes, we will take additional steps this winter, as we always do, as is in Sinn Féin's motion, and as we did last year. We will have an additional targeted GP respiratory illness support programme to coincide with the flu season and reduce pressures on emergency departments. Each hospital with an emergency department has a dedicated additional patient flow and elder care support plan tailored to its own circumstances, given that they all have slightly different needs and pressures. They will have an individualised plan, which is very important.

However, the central point around operational grip is the key one. There are hospitals that have improved and sustained that improvement from 2025 into 2026, even during rising demand. There are hospitals, such as Galway, which went through a complete reset in March

of this year. Although it has had ups and downs, it has a completely different approach - a totally different wraparound care - to how it manages patient flow. It was routinely having 50 and 60 people on trolleys last winter. Where it goes into red, it is more often in the 20s now. That is too many, but it is such an improvement within one year. The investment did not increase by that amount. It had increased recruitment, as all hospitals did. Rather, there was a massive process change and cultural change, and those have been sustained.

Limerick has improved enormously. There are 34 people on trolleys in Limerick today. That is too many, but it was routinely 70, 80 or 90. It has improved so much.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I would disagree with the Minister's figures.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: What it needs is additional GP support before people come to Limerick because there are too many people presenting who are not sufficiently acute to be in an emergency department and who need better care in other places. That is what Limerick needs. The hospitals all need something slightly different, but it is those eight or nine hospitals where we have not approved patient flow in the way that has happened across the HSE Dublin and North East region, across the midlands, largely, and across many different hospitals just within that period. That is because of the dedication and focus of staff, which happens in every single hospital. However, there are key enablers to how patients move through the hospital that reduce the pressure on the entry point, which is the emergency department. That matters very much. There is no automatic correlation between increased staff and patient flow. It is about processes.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: We are very fortunate in Ireland to have among the most highly trained, qualified and dedicated healthcare professionals in the world. However, the Minister is not heeding the warnings in relation to serious and life-threatening risks that will happen this winter and deaths that will occur unnecessarily. This situation arises from the lack of respect for front-line workers, such as the paramedics in the National Ambulance Service who are made to reapply for their jobs or the newly qualified nurses and midwives in Galway and Dundalk being left without job offers. They do not want gradual employment. They want jobs today.

Of course, there is the ongoing recruitment freeze. In the same breath, the Minister tells us about front-line workers and that she wants to talk about productivity before she talks about pay and conditions. Let us talk about productivity in the Department of Health. All I can see is serial waste, which will escalate to nearly €3 billion being spent on the children's hospital, money that could have been used to prevent people from striking and prevent recruitment freezes or front-line staff. This could all have been prevented. What impact or risk is the Minister willing to accept in terms of patient safety? The Minister needs to think about this urgently.

Commitments to our nurses, midwives and paramedics must be honoured. We need a funded workforce plan to reduce reliance on expensive private agency cover. In Monaghan hospital, we need a medical assessment unit. The Minister spoke of how, in Cavan hospital, there were hardly any people waiting on trolleys in its accident and emergency department today. I can tell the Minister from experience that queues of people are waiting in the

emergency room - hundreds of them - although they may not be waiting on trolleys. I am asking the Minister for a medical assessment unit in Monaghan hospital, which would prevent people from going near Cavan hospital. They would be assessed in Monaghan hospital and not have to go near Cavan hospital.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Every day, doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants and other healthcare workers do their best to deliver quality care to patients. However, the Government has completely failed to ensure that our health service is adequately staffed and resourced to respond to demand. We see the consequences of this failure across the State, with record numbers of people waiting for hospital beds. The INMO has reported that University Hospital Galway, UHG, saw over 1,100 patients treated outside of a bed last month. This reflects the worst month of October in the last ten years. Despite these worsening trends, the Department is actively obstructing the recruitment of staff, including graduate nurses and midwives in UHG, Portiuncula and other hospitals across Ireland. At a time when our hospitals are operating under severe, unsustainable pressure, when many vacant posts remain unfilled, when there is excessive reliance on agency staffing, when emergency departments are overwhelmed, when patients are suffering long delays on trolleys and when staff are burned out to the point of exhaustion, how on earth can the Minister justify these recruitment restrictions? How can she justify the appalling treatment of graduate nurses and midwives, who worked so hard to qualify with the firm promise and commitment that once they graduated, there would be permanent positions waiting for them in the health service? What has happened to that commitment? These are talented professionals who have much to offer to our country and our healthcare system, yet they are being pushed away by their own Government. They have not received any updates or acknowledgment from the HSE in weeks, yet the Minister comes in here trying to throw around statistics, denying that there is any problem at all and trying to shift the blame onto others. She is the Minister for Health and the buck stops with her. She owes these young workers an explanation as to why her Department is actively trying to frustrate their recruitment prospects and leaving our health service in a state of constant chaos. Lift the recruitment restrictions, honour the permanent contract commitments that were given and make our hospitals safe for staff and patients.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Hospital care in Naas General Hospital is at breaking point. Kildare's population has recently exploded, yet the Department is not providing sufficient resources at Naas General Hospital. I have submitted countless parliamentary questions specifically on Kildare's population increase and the need for more resourcing at Naas, but the Government has been far too slow on this.

Kildare also has one of the lowest rates of GPs *per capita* in the State, which is having a huge impact on accident and emergency departments in our hospitals. People who cannot see a GP, tend to go to an accident and emergency department. The average emergency department wait time at Naas is 11 hours. Half of all admitted patients wait for longer than the six-hour target. I spoke to a constituent who is a friend of mine whose father had been waiting for more than 24 hours in the accident and emergency department there last month.

This October was the worst on record for hospital overcrowding in Naas. According to the INMO, Naas General Hospital is now short 80 nursing posts, yet we seem to expect the hospital

to continue to deliver services with these staffing shortages. It is unsafe and completely unsustainable.

Earlier this year, an agreement was reached between the HSE and nursing unions to address the staffing shortages. However, that agreement is being undermined by the recruitment freeze that remains in place across the health service. Faced with no meaningful progress, nursing staff have understandably decided to take industrial action at Naas since last week and there has been disruption to services. The Department of Health and the HSE must release these posts without delay so that full services can be restored.

The nurses did not take this strike action lightly. Their actions reflect the seriousness of the situation. A constituent of mine who was an agency nurse worked for one day in Naas but is now working as a nurse in a GP's surgery. It should not be hit and miss. Some hospitals are great but Naas is just not-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I must call Deputy Pa Daly.

Deputy Pa Daly: I am not sure whether the Minister wants to call it a moratorium, a pause, a blanket recruitment freeze or whatever, but this motion, which I support, calls on the Government to remove the recruitment restrictions because if it does not do so, patients will die or else they will remain sicker for longer.

I want to tell the Minister about the Castleisland-Farranfore community care area. It goes from Abbeyfeale down to outside Killarney, west as far as Firies and east as far as the Cork border. Traditionally, there were two senior physiotherapists in the area working for five days per week, but that has recently been reduced to one senior physiotherapist, who is expected to cover all outpatient department referrals, often 80 per month, the vast majority of which require numerous appointments. That physiotherapist is also covering a domiciliary post that has been vacant since 2023, so they are doing all of those home visits. That is not enhanced community care. It is not Sláintecare where patients were supposed to be seen in the right place and at the right time. It is very regressive because the delay may increase falls and injuries and patients may present with more chronic issues.

In University Hospital Kerry, staffing for acute services has been prioritised with the result that outpatient departments and elective procedure waiting lists have lengthened. One of the junior Ministers will be in Killarney to finally open - three years late - the community nursing unit. I am wondering what kind of reception he will get because while that is being waited for, there is no minor injuries unit in the whole of the county, there is no promised primary care centre and the whole system seems to be in a seachrán.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The chief executive of CUH, Jennifer Kearney, bravely came out and highlighted the serious risks that the people of Cork and CUH are facing this winter. People are at risk and the Minister chose to come out and attack that lady, who is highlighting this and standing up for ordinary people because she is the chief executive and she knows that people are at risk in Cork. The Minister decided to attack her.

I also want to extend my solidarity to all the staff in the CUH, the Mercy hospital, the south infirmary and all of the other facilities. I was treated in CUH for sepsis and nearly died. I

know myself that the staff there are unbelievable, from housekeeping, administration, nurses to the surgeons and everyone in between. I stood proudly with them a couple of weeks ago outside the CUH. They are so angry with the Minister and the rest of this Government because of the way they are being treated. They know. We see the midwives being pulled from the brilliant domiciliary in and out, DOMINO, scheme to the Cork University Maternity Hospital, CUMH, because of the embargo. Not only that, but Heather House's new dementia unit is not open because we know the Government is blocking the recruitment there. St. Finbarr's new unit is not being opened. Both should have been opened by now but they are not, all because of a recruitment embargo by the Minister and her Government.

Cork has no elective hospital. There are no out-of-hours services in Blackpool. Those were virtually closed down by this Government. The Government is closing the Sarsfield Court dementia unit at the moment. It is closing beds because it is not recruiting.

I will ask the Minister one thing tonight. Will she give a guarantee that the people of Cork will not be at risk and will she put in place the money, staff and resources to protect those people who are at risk?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling tonight's motion.

Every day our hospitals are operating under constant pressure, with overcrowding and shortages of both beds and staff. This is made worse by the lack of alternatives in the community. Patient safety and outcomes are being compromised by this chronic overcrowding. The Minister must start listening to the first-hand experiences of front-line staff and management rather than reverting to the default, which is complete dismissal.

Let us look at some of the facts. According to Eurostat, Ireland had around 290 beds per 100,000 people in 2024, the fifth lowest in Europe. The EU average is 507 beds per 100,000. We know that of the 297 beds delivered in 2025, only 196 were open and operational at the end of last year, leaving 100 promised beds unopened. This year's figure is even lower, with 177 beds promised. Where is the ambition from the Government to build up the capacity? The ESRI has told us we need 300 additional inpatient beds every year because of changing demographics, and this year we are going to fall far short of that. It is going to get worse and worse until we actually build up the bed capacity. Clearly, we do not have enough beds in the system. We have just had the most overcrowded September and October on record.

In relation to staffing, it is clear that our health service is dealing with the impact of the post-crash period and a decade of austerity cuts. Now, despite the supposed commitment to Sláintecare from Fine Gael, it has returned to type, imposing a de facto recruitment freeze and austerity-style cost-saving measures. It is incredibly short-sighted. Is the Minister content to return to a policy of training healthcare workers only for them to have to leave the country to get jobs elsewhere? Too many graduate nurses have been left in limbo, with job offers withdrawn or put on hold, leaving the HSE in breach of contract in some cases.

Despite all the talk about record recruitment, the reality on the ground is that there are vacancies and unfilled posts right across the health service. In April of this year, 468 posts from the 2024 national service plan had still not been onboarded, while 1,636 posts from the 2025 plan were still not filled. Overall, 6,420 posts that could have been filled under the HSE budget were not. Of those, 1,020 were previously filled posts that are now vacant. At the same

time, €522 million had been spent on agency staff up to the end of August, and we know that agency staff cost about 40% more than permanent staff.

I spoke to a speech and language therapist in Cork who applied for a job in St. Finbarr's Hospital and came first on the panel but was told the job could not be progressed. Now there is somebody employed through an agency sitting in that post, costing us far more money. We should have filled the post, offered the person a permanent job and continued filling those posts.

With respect to CUH, I would like to question the Minister's constant comparison to other hospitals because I believe it is disingenuous. Comparing CUH to Beaumont is like comparing apples and oranges. Beaumont is one of two model 4 hospitals in the HSE Dublin and North East region, and it is in a city with five other model 4 hospitals, while CUH is the only model 4 hospital in the entire south-west region. Furthermore, CUH is a super-regional service. It is critical for stroke, heart attacks, cancer, dialysis and neurological services. It is also co-located with maternity, paediatrics and mental health services. It is not just the south-west region that it is crucially important for. It is also important for all of Munster and parts of south Leinster. In the Department's own bed expansion plan, the largest deficit was identified at CUH, with 341 extra beds needed in that hospital by 2031. Only 18 were delivered last year, and now an additional 21 are stuck in limbo.

It is not just the south west where there is a crisis. The mid-west is also raising alarms. UHL management has warned that demand for services is outstripping available resources, while the decision to implement major curbs on recruitment has compounded the situation. Will these concerns be dismissed out of hand too or will the Minister engage with the local management? Ultimately, we need to fully address overcrowding in our hospitals. We need to reorientate and expand capacity in the community.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank Sinn Féin for this motion and the opportunity to discuss the staffing crisis in our hospitals.

In 2013, my brother and I accompanied our father through the emergency department at UHL two weeks before he died. It was the most harrowing experience of my life. My father endured a prolonged, nightmarish ordeal on a trolley, the lowest point of which was when we had to use his coat as a makeshift blanket. In May of last year, my elderly mother had a similar experience in the same hospital. Those experiences were 12 years apart, and Fine Gael has been in government throughout that time and longer.

I commend HSE Mid West management for sounding the alarm two weeks ago to local Oireachtas Members about its staffing crisis. Political leadership requires humility as well as capability and decisiveness. It requires recognising the limits of one's knowledge and listening to people with decades of professional experience. Humility has been entirely lacking in the Minister's treatment of CUH. Setting hospitals and health regions against one another, using selective statistics to praise some while publicly castigating others, is a damaging and divisive way to assert authority and instil fear. We need real leadership in our health system, trust and an honest appraisal of all the factors influencing hospital performance.

I imagine the Minister will be in Cork this weekend for her party's Ard-Fheis. If she has the courage of her convictions on CUH, why does she not take two hours out of that event to meet

the nine clinical directors who wrote to the Taoiseach this week, together with their chief executive officer, and engage in good faith? Why does she not, on a separate occasion, meet the Irish Hospital Consultants Association? It represents approximately 5,000 consultants, yet has secured only one meeting with the Minister, in March 2025, despite repeated requests over 18 months.

The Minister's simplistic critiques of CUH and defence of recruitment restrictions are delivered with overpowering rhetorical confidence in short set pieces here and on the airwaves. Those arguments would dissolve in a sustained dialogue with senior clinicians equipped to challenge them. I suspect that is why the Minister is avoiding that engagement. The Minister's treatment of CUH is damaging patient safety and staff morale. She is also damaging her own party in Cork. How many of the thousands of CUH staff and their families will vote for Fine Gael in 2029 if she continues depriving their hospital of staff and trashing it for supposed underperformance?

Deputy Colm Burke has long championed neurological services. How does he explain 20 specialist neurorehabilitation beds lying idle in Blarney because the Minister has not funded the staff? How does one of her Ministers of State, Jerry Buttimer, explain to his constituents why a superb outpatient facility on the Curraheen Road remains unused because she will not fund the relocation of CUH's fracture clinic? Both of those services would substantially ease pressure on CUH.

Are Deputies Burke, Buttimer, McCarthy and O'Shea and Senators Kelleher, Lynch and O'Donovan all signed up to the Minister's approach to CUH? The Minister seems more concerned with demonstrating who is boss than engaging respectfully with those confronting the challenges in our health service. If she aspires to lead Fine Gael, she needs to become as adept at building bridges as she has shown herself to be at burning them.

The Minister's treatment of CUH is blatantly unfair. It is distasteful. We are not going to stand for it. The clinicians and managers at CUH are not the Minister's political enemies. Their collective experience, expertise and dedication to patient care should humble all of us who are privileged to engage with them. Why does the Minister not meet them, commission the independent staffing assessment they have requested and address the shortages that are causing such unnecessary suffering for patients?

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion.

We do not have a properly funded, adequately resourced public health system in this country. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed to create it because they have never invested properly, never prioritised it properly and never truly believed in it. The result is that we see nursing graduates being exported from this country. We have 1,000 nursing vacancies across the two Dublin HSE regions. The scale of overcrowding is something that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have promised year after year, decade after decade, to solve. We have the worst figures in terms of patients on trolleys since January 2023. Some 111,000 patients have been treated on trolleys in acute hospitals so far this year. Patients are unsafe. It is wrong that nursing staff and other healthcare staff have to try to operate under these conditions. We are failing, and the Government is failing, patients.

The Government also has an effective recruitment embargo in place that is having massive impacts, and it should honestly accept that. Staffing decisions should not be driven by financial controls but by clinical need and patient safety. We are not seeing that. What we are seeing in hospitals, and what patients and staff are experiencing, is unsafe. Patient safety should be paramount. What we are seeing is something that is completely unacceptable and a failure to value our nursing staff.

My mother was a nurse, and I know the reality of her trying to deliver care within a public health system in this country that has never truly been delivered as a public health system. The Social Democrats believe in Sláintecare and in delivering a public health system, and we would put the investment behind that. We would respect the staff, respect the hospitals and allow them to deliver a system that would provide the patient care required.

I have one more issue to raise. In Beaumont Hospital, in my constituency, there are people on trolleys right now. It is wrong, it is not acceptable, and we need a proper public health system.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. I also thank my colleague Deputy Rice for all the work he does on the health committee and in trying to get information about the health service.

I will start with the permanent contracts for graduate nurses and midwives. We are training highly skilled individuals who are leaving the country. The INMO reported in October that there were 80 nursing and midwifery vacancies in Cork University Maternity Hospital and 23 vacant midwifery posts in University Hospital Galway. However, posts were not offered to graduates. The INMO stated earlier today that 35 graduates of the Technological University of the Shannon, TUS, in Athlone have not had their contracts fulfilled. That is a disgrace. They will leave and our hospitals will continue to be overcrowded and understaffed.

There are a number of hospitals in my constituency, including St. James's Hospital, the Coombe, Crumlin children's hospital and Cherry Orchard Hospital. My colleague Deputy Rice has discovered the incredible challenges relating to waiting times. In St. James's Hospital, for example, just over 39,000 patients attended the emergency department. Some 40.2% of those were seen within six hours. Some 17% did not wait over the 24 hours because they could not wait any longer. Some 4.5% were seen after waiting for more than 24 hours. The 1,764 people involved waited for more than 24 hours.

I was recently contacted by a woman who went to the Coombe hospital. She was 36 weeks pregnant and needed an MRI. She, a pregnant woman, waited on a trolley for 40 hours. That is absolutely ridiculous. It should not be the situation.

The final thing I would like to say is that the issues of overcrowding and understaffing in hospitals have nothing to do with the staff who are there. It is the responsibility of the Minister and the Government to ensure that these issues do not arise.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this important motion. I will start by paying tribute to the staff who are working across our health services. They go to work every day, many of them in difficult conditions. They are there for the best of reasons. I must say from talking to many of them that they are not feeling supported now. They see a

situation where we have hospitals pitted against each other. Apples are often being compared with oranges. The general public are confused. They are told, on the one hand, that great progress is being made, as in the countermotion put forward this evening by the Government, and, on the other hand, their experience on the ground is very different. Some 90,000 people in this country are waiting for a physiotherapy appointment. The Mater is supplying a fantastic service, much better than most other hospitals, but I recently visited a woman who last week spent 36 hours in the accident and emergency department waiting for a bed. People have been waiting for hip replacements for six years. The stories go on.

It is a pity that the Minister has walked out during my contribution. We constantly hear about Galway, Cork and St. Vincent's hospitals. The Minister should name what she believes is going on here. Is it incompetence or is it something else? Many of us believe that very serious resource issues account for the trolley numbers in those hospitals.

The reality is that matters are getting worse, rather than better, in our health system. For the first time this year, the numbers on hospital waiting lists crossed the 1 million threshold. There were 538,000 on waiting lists this time ten years ago. Our population has not almost doubled in that time and yet we have seen an enormous increase in waiting lists. One in seven people is obliged to wait for more than a year. The waiting times that people are facing is the most damning indictment of all. That does not even cover the waiting lists in primary care. Over 250,000 people are waiting on primary care lists at this point.

To listen to the Minister, we would think that recruitment is the main driver of the deficit, which will move beyond €1 billion by the end of this year. The reality, when we see the facts from the internal HSE documents that I have seen, is that non-pay is running at three times the pay deficit within the HSE. When we look into the non-pay issues, we see that the category of other, amounting to €170 million, is the main driver. Drugs only accounts for 15% of the non-pay deficit.

There needs to be a serious and honest conversation about what is happening within our health service. The public message from the Government is that the south west has recruited outrageously and that this is driving the deficit. We see that the reality is very different. We see that direct pay is being suppressed and that the agency bill has rocketed when, in fact, it should have been going down.

In the context of the financial control measure that was put in place in September with regard to the four regions, there are very serious questions about the legal basis for that measure. This is crossing a line. The 2004 Act set out the basis for the establishment of the HSE. The Department of Health is now getting involved in operational and day-to-day matters. That is wrong. There is no legal basis for that. I would like to hear from the Minister of State on this issue. The second key issue is that it is reckless and is going to endanger both patients and staff.

So much has been asked about the south west. I want answers from the Minister of State as to what has happened with regard to recruitment. I am looking at a letter, dated 8 August, from the regional executive officer, REO, to the chief executive of the HSE. It talks about a requirement regarding 154.5 posts. It states that is the minimum amount required to deliver safe care. It states that without those posts, the system will not be able to function effectively. Those posts are considered essential in the context of maintaining safe, effective and

sustainable services across the south-west region. Those 154.5 posts are for older persons, home care assistants and those who provide home support, interventional radiologists, paediatric neurologists and the regional medical workforce. Were those posts put in place? There is a clear message from the REO stating that safety would be compromised across the south west if there were a failure to put these posts in place. We need clear answers.

The Minister talked about planning, but the reality is that there has been a complete failure to plan on the part of the Department. We heard from the Minister that the budget is set on the basis of a 2% demographic increase for this year and yet we know that emergency demand is up by 7%. In places such as Cork it is up by 12%. In the Mater, it is up by 6%. There is also the complexity of care. The reality is that the Department is failing to plan based on demand and is instead applying an arbitrary figure to the health service.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Deputy-----

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Earlier this year, we heard about the disgraceful situation around the radiation therapy being provided in our hospitals in the context of the waiting lists and, in particular, the machinery. We know that some of that machinery is 18 years old.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: It is the oldest equipment in the country. I hear that progress is being made-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: -----to put a steering group in place. Is the funding going to be put in place for the replacement of the LINAC machines across our radiation therapy services?

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is a pity that the senior Minister left because she needs to hear what people are saying. She liked the idea of having a freshness to her style of management, and indeed there probably was a freshness and directness. I appreciated, in particular, the way in which she was dealing with constituents. However, the honeymoon is certainly over and we are heading into a serious winter of discontent.

I have a serious concern about what has happened with regard to CUH in the past few weeks. The CEO down there is refreshing. She is very good. She has been outspoken. I am seriously alarmed by some of the sinister developments in response to her having the courage to speak out in the manner she did. There was a suggestion that there were somehow going to be consequences and some assessment of her management performance. We do not want to live in a country where somebody who speaks out is treated like that. I would like to hear more from her in that regard.

Approximately a week and a half ago, I met representatives of the HSE in Limerick to discuss the mid-west.

There is no topic I have spoken on more. I got into politics because of the state of the health service in the mid-west. It was a cry for help. The senior management team were getting their retaliation in first. They said there would be clinical and governance issues because they simply cannot sustain what is going on. The mid-west has been discriminated against for more than 20 years. We have one model 4 hospital. The south east has four model 3 or model 4 hospitals. It does not have the same issues on the same scale. We are looking at 400 emergency department attendances. Beaumont, at most, will be looking at 260. It is not on the same scale. We are facing into absolute hell.

I once stood up here and explained how my father would not go into that hospital. He said he would never come out. Do you know what? He never did. He came out to die. There are many people in the mid-west who are faced with the same issue. What we are heading for in the coming winter is worse than what I spoke about here two years ago. That is how bad things can be.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I also want to express my frustration at the senior Minister not being here to hear everyone's contribution to this debate. I want to focus my contribution on what is happening at Cork University Hospital, CUH, because it demonstrates the reality of the crisis facing our health service, especially as we enter winter. The INMO confirmed that October was the worst October on record for hospital overcrowding. At CUH alone, 1,215 patients were recorded on trolleys during October. I also want to highlight something that goes to the heart of this crisis. Last month, through a parliamentary question, I revealed that CUH had lost 50% of its CT scanning capacity in 2026 because of staffing shortages. At the time, 701 patients were awaiting scans, including 292 urgent cases.

Patients are waiting for potentially life-changing diagnoses while essential scanning equipment cannot operate at full capacity because the staff simply are not there. The consequences go much further than diagnostic waiting lists. These delays affect patient flow, prolong hospital stays and contribute to overcrowding. We have patients waiting on trolleys because beds are unavailable, while others remain in hospital longer because essential diagnostic procedures are delayed. That is the vicious cycle we are witnessing in our health service. Rather than a clear plan to address these staffing shortages, we have witnessed a public dispute between CUH and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. Yesterday, my colleague, Senator Laura Harmon, raised serious concerns following a report that CUH's chief executive, Jennifer Kearney, was warned of possible performance management action after raising concerns about staffing and patient safety.

Those reports require a full and transparent explanation. I do not believe the Minister for Health can provide that. I believe it has to be independent because hospital managers, doctors and nurses must be able to raise legitimate patient safety concerns without fear of repercussions. Has this State learned anything? Tomorrow we will have a debate in this House on whistleblowers. When we speak about people working in our health service raising legitimate concerns and then the possibility of facing repercussions, what is that telling the staff in our health service?

My colleague, Deputy Sherlock, also referenced the legal basis of the Minister's new recruitment sanction controls. This exposes the fundamental contradiction in the Government's approach. The Minister cannot demand that hospitals improve patient flow while restricting

recruitment. There are serious issues in our health service, but I emphasise one matter: do not undermine hospital chief executives and clinicians. They deserve to have their voices heard because they are also the voices of our patients. They should not be undermined.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The recent figures for the number of people on trolleys are shocking. The figures from the last week of October have broken all records and have been rising sharply to dangerous levels. There were 824 on one day last week, a new record. There is overcrowding in 28 hospitals, with patients on trolleys and chairs. In Portlaoise, while the figure was quite low at eight patients on trolleys, that is eight too many. Those are the facts. The figures in Portlaoise are only kept low by the exceptional efforts of staff working flat out and under huge pressure, including pressure to discharge patients as soon as possible. At one end of the hospital, patients have to be discharged, which everybody understands. At the other end, patients are waiting to come in and there are no beds for them. The pressure this puts on staff is leading to burnout. It can also lead to negative patient outcomes.

Portlaoise's emergency department is now dealing with more than 40,000 people per annum. Bearing in mind the daily numbers of 100-plus on trolleys in October, what will it be like in January, in the middle of the flu season? The reality is that our hospitals do not have the capacity. That is acknowledged in the Government's bed capacity action plan. It is widely accepted that having people endure long waits to be seen at emergency departments or on trolleys, and a lack of capacity in hospitals, is bad for patient outcomes.

This issue has been building up for decades. There are no shortcuts. The solutions are clear. The promised 3,000 additional critical care beds have to be delivered. We have been hearing about them, but we do not see the delivery. Earlier this year, the Minister for Health promised a new 48-bed wing in Portlaoise. That is the promise, but it needs to be funded and constructed to deal with the population increase in the county, which is putting huge pressure on the hospital and the excellent staff in Portlaoise. The number of front-line staff needs to be increased and the Government needs to remove the recruitment block, particularly for nurses and midwives. Hundreds of nurses and midwives, some of whom have been interviewed and placed on panels, have been told by the HSE that they have no job. I have another letter here today from one of them. Bed blocking is an awful term used for delayed discharge. The Minister of State and I know why that is happening. It is due to the lack of transitional care. In Abbeyleix, we have an excellent step-down facility, but its bed capacity needs to be increased.

To get people home and out of hospital, we need to beef up the home help system. Public health nurses, in particular, need to be out in the community, rather than in offices filling out paperwork. They need to visit clients, see the conditions in which they are living, monitor their ability to look after themselves and ensure that critical warning signs are flagged and are seen or acted on. We need bed capacity in hospitals and the staff. We need home care and transitional step-down care, all beefed up, if we are to avert a crisis this Christmas and into the new year.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Deputy Cullinane for this motion. I fully support it. I could not agree more that overcrowding robs patients of their dignity, endangers lives and exhausts staff. I am becoming increasingly concerned about the situation in Letterkenny University Hospital. It is simply diabolical. There were 701 patients on trolleys in Letterkenny last month, while the figure for Sligo University Hospital was 951, giving the north west a total of 1,652.

We know from the INMO that this was the worst October on record for overcrowding. The crisis is consistently worse than in previous years. In 2026, 111,000 patients have been treated on trolleys, yet the Government still fails to deliver a fair pay agreement. Hospital staff across this country are on their knees. There is a cost-of-living crisis and they are in trouble. They go into work every day and perform miracles, yet can hardly put food on the table. That is the state this country is in.

A strike in hospitals next week would be a disaster, particularly in Letterkenny, where overcrowding has reached a dangerous, critical point. We must do everything, and the Minister of State must do everything within her power, to make sure this does not happen. I hear devastating stories every day from constituents waiting in emergency departments, being sent home and then having to be readmitted the next day because of capacity issues. Week after week, overcrowding in Letterkenny only seems to get worse. Last week, one elderly gentleman sat in the same chair for 28 hours in that hospital. Councillor Tomás Seán Devine of the 100% Redress Party visited him and came back 24 hours later. Four hours after that, 28 in total, the man was given a bed.

8 o'clock

This is not the fault of the staff. It is the ongoing situation in Letterkenny and it is becoming dangerous and, indeed, critical. Another woman was admitted twice to the emergency department. She was discharged the first night and her doctor sent her straight back the next morning.

There are no care packages available for people, with some, unfortunately, being unable to leave hospital because there is no provision to look after them. This is a consistent problem and it negatively affects patient care. The staff are under immense pressure, with which they should not have to deal. This issue is particularly concerning in the north west, where limited hospital capacity and staff shortages are now coming to the forefront. We are facing potentially dangerous situations going into the winter. It is only a matter of time before there is a death.

We cannot allow this to continue. Patients must be provided with fast and effective treatment as soon as they arrive at a hospital. We cannot have people waiting for 28 hours. Patients deserve dignity and proper treatment. There is an urgent need for increased hospital capacity, improved staffing levels and better access to community-based healthcare, particularly in the north west. I ask the Minister of State to do her best to address these issues. If they are not addressed, we will be facing a catastrophic situation, not just in Donegal but all over Ireland. We have a responsibility in this matter. We know what is coming down the line. The public sector pay dispute, with strike action planned for next week, must be resolved. What kind of message are we sending to the people in this country who provide front-line care services when we cannot even pay them their wages in a cost-of-living crisis?

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome and support the motion brought forward by Deputy Cullinane. There are record levels of emergency department attendances and admissions in hospitals throughout the country. For the month of September, the number of patients without a bed was 12,274. Just last week, on 28 October, 824 admitted patients were on trolleys, 100 of whom were in University Hospital Limerick. Obviously, this is a very dangerous situation. There have been numerous difficulties, not just at University Hospital Limerick but in major

hospitals throughout the country. In 2006, former Minister Mary Harney declared an emergency when there were 495 patients on trolleys.

A number of factors have given rise to this situation, one of which is the effective embargo on staff recruitment, with most posts now required to be approved by the Department of Health. I wonder how legal or legitimate is that requirement. There is such a paperwork trail now ending up with the Department that there is, in effect, an embargo on the filling of posts.

Student nurses are being left without jobs. Many of the 2026 graduates have not been offered employment. There are vacancies at midwifery level in University Hospital Galway. There are 80 nursing and midwifery posts vacant at Cork University Hospital. It is the same right across the country. This is in breach of employment commitments set out in HSE circulars and in 2026 graduate employment memorandums. While I welcome the increased graduate intakes in recent years, we are now in a situation where those graduates are not being offered jobs. Highly sought after graduates are being actively recruited to Australia, the UK and Canada. That situation cannot continue.

Centralisation has been an absolute disaster, particularly in the mid-west. The closure of the emergency departments at Ennis and Nenagh general hospitals, against the wishes of the vast majority of the population and almost all the public representatives, local and national, in the area, has turned out to be a complete disaster. Hardly a day goes by without something like 100 patients being on trolleys at those hospitals. There have been various reports and proposals to address the situation but the only proposal that really will address it is to reassign Ennis and Nenagh general hospitals as fully fledged model 3 hospitals with emergency departments.

There are significant bed capacity deficits throughout the country. As has been noted, the Government's own bed capacity plan states the need for an additional 3,000 beds. We also need fully funded hospital-based winter plans. The lack of provision of what used to be called home help assistants and are now called home care assistants is a huge problem. Not a day goes by without someone contacting me who has been approved for home care assistant hours but is not receiving them because the HSE cannot provide the staff. That is happening on an ongoing basis and it is seriously undermining the work of hospital services.

I commend all the staff of Tipperary University Hospital. As a team, they are working above and beyond on behalf of patients and the people of south Tipperary. They are doing so against all the odds. We are looking for additional staff, additional funding and an extension to the emergency department.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is a pity the Minister is not here for this debate. She is at the Mansion House celebrating the 30th anniversary of the operation in Ireland of the pharmacy chain, Boots. I wish the company, which has an outlet in every county in Ireland, well. However, what we need in Limerick are boots on the ground.

Together with colleagues, I was at a meeting last week with HSE Mid West, where we heard that 180 people offered positions in UHL are waiting for sign-off on those posts. Those health professionals can help people in our hospital in Limerick. UHL is a lot different from other hospitals because it not only serves people in Limerick city and county but also the people in counties Clare, Tipperary and north Kerry who come there for care. What we do not have are adequate staff and facilities to care for those people. That is what is wrong. People are always

talking about the overcrowding at UHL. That overcrowding is caused by a lack of staff and facilities. That has been spelled out as clear as day.

We were offered an 80-bed unit for people in long-term care in order to free up beds at UHL. However, according to the budget, the funds are not there to do that. Yet, it is being done in Waterford, with a step-down facility available there for long-term care. Will the Minister of State confirm that? We are not being allowed to do that in Limerick for the people who need the same care as those in Waterford. It comes down to budgets. No price can be put on a person's health. In 2009, when UHL was designated as a centre of excellence, the HSE forgot to allow for the population to rise.

For God's sake, will the Minister sign off on the appointment of the 180 staff who are needed now at UHL and ensure the rest of the staff who are needed are also appointed? Agency staff are great but they come in for one day here and there and then they are gone. There is no follow-up and no accountability in that regard. We need long-term appointments of health professions to ensure we can look after people in Limerick.

Deputy Michael Collins: The situation in our hospitals is getting worse, not better. Overcrowding at CUH remains a daily reality, with patients waiting on trolleys, waiting lists continuing to grow and staff being asked to do more with fewer resources. I received an email today from a woman who was due to undergo a mastectomy in CUH last week. She arrived for her operation, having prepared herself physically and mentally - anyone who has gone through that knows it is torture - only to be turned away on the day and sent home. That is the reality facing patients. Procedures are being cancelled and people are left waiting and wondering when they will finally get the treatment they need.

The pressure is also being felt across west Cork. Bantry General Hospital provides a vital service for rural communities, yet it, too, is operating under significant strain.

Strengthening services in Bantry would help reduce pressure on CUH, but progress remains far too slow. I thank the management team, doctors, nurses and all the staff who do such an excellent job in Bantry under pressure.

I also want to raise the withdrawal of the Domino and midwifery service in Cork. This service provided continuity of care through a dedicated team of midwives during pregnancy, labour births and the early days at home. More than 400 mothers used the service last year. The service is now being withdrawn because of staffing shortages. There are over 18 vacant midwifery posts in the maternity hospital at CUH and the staff providing the Domino service have been redeployed to other wards. As a result, many women have been left uncertain about their upcoming maternity care.

I have also raised before the disgraceful situation facing cancer patients across Cork and Munster who are still being forced to travel to Dublin and Galway for stem cell transplants and CAR T-cell therapies because CUH does not have the facilities it needs. We are constantly told that Cork is Ireland’s second city, yet patients battling blood cancers are travelling the length and breadth of the country to access life-saving treatment. Families are taking time off work, travelling hundreds of kilometres and facing additional stress and expense while dealing with serious illnesses.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Since 2011, four Fine Gael Ministers have run the Department of Health, namely Dr. James Reilly, Leo Varadkar, Simon Harris, during whose tenure we watched the cost explode on the children's hospital, and the current Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, who leaves her own special legacy of 1 million people on hospital waiting lists for the first time ever in this country. The children's hospital was due to open in 2022, but its opening date has moved countless times. We are now expecting it to open, possibly, in 2028.

Looking at Cork, on 28 September, the Minister for Health came to CUH hand in glove with the Taoiseach to open the €90 million surgical hub, two years later than planned. On the same day, she told us that Cork was safe all year. Almost straight away, that hub was shut down for a fortnight having failed air quality testing. Since its reopening, reports have come to us that only ten patients have walked through those doors. That seems like an expense photocall. A total of €90 million was spent. I find it bizarre that the Minister attended because it was in her diary knowing it would have to be shut down within hours. It tells us one thing about her, namely that she is more interested in headlines rather than hospitals. I will provide her with another headline. This has been the worst October ever, with a total of 12,672 people on trolleys, 1,215 of whom are in CUH. Last Thursday, 90 people waited over 24 hours on trolleys in the hospital for a bed, the worst in the country.

The answer from the Minister is to blame the hospitals. She has previously told this House that the hospitals that consistently do not improve are, bizarrely, in Cork. There is nothing bizarre about it. In the summer, consultants cried out for help from this senior Minister about staff needs. Instead, the HSE has turned down financial and restricted medical posts across the CUH and other hospitals.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Meanwhile, the Minister is playing in her own soap opera about who rang who. She has been talked about-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The Deputy is way over time.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----as the next Fine Gael leader but, obviously, she is more interested in the next job than doing her current job.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Before Deputy Lawless proceeds with his contribution, is he moving Aontú's amendment to the Government's amendment?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "better address unscheduled care needs":

"; and

calls on the Department of Health to approve all contracts which have already been signed by the HSE, and the prospective employee's which are currently awaiting approval by the Department of Health under the newly introduced recruitment pay-bill requirements, and to

immediately offer clarity regarding the start dates of each individual who has signed a contract or offered a job by the HSE.".

I want to talk about the absolute shambles of recruitment in the HSE at the moment. What we are witnessing is, effectively, a recruitment freeze in all but name. It appears the HSE has overrun the budget for the west and north west and, as a result, the Department has introduced a recruitment freeze. While this is happening, there are 85 vacancies in Mayo University Hospital, 50 of which are nursing and midwifery positions.

Just down the road in Galway, 88 graduate nurses from Galway University Hospital were offered contracts and positions. They were offered specific jobs on specific wards. Days before induction was due to begin, however, those contracts were, effectively, shelved. When I raised this issue with the Minister in the Dáil, she blamed the HSE. What she failed to mention, however, was that her Department was reneging on these contracts and slowing the entire process.

This situation is not refined to graduate nurses alone. Over the past couple of weeks, my office has been inundated with healthcare professionals, physios and occupational therapists. They were offered jobs and positions, with start dates and contracts signed, but those contracts have been shelved. The Department has given no indication as to when those contracts will come into place. I spoke to one lady this week who was offered a contract, which she signed. It was suggested to her by the line manager in the HSE to hand in her notice, and she did so, given she had a contract and start date. That individual is now without a job because her current employer has already recruited and put in place a new hire, and she is still waiting for the HSE to implement her position that was due to commence. Let us imagine a young mother with young children approaching Christmas, who signed a contract with the HSE, handed in her notice based on the good faith of that contract and is now without a job and faced into jobseekers' benefit. It is the same for many of the nurses who graduated from Galway University Hospital. They undertook four years of an undergraduate programme as well as a nine-month internship programme. For the nine months of that internship, they were being told that there are jobs there for them but, instead, they have had to sign up for social welfare. It is totally unacceptable. I am asking the Minister to intervene before many of our young people go off to Australia and Canada.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is another winter of discontent amid failing healthcare by this coalition. Tá na scannail dhorcha a bhí ag caitheamh os cionn ár dTí i láthair arís tar éis an bhuiséid dheireanaigh. Our brows are furrowed with rising patient numbers, while the bruised and battered are left hanging in accident and emergency departments. Tá cruinnithe de chuid an lucht oibre, a bhfuil míshástacht iomlán orthu, ag máirseáil agus ag dul ar stailc. Grim are the public health workers who were promised jobs in graduation. Tá siad ag imeacht go Dubai agus go dtí an Astráil. Caillfear an chuid is mó díobh orainn, agus is mór an trua é sin. They have been cheated of a working life here because of incompetence and pound-foolishness that send our best off and import at higher costs. Tá 12,000 duine ar liostaí feithimh agus easpa leapacha ospidéil ar fud na tíre. In this time of growing crisis, why does the Cabinet pass away the hours ag seinm an fhidil agus an Roinn Sláinte trí thine? Tá sé ag cruthú ollphéiste dífhoirmithe i ndáiríre. We need to honour contract commitments and remove needless recruitment restrictions. Ní mór feabhas a chur ar acmhainn agus shábháilteacht na n-ospidéal. We must fund a winter plan that will work year on year; grow capacity that will save money in

the long run; agus a chinntiú go bhfuil maoiniú cuí ag an tseirbhís otharchairr. Let us make more glorious each summer with the right policies. Let us value our workers and protect our patients. Iarraim ar an Aire spléachadh solais a thabhairt dúinn. Déan an rud ceart.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: First, I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for the kind way she personally dealt with the serious issue of CAMHS in south and north Kerry. It was an awful situation, but I thank her for it.

We have an awful situation in Kerry at the moment with regard to accident and emergency services. The people working so diligently in our university hospital in Tralee are under so much pressure and strain all the time. The answer to that problem is to try to divert people away from accident and emergency departments so that only those who need to be there are there. When people have to attend, however, they do not want to go because they know they are going to be waiting such a long time. We need to enhance our hospitals, such as those in Kenmare, Cahersiveen, Listowel and all of our other hospitals, including in Dingle and Killarney. I am glad of them. We are having an official opening on Friday of our new hospital, and I welcome that. We need to enhance our services in the community to try to take the pressure away from the university hospital.

This is so important for our young nurses. I heard a quote today from nurses whose take-home pay equates to 63 cent an hour. That does not make sense. How are we going to keep young nurses in Ireland if they are going to be treated that way, with the worry and torture they went through in recent months with regard to contracts? In other words, there are young nurses who wanted to stay at home in Ireland but, unfortunately, they are being offered no full-time employment. That is very wrong. If we want to get young nurses to stay in Ireland, we have to treat them and pay for them properly.

To highlight accident and emergency again, I know of an incident in Kerry today where a person was injured at work - a young girl. She did not want to go in any circumstances. She was a case to go to accident and emergency but did she want to go? She knew that because that incident happened today at around 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock, she would be there until tomorrow morning. That is no fault of the people working in accident and emergency but it is our fault.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I will be supporting this motion because many of the concerns it raises reflect the issues I have been raising in this House directly with the HSE and the Minister for Health over recent months. However, I believe this debate should not be confined to trolley numbers alone. The overcrowding crisis we see every winter is a visible manifestation of capacity deficits that exist right across the health service. Earlier this year, the HSE confirmed to me that Ireland is operating significantly below recommended levels of specialist neurorehabilitation capacity with a deficit of more than 300 beds compared with internationally recognised standards. That is of serious concern, particularly with the prevalence of Parkinson's disease and people who need these services. I have called for a dedicated neurology team in the midlands and to make sure there is a neurology unit at Tullamore hospital. Such a unit has to be put there because the demand is increasing.

I also raised concerns regarding neurological services provided through Beaumont Hospital and the bad experiences people had. In response, the HSE confirmed that there were more than

14,000 complaints on Beaumont waiting lists, that is, 14,000 complaints from patients waiting on neurology services while dozens of patients from Offaly alone are dependent on that particular service.

Likewise, after raising concerns regarding dermatology services, I was informed that additional clinics and staffing measures were being introduced in an effort to reduce waiting lists, which in some cases were approaching two years. More recently, I sought clarification regarding stroke rehabilitation services in the midlands. The response made it clear that further expansion of early support discharge services remains dependent on future staffing and resource reviews. That is a common thread running through all of these cases and it is just not good enough.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, support this motion. Ar an gcéad dul síos, gabhaim buíochas leis na banaltraí, na dochtúirí and the professors in the Dunmanway unit in Cork University Hospital. My wife has been going there for treatment as a public patient for the past number of months and she is getting exceptional treatment there. I have been in St. Vincent's University Hospital myself a couple of times over the years and got exceptional treatment, and in Tipperary University Hospital in Clonmel as well, where there have been huge issues recently with trolleys waiting. We never hear the good stories but we hear of that.

I salute the front-line staff, doctors, nurses and cleaners but the mismanagement in the HSE executive is just intolerable. From the children's hospital to the latest fiasco with the €90 million regional unit, nothing is delivered on time and everything is over budget. We do not have an optometry service at all in Tipperary. Dr. Hillery, an excellent woman, gave a year's notice that she was retiring. They did not both to reply until she left. We have had three rounds of advertisements and nobody is there. Young children are suffering and will suffer into the future from being neglected like that. This is up and down. I am not taking from the motion but there are issues of sincerely reckless and disastrous management and nobody is held accountable. The waste of money with Covid was just inexplicable and there are many other issues as well around the incompetence there at senior management level and maybe lower management as well. It is just impossible and the HSE is cannibalising itself with management. We have no bother recruiting management. There is a definite recruitment issue with nurses and everybody else but not management. It is, "Fill all the positions you like". Managers are going around with files and this, that and the other but what are they doing? They are just bringing trauma on people and the staff they should be looking after.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity and I will be supporting this motion because it is very apt as regards what we want to represent. A lot of what has been said here is happening in Kerry as well, day after day. For many elderly people, it is a daunting thing to leave a warm bed and have to go back to accident and emergency and wait there for maybe a day or two in a trolley, a chair or somewhere but not in a bed. They left a warm bed to start out with and this is where they finish up for a long number of hours. I have said this here several times before. That is the worst scenario happening in our health system.

Enough money is being given to the HSE but it is not being accounted for and the people who are spending it are not held responsible or accountable. It is very wrong because the Department of Health and the Minister should be spearheading this and nailing the HSE down in regard to how it is spending its money. Almighty God, the Minister of State can go into any

hospital and see the number of beds that are empty because they do not have a workforce to man them. It is no different with the new hospital that is to be opened in Killarney. A great number of beds have been left unopened. That is not right. It is not on. We have a population that is sick and they cannot get a GP at home so the next thing that has to happen is they are taken to accident and emergency in an ambulance. I commend the ambulance workers and the staff who go out. They do great work and sometimes they do things for people so they actually can be left at home. In any case, they do great work. They finish up with these people-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----in admissions and waiting to be left in. It is very wrong and until we have it sorted out we do not have a proper health service.

Deputy Michael Cahill: At the outset, I wish to mention that we have a very busy accident and emergency unit in University Hospital Kerry. More often than not, it is crowded. Where I have a particular issue is elderly people in their 80s and 90s being left waiting 24 hours and longer. That is simply not good enough. There are plans for a 96-bed block in University Hospital Kerry. That will, when developed, help ease the pressure. I ask the Minister of State to do everything possible to have that project expedited. It is very much in the pipeline. We have a trolley crisis. The Minister for Health saw it with the staff first-hand when she visited Kerry recently. We were delighted to have the Minister in our county hospital.

Staffing is a huge issue in all our hospitals. In response to a parliamentary question earlier this year, I was told that there were 163 vacant positions in University Hospital Kerry. That is obviously putting huge pressures on all the other staff and services as well. The same can be said right across all our community hospitals, including the community hospitals in Dingle, Cahersiveen and Kenmare and, indeed, the new community nursing unit in Killarney. It is a shame that beds are closed there. There are beds that have never been opened in the other three community hospitals I mentioned. I ask that everything possible be done to address that.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. The Minister of State knows I am going to mention Beaumont Hospital, and I thank her for the work she did with the solace cafés in north Dublin.

With regard to Beaumont Hospital and its emergency department, it is one of my main priorities after being elected and after the mandate I was given from north Dublin. I welcomed the announcement last year from the HSE capital plan but what I am hearing from constituents in my clinics and across all my emails and phone calls is simply not acceptable. Elderly patients are spending hours or sometimes days on trolleys waiting for care. I know there is work in the HSE with virtual wards but we need to expand it and have a Covid-level response to this. Constituents have got on to me about the accident and emergency unit. Sadly, because of their experience in accident and emergency, they were discouraged from going there and they lost their lives.

A wife rang me whose husband would not attend accident and emergency because of the previous experience they had. I raised it with the Department at the time. That man got ill. Sadly, because he wanted to fight his illness instead of going to the hospital again, by the time

the ambulance arrived he had passed away. That is from me speaking directly with patients. Another family described how their father spent 27 hours on a trolley. These are people. I know the Minister of State will work with me, and I want this to be urgent. They deserve to be treated with dignity, particularly when they are elderly and at their most vulnerable. I acknowledge the extraordinary doctors, nurses, healthcare workers and cleaning staff at Beaumont who continue to provide under enormous pressure. They deserve facilities that will allow them to do their jobs properly. The new emergency department and the 95-bed block are essential. We know the redevelopment was approved and progressed through the detailed design phase in 2025 and 2026. We urgently need clarity on what happens next.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Beaumont does not just serve north Dublin. As other Deputies have mentioned, it serves a wide area of Ireland and this needs to be done urgently.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. She is an able Cathaoirleach, I must say. I welcome the opportunity to conclude this debate on behalf of the Government. At the outset I acknowledge the real concerns that patients and families experience when they face long waits for care. Overcrowding can never be acceptable. As we know, it places pressure on the patients, on their families and on our health and social care workers alike. None of us, especially in the Government, are in any way complacent about these challenges. As the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, outlined, our health service is dealing with unprecedented levels of demand with almost 100,000 more patient attendances so far this year compared with the same period in 2025. There are 18,000 more attendances by people aged 75 and over, many with more complex health and social care needs and requiring additional care. It is unacceptable to me that older people are left for long times on trolleys. Nobody wants to see that. This House cannot ignore the fact that despite this growing demand, our health and social care workers continue to provide high-quality care every single day, often in challenging circumstances. I place on the record my appreciation and that of the Government for the extraordinary work of nurses, doctors, allied health professionals, support staff and managers throughout our health service.

My colleague opposite can put down a motion with rhetoric about a lack of investment in staffing and capacity across the health service, but the facts tell a different story. There are 4,000 more staff in our health service today than at the start of the year. That is a fact. There are 6,000 more staff today than 12 months ago. That is also a fact. There are 30,000 more staff now than at the start of 2020. That is another fact. Within our acute hospitals staffing has increased by one third. Since 2019 health spending has increased by more than two thirds, or €10.6 billion. The motion from the party opposite ignores these facts because they cannot accept the Government is making sustained and substantial investment in our health services, in staffing and in patient care. They cannot accept that major investment is also under way through the largest healthcare capital programme in the history of the State. Surgical hubs are being rolled out across the country to separate elective and emergency care. Four hubs are already operational and further hubs, including the new surgical hub in Waterford, are due to open in the coming months. These facilities will help to reduce waiting times and ensure that

planned procedures are less vulnerable to disruptions arising from pressures in emergency departments.

I want to correct an earlier comment that there had been eight people through the surgical hub in Cork. As of yesterday, 2 November, 87 patients had attended the hub. This Government has also continued to develop and grow alternatives to hospital care through the enhanced community care programme, the chronic disease management programmes, more services in our community pharmacies and virtual wards providing care in the home. Home support is an important part of our response to pressures on hospitals, including over the winter period. The triangle of supports of home care, day care and meals on wheels has grown exponentially over the past six years, supporting many people to stay in their own homes for as long as possible. It helps people to remain in their homes and enables those who no longer require acute hospital care to return home with appropriate supports. Priority is given to people in the community with acute needs and to those assessed and waiting in acute hospitals who can return home with supports.

As a TD for Waterford and as a Minister of State in the Department of Health I also want to acknowledge, as was mentioned tonight, the outstanding work taking place at University Hospital Waterford. It has maintained a green status throughout the first ten months of 2026. This is effectively a zero trolley status that it has held for years, despite having the same increasing demand for services that is being witnessed nationally. University Hospital Waterford is demonstrating what can be achieved through strong leadership, effective patient flow and a whole of health services approach. It is important to state again today that just five out of the 29 emergency department sites account for 50% of the national trolley congestion total. We have 29 hospitals with emergency departments. Our persistent problem is in eight or nine of them. Waterford demonstrates that good patient flow is about knowing who is in the hospital and having a plan for every patient. It is about having strong operational oversight, having a senior manager focused on bed capacity every day, being proactive in the management of diagnostics and infection prevention and control, and facilitating timely discharges. It is about maximising the use of all available capacity, including community supports such as community intervention teams and home first services. The entire health service needs to recognise and learn from University Hospital Waterford's successes in dealing with trolleys.

In my role as Minister for State with responsibility for mental health, I am particularly conscious that emergency departments are not always the most appropriate setting for people experiencing a mental health crisis. In recent years we have made significant progress developing community-based mental health supports. We are continuing to invest in crisis resolution teams, crisis cafés, enhanced out-of-hour responses and stronger community mental health teams so that people can receive support closer to home and at an earlier stage. We now have seven crisis resolution teams in place. There are two in Cork, one each in Waterford, Galway, Sligo, Limerick and Dublin, and five more funded for Donegal, Kerry, the midlands, north Tipperary and Wexford. We have six Solace Cafés open with nine more funded to open in the coming 12 months. Where we have Solace Cafés in place, which are crisis cafés for people with enduring mental health conditions, we have seen a reduction of between 14% and 18% in presentations to emergency departments. We are also investing in our suicide crisis assessment nurses, SCANs. These experienced nurses work to support people who present to GPs in distress, often providing support in GP surgeries and even in people's homes. In budget

2027 I funded a further 24 of these nurses to expand this programme so it has a presence in every county, bringing the total number to 69.

Our objective is clear. Where appropriate, people experiencing mental health difficulties should be able to access timely support in their communities without having to attend already under pressure emergency departments. By creating additional pathways to care, we can improve outcomes for individuals while also helping to reduce pressure on acute hospital services. As we continue this major expansion of community-based supports, we know some people in distress may need to present to a hospital where they have both a physical and mental health need. That is why we are also investing in building the capacity of our emergency departments to better respond through the development of new specialist crisis nursing teams. These teams are made up of experienced clinical nurse specialists and advanced nurse practitioners working out of hours at night and over the weekend to support the non-consultant hospital doctor, NCHD, on duty. I funded teams for all model 4 hospitals and the Mercy in Cork in this year's budget and new teams for six of our model 3 hospitals for next year's budget.

As we enter the winter period, the public can be assured that extensive work is under way across the health regions. Region- and hospital-specific plans are being implemented. Additional patient flow measures are being put in place. Vaccination programmes for influenza, Covid-19 and RSV are already under way and will play a critical role in protecting vulnerable people and reducing avoidable hospital admissions. The Government does not underestimate the challenges ahead. Our responsibility is to focus relentlessly on what works for patients. These are safety, safely staffed capacity, reducing delayed discharges, seven-day services - which are important - strong patient flow, alternative care pathways, innovation and accountability. That is the approach set out in the Government's countermotion. It acknowledges the challenges. It recognises the outstanding contribution of healthcare staff. It provides a practical path to improvement through investment and reform.

We want patients to be seen quickly, treated safely, and cared for in dignity. We want families to have confidence that the health service will be there when they need it. We want our healthcare workers to have the facilities, staffing, and support they need to do their jobs.

The Government’s focus will continue to be on delivering the mission of universal healthcare. We did not hear much about that tonight. We will continue to build capacity, strengthen our community services and improve patient outcomes. We will continue to invest in and support the dedicated health and social care workforce who treat patients every day. This winter, every single available resource must be focused on the patient, every part of our health and social care service must work together, and every opportunity to provide safe care in the right setting must be taken. I commend the Government’s amendment to the House.

Deputy Máire Devine: I spoke to the nursing team at Usher’s Island in Dublin 8 and I send my best wishes to Dr. Kevin Kilbride, who built a fit-for-purpose homeless mental health service from scratch over decades. He is the epitome of public service and I am sure this House sends its best wishes for his speedy recovery following the serious injuries he sustained from an horrific knife attack last week as he carried out his duty.

The health of our service depends on people and investing in people to carry out care with compassion in treatment and therapy. This is compromised when staffing vacancies are left

unfilled and while a recruitment freeze damages the capacity to deliver a duty of care. Health and safety are weakened and patients made more vulnerable.

I spoke to the Psychiatric Nurses Association. It is alarmed at the vacancies in mental health across all sections. Services are now at a critical juncture where the next step is the serious consideration of closure of some services. Despite what the HSE has stated, recruitment restrictions are in place. We can take the tier 4 controls as an example. They have resulted in an embargo on recruitment, especially in mental health, which historically has had poor resources. Mental health services are the forlorn Cinderella of the health service. There are between 650 and 700 vacancies in mental health nursing alone, and services are heavily reliant on agency staff and overtime hours at a cost of almost €1 billion across all sectors. Our 2026 graduate nurses experiencing the snail's pace of contract signing are heading to the private sector or packing their bags and moving abroad. This blatant crawl to recruitment is destroying the health system.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Many other Deputies have alluded to the population growth. The population of Tallaght and surrounding areas has exploded in the last 20 years. We have not seen anything like the increase in funding for Tallaght University Hospital needed for the growing population. This puts significant pressure on the emergency department, inpatient beds and staffing levels.

A new 72-bed unit was approved for funding in 2023. We were told that these additional beds would solve the problem in accident and emergency services in particular, but they have remained in limbo ever since because of the bureaucratic nightmare that is the HSE capital project system. I do not know and hospital staff do not know where we are in relation to that.

I do not understand a system – I have only two minutes – where a hospital delivers additional services for patients and reduces waiting lists but is then expected to operate with the same resources. It does not make sense, but that is the system we are operating. There is a lot wrong with our system and one of the issues is clearly that we are not planning for the future and for population growth. It is patients and people living in areas where there is population growth who are suffering. It makes sense that if there is population growth in an area, staff working in the local hospital cannot get accommodation and have to live farther out. We have a broken system and it does not seem to be getting fixed any time soon.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Every winter, we have the same major problems. Hospital figures go sky high, patients wind up on gurneys in corridors, and others end up languishing for hours on chairs. Staff capacity is at a dangerously critical level, with severe emergency department delays. In my own area, Wexford General Hospital has highlighted that approximately one in three patients spends more than six hours waiting for admission - that is roughly 11,800 people - with more than 6,000 waiting more than nine hours. The INMO has stated that withholding permanent contracts from 2026 graduates due to employment control fails to address the real and tangible problem of permanent staff and bed capacity.

The Government has failed to honour these commitments. It must implement and publish regional winter plans, incorporating staffing and capacity targets, along with a safe staffing

framework protected by law. Lifting recruiting restrictions on priority vacant posts is essential for patient safety and the delivery of world-class health services.

I have spoken to staff in Wexford General Hospital. From the canteen employees to the cleaners, to the nurses and midwives, they are saying the same thing: they are doing their best but there is no planning laid out for hospitals during the winter months. An increase in sickness levels through flus and viruses and a new strain of Covid is overwhelming. It is time to listen to our doctors, nurses and midwives who have no choice but to face each winter with a deep sense of frustration, anxiety and exhaustion that puts both themselves and their patients at high risk. It is time that the Minister's actions reflect the reality of what is happening on the ground. She must publish a winter working plan that lifts embargoes, promotes staff levels and, most of all, delivers a safe environment for all who will be hospitalised this winter.

Deputy David Cullinane: If Fianna Fáil is wondering why it has collapsed in opinion polls, its TDs should listen back to the speech that the Minister of State gave a few moments ago. It was utterly delusional. She spent most of her time talking about what she said was my and Sinn Féin's failure to accept what she saw as reality. Most of it was untrue. What I do not accept and the Minister of State needs to understand is that we have a real crisis in our healthcare system. One would not think that at all from her response.

The reality as we go into the winter season is that people are waiting longer to see a GP and many cannot even register with a GP. Some people who cannot get an appointment with a GP end up going into a hospital's out-of-hours service, emergency department or minor injury clinic because they are waiting too long.

There was no mention of it in the Minister of State's speech, but for the first time in the history of the State, we have 1 million people on acute hospital waiting lists. We also have, again for the first time, over 260,000 people on community waiting lists. There was no mention of that in the Minister of State's speech. That is not to mention waiting lists for mental health, CAMHS, disability and other services. We have a national children's hospital that is still not built and people waiting far too long for treatment and in emergency departments.

The Minister of State is right to point to examples where things have improved, including in some emergency departments. She cited University Hospital Waterford. I have acknowledged a number of times the fact that we do not have patients on trolleys. However, she should not get overly excited about that. If she visited the emergency department on a busy night, she would see people sitting on chairs. If she were to leave and come back hours later, she would see the same patients sitting on those same chairs. One person said to me recently when I was in the emergency department that a hospital trolley was actually a luxury. She was with her older parent who was on the same chair for ten hours without being seen. When I went off and came back later - I was there with a relative myself - the same elderly person was in the same chair.

Simply saying that a patient is not on a trolley does not paint the full picture. That is the problem with overcrowding, which is why the INMO counts not only the number of people on trolleys, but also those who are not in beds and who just have been moved. We have to look at how long people are waiting in emergency departments and at the many more people who have left.

In the Minister said that we did not have a recruitment embargo, but recruitment controls. People will see that as essentially gaslighting patients, staff and management of hospitals because what is the purpose of controls but to prevent recruitment for essential posts? That is what is happening. No amount of spin from this Government is going to avoid that reality.

We have priority posts, urgent posts and necessary posts that cannot be filled because the Government has decided it is not going to fill them. That is the reality of it. The Government is playing fast and loose with people's lives because the reality in emergency departments and in hospitals more widely is that there is a patient safety crisis. The Minister of State does not have to take my word for it. Hospital managers, patients, advocate groups, campaign groups and healthcare trade unions are saying it. There is no acceptance or reality of that at all from the Minister of State sat opposite or, indeed, from the Minister for Health. They say that we have never spent more money in healthcare and tell us to look at all of the staff that they have recruited. Well, riddle me this. If that is the case, then why in God's name have we 1 million people on acute hospital waiting lists? Why are people waiting so long? It is also a case of mismanagement, inefficiencies, €1 billion spent on agency and hundreds of millions of euro on overtime, and all the while we cannot recruit the staff that we need. The Government is the one that needs a reality check and needs to start accepting a bit of reality as regards what is happening in healthcare as we go into a very difficult winter for patients and staff.

Deputy Máire Devine: Hear, hear.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): We must move on to the decision on the amendment to the amendment.

Amendment to amendment put and declared lost.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): That division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Defence Forces

94. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence her views on the Government's proposal to end the requirement for a UN mandate for the deployment of Irish personnel as part of an international force. [77955/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Is léir leis an bplé atá ar siúl i measc an phobail go bhfuil fonn ar dhaoine a gcuid a rá faoin gceist seo. Among the Irish people, in my engagement with them, there is a huge appetite for a referendum on this question. People want their say on this. They had it in the past and they want it again. Regarding the Minister's proposals to get rid of the triple lock, and it is to get rid of it, it is my view that the Government should put it to the people.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for the question. We have had an opportunity to set out in detail over the last number of weeks in the Dáil and, indeed, the Seanad the purpose of the Defence (Amendment) Bill. This is to broaden the range of international missions to which Ireland may contribute, where appropriate, in support of international peace and security. Importantly, it is to make sure that we, as a country and as a Government, have the right to make those decisions ourselves. The Government's proposals do not seek to end Ireland's participation in UN-mandated missions, which is something that has been conflated with this matter, nor will they prevent Ireland from continuing to deploy personnel to missions authorised by the United Nations. In fact, they broaden the basis on which to deploy our peacekeepers to UN and other missions.

I want to clarify to the Deputy that the legislation specifically proposes to amend the current reference in legislation from an "International United Nations Force" to the broader term "international force". This reflects the reality that peacekeeping and crisis management operations are conducted in a variety of international frameworks. This includes the United Nations, the European Union and other international organisations. In fact, some of the missions are led by NATO but are still UN-mandated missions. It is, therefore, not accurate to characterise, as many have, these proposals solely as ending a UN-mandate requirement. The objective is to provide Ireland with the flexibility and sole responsibility in making decisions to participate in a wider range of international missions, which importantly will continue to include the UN, where there is a clear legal basis and where such participation is consistent with Ireland's foreign and security policies and in line with our values and international obligations.

We have heard for decades, time and time again, in particular from those who are opposed to the EU, that we are going to EU defence armies, that we are going to send our men and our boys to war, and that we are going to become warmongers. None of this has come true. In fact, we have been always clear. We have participated in UN-mandated missions and we have removed ourselves from UN-mandated missions where they have not aligned with our views, values and propositions, but we want to make sure that that decision is ours and ours alone.

In terms of the overall suggestion around a referendum, that is something I want to come back to because there is something in our Constitution that the Opposition continues to overlook.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There is absolutely nothing whatsoever preventing the Government from putting this to the people.

I was out in Cork over the course of the weekend talking to people. People have lots of different views on this. The vast majority want to protect our neutrality and keep the triple lock but the thing that unites almost everyone is that people want to have their say. That is based on the fact that commitments were given to them in past referendums. Even the Taoiseach, in discussing the Lisbon treaty and how it was that they managed to persuade people the second time around, put it down to concessions that people got in relation to confirmation of neutrality. The triple lock was a central part of those debates. People want to have their say. It should be put to the people.

The Minister says that it is wrong to state that this is getting rid of the requirement for a UN mandate. It plainly is getting rid of the requirement for a UN mandate. That is literally what

the legislation does. That is the bit that the Government is taking out of the Defence Acts. I again emphasise that these are Defence Acts and are decided here. If the Minister were so concerned about sovereignty, it is-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta. You will have a further opportunity.

Deputy Helen McEntee: What I said clearly was that this did not prevent us from participating in UN-mandated missions-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: No one said it would.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----which is what the suggestion is.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Not a one said-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): There is one speaker, namely, the Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Article 29.4.9, introduced in 2002, sets out that the "State shall not adopt a decision taken by the European Council to establish a common defence pursuant to Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union where that common defence would include the State", that being, Ireland. That was put into our Constitution in 2002 following the Nice treaty and was upheld again in the Lisbon treaty. What would we be putting into the Constitution? What is it that the Deputy wants to put to people? We have legislation that was enacted after we were very clear that we were a neutral country. Our neutrality is based on our non-military alliance. We have set out already in our Constitution, under Article 29.4.9, that we will not adopt any decision taken by the EU where it aligns with a common defence that would include our State. How can we be any clearer in that regard?

What we are proposing here is that we would put forward a mechanism that would allow us to make our own decisions. Nobody would make any decision as to where we sent our troops and, also importantly, where we kept our troops. It is important to point out that since we had our debate two weeks ago, another UN-mandated mission has lost its mandate. There are now ten, not 11. That is three in the last couple of months.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. You will have another opportunity. A Theachta.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There are many more situations that could potentially compromise our neutrality than simply that common defence point. In fact, I would say that our neutrality is frequently compromised by our failure to check warplanes that fly through Shannon and over Irish airspace. That is certainly something that the Government should return to. Certainly, it is something that we will return to.

This is another paper tiger. There are so many of these arguments that the Minister throws out that nobody is actually making. I have not heard a single person, left, right, middle, media or Deputy, suggest that we would have to pull out of UN missions because of this. I do not know where that came from. Add that on top of the fact that there is this constant implication that we are prevented from doing things that we are not, such as the rescue of Irish citizens, humanitarian evacuations and investing in our Defence Forces should we deem fit. We should take our security seriously. That is appropriate but that is not prevented by the triple lock. The Government should put it to the people.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy has not answered, in any response, what I have just set out in Article 29.4.9,-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister has not-----

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----which clearly sets out that we will not join any defence alignments. If we were to do that, we would have to have a referendum. Unless the Deputy wants to change that himself and actually take that out, that is what he is talking about.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is not the only-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister has the floor.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is saying that I am running away and we are not engaging with the people. I put it to the Deputy that his own colleagues are running away.

9 o'clock

For two weeks, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Government colleagues have engaged with Deputy Conway-Walsh, who is the Chair of the defence committee, on tabling Committee Stage of the Defence (Amendment) Bill but she has ignored us and has not responded. Potentially we will have a meeting on Thursday of next week to talk about when we might take Committee Stage. There are many ways in which it can be brought through the House.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: What deadline are is the Minister working to?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): There is one speaker and the Minister has the floor.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: What is the rush?

Deputy Helen McEntee: If the Deputy's party is intent on frustrating this, it is not for a committee Chair to decide what they want to bring forward or not bring forward. There is an agenda and it is up to the committee Chair to respond to committee members. Sinn Féin is clearly trying to frustrate and delay the Bill so that when we try to bring it through the Houses, it will accuse us of rushing.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: By discussing it at the next scheduled meeting agreed at the previous meeting.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is a political tactic. That is all Sinn Féin is trying to do.

Legislative Measures

95. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Defence to provide an update on her plans to remove the requirement for UN authorisation via the Security Council or the General Assembly in order to deploy Irish troops overseas as part of an international force. [77487/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am sure the Minister's email inbox, like mine, is full and chock-a-block with people asking her to urgently reconsider the plans to abolish the triple lock. They point out, as I and many others have, the generosity of the wording of the Act of 2006 and the solemn guarantees of the Nice and Lisbon treaties. The will of the people is clear. Will the Minister listen and keep the triple lock?

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): As Deputies are aware, the Defence (Amendment) Bill is progressing through the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Bill will be proceeding to Committee Stage. We are awaiting a date for Committee Stage, as the Minister said.

It is important to address some of the claims that have been made about this. Much of the criticism advanced on Second Stage was based on a mischaracterisation of the legislation and an inaccurate portrayal of its consequences. The Bill does not impact on Ireland's neutrality. It does not provide for unrestricted overseas deployment of Defence Forces personnel. Nothing in the Bill does this.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It does allow for this.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The central reform contained in the Bill is set out in section 4, which replaces the existing concept of an international United Nations force with the term "relevant international force", which is then defined in the legislation. In practical terms, the law that we want to pass sets out clearly that Ireland can continue to participate in peacekeeping, peace enforcement and conflict prevention on overseas missions which, crucially, operate in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the UN and international law, whether specifically authorised by the Security Council or subject to a UN General Assembly resolution or, in addition, by organisations such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe or other regional arrangements.

The reform will ensure that Ireland is not prevented from contributing to legitimate international peace support operations solely because agreement cannot be reached at UN level. The legislation will, of course, continue to permit participation in UN and UN-mandated operations. Should the Security Council authorise, or the General Assembly recommend, future peacekeeping missions, Ireland will be fully able to contribute to them but we will have greater flexibility to participate in peace missions organised or led by bodies such as the

European Union, as we had in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the OSCE or other regional arrangements where such participation is considered appropriate by the Government and approved in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the UN.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The principles of the Charter of the UN were tested in 2003 when the US and the UK chose to go to war with Iraq. These exact principles were invoked when they went to war. The Minister's colleague in the Department of Defence said at a committee meeting in response to Deputy Murphy that had this legislation been in place in 2003, neither Article 29 or anything else would have prevented Ireland from sending troops to Iraq and engaging in what was described at the time as action in line with the principles of the UN Charter. This is exactly what was said at the time. It is the Government that is being inaccurate and disingenuous. It is putting forward this tired rhetoric about sovereignty and taking back control. Solemn guarantees were given in the Nice and Lisbon treaties. It is clear that the public view is pro-triple lock and it is clear that the current trajectory is exactly what people were afraid of when they voted in the Nice and Lisbon referendums. If the Government is confident about this legitimacy it should put it to the people.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is time to call out the scaremongering and misinformation about reform of the triple lock. The Iraq war was not in conformity with the principles of the United Nations Charter.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They said it was.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: They said it was.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, said at the time that it was not in conformity with the charter. Therefore, this claim is false. The Opposition tells us we will end up fighting in foreign wars. This is false. It tells us that Ireland will end up in NATO. This is false. It talks about the end of Irish military neutrality. Again, this is false. Nothing in the Bill affects our neutrality. Decisions on military alliances and on the Defence Forces of this State are for the Dáil and the Dáil alone. This is what the Bill is about; it is about decisions. Either we do nothing, which is what the Opposition wants, and peacekeeping from an Irish point of view ends, or we act to reform the triple lock-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: You are not reforming it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----and provide ourselves here in Dáil Éireann with the power to make decisions-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Pull the other one.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----on Irish peace work abroad, here in the Dáil and not elsewhere.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The example of the UN Charter being invoked in 2003 is exactly what I said; it was used by the US and the UK to justify that war. It was clear that the UN did

not agree and this is the whole point. The UN is the only game in town when it comes to multilateralism. It is the only body that can offer a mandate to serve under the blue helmet or blue beret. It is the only body that can guarantee that the work of the Defence Forces is peacekeeping. The Government is taking this away. It is as though the Government does not understand what a guardrail is. Of course, the Opposition is not saying this will immediately send us to war but the point is that the guardrail is in place so that we do not go to war and we stay in line with our values of neutrality, diplomacy and peace, and achieving peace through peaceful means, which the Government seems to have forgotten completely. Once again, the Government cannot continue to maintain that removal of the triple lock, which is what the Bill proposes, in any way allows us to remain a neutral state. It is farcical.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputy has said repeatedly that the Iraq war was in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: No, that is not what I said. The US and the UK said it was.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): One speaker and the Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Secretary-General of the United Nations at the time said specifically that it was not. This legislation requires us to act in accordance with international law-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: And who determines that?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----with the Charter of the United Nations-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: It does not.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----and with our Constitution.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What about the principles? That is the whole point. The Minister of State will vote down amendments.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy Murphy, the Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister of State will vote down amendments to say it should be in line with the UN Charter. Mark my words.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy Murphy, there is only one speaker.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Tell us now that he will not vote down amendments that propose it will be in line with the UN Charter.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy Murphy-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Tell us he will not vote down amendments to say it should be in line with the UN Charter. Tell us how he will vote on those amendments.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy Murphy, there is only one speaker.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am looking forward to the answer.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Right now the only speaker is myself as Cathaoirleach and Deputy Murphy has no right to speak. The Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputies opposite completely ignore the Irish Constitution. As the Minister said, the Constitution prevents us from becoming part of a European Union common defence. The Leader of the Opposition talks about Ursula von der Leyen's wars but if the European Union were ever to do this, and it has never done this because it is a peace project, Ireland would not be permitted to participate under the Constitution.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): We will move on.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Our Constitution requires us to conduct our international relations in accordance with moral principles with the objective of friendly relations among the states of the world. The argument the Deputies are putting forward is that somehow we will all go to war. What war are we talking about? It is completely ignorant of what is in our Constitution and what legally prevents us from doing that.

Defence Forces

96. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence if and when she will provide for permission for NCOs to participate in the First Line Reserve of the Defence Forces, given the benefit they can provide in terms of their skill and expertise. [77957/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The First Line Reserve is a very important element of the Defence Forces, particularly for former Defence Force members. It ensures the Defence Forces continue to get the benefit of their skills. The issue I am raising relates to NCOs who have left the Defence Forces and potentially want to re-enter. At present they can only remain attached to the Defence Forces at the rank they held on leaving.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. When we speak about modernising our Defence Forces, it is essential that we look at the revitalisation of the Reserve Defence Force. This includes the First Line Reserve, which is a vital part of the overall transformation process. As Deputy Ó Laoghaire is aware, the First Line Reserve comprises exclusively former members of the Permanent Defence Force. It provides a pool of trained former personnel and specialists who are available to supplement the Permanent Defence Force in times of emergency. The regeneration plan for the Reserve includes a commitment to streamline induction and assignment of the First Line Reserve. The regulatory mechanism to induct former Permanent Defence Force officers to the First Line Reserve is provided for and is already being utilised. The military authorities have advised that 20 officers joined between 2020 and 2024 and a further five joined in 2025. There are also enlisted members of the First Line Reserve who serve out the balance of their term of enlistment.

Legal advice was sought on the matter of former enlisted members voluntarily joining the first-line Reserve outside of their term of enlistment, which is what the Deputy referred to, in line with the goals of the regeneration plan. Unfortunately, there is currently no regulatory or legislative pathway for former enlisted Permanent Defence Force, PDF, personnel to join the first-line Reserve at their former rank, so they come in at the rank of private. An amendment to primary legislation is required to facilitate such enlistment. Work is under way in my Department to develop proposals.

I am keen to bring forward legislation that would allow former enlisted personnel to rejoin at the rank they held when they left. We are talking about very experienced personnel who can contribute, and have contributed, a huge amount to our Defence Forces. I want us to be in a position where they can do so but where they are coming back at the rank they had when they left. I am eager that this legislation be brought forward without delay so that the skills and expertise of former enlisted personnel can be fully utilised. Former enlisted members may join the second-line Reserve. Pending the introduction of primary legislation, it is hoped they will be able to join the first-line Reserve.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister understands the issue. Could we get more clarity on the timeline for the legislation and what type of legislation it might be? Could it, potentially, be tied in with the proposed legislation relating to command and control? I have another question on that, but it might not be reached.

This issue that we are trying to resolve here arises frequently. There are people who served for a number of years and who served out their time with the Defence Forces. They have particular skills. They could be marine engineers or engineers of other kinds, or they could have skills in aircraft maintenance and other areas. They leave the Defence Forces, go off and are then only permitted to re-enter. At the moment, they can enter the first-line Reserve when they exit, but they cannot currently re-enter it later. Being able to do so could have huge potential benefits, particularly for the Naval Service, where many former members have gone

into life sciences and pharmaceuticals. We want to get the benefit of their skills. When does the Minister expect legislation on this issue to be introduced?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot provide a specific timeline, but I can say that these amendments are being worked on by my Department. The most efficient approach is often to bring forward a miscellaneous provisions Bill or to add it to another Bill. I would be keen to do that. The Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 is going through now but will not include these provisions. I will seek to bring forward the necessary legislation as quickly as possible.

Like the Deputy, I think this is important, particularly when we look at the overall objectives of the plan to revitalise the Reserve Defence Force. It is about making sure that we supplement the Permanent Defence Force where there are gaps and provide opportunities for those who have left but who want to continue to contribute. We also need to incentivise them. I do not know why personnel above a certain rank were not included in this initially or why they are unable to join the first-line Reserve, but I am very keen to amend the situation. These are the types of changes that encourage and support us in respect of overall recruitment and retention in the Reserve Defence Force. We are going well in that regard, and I can touch on that aspect in my final response. It is changes like this that will encourage more people to come forward and ensure we are not losing important skills.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: As I said, there is a whole category of people available. Parts of the Defence Forces are very reliant on contracted services. We should be trying to eliminate that reliance if people with the necessary skills are available, particularly in situations where surge capacity is required. There is a benefit in ensuring that people who have gone on to do something else with their lives but who still want to contribute can do so. Finally, if a miscellaneous provisions Bill is to be introduced, I ask that Army chaplains finally receive the recognition they deserve and the appropriate rank they ought to hold.

Deputy Helen McEntee: On that final point, I am committed to bringing legislation forward. It has transpired that it is a much bigger piece of work than may initially have been thought. I conveyed that at the recent RACO conference and to our colleagues in PDFORRA.

In terms of legislation more generally, all Ministers like to bring forward a steady stream of Bills. I hope to move again in this regard once the current legislation is enacted.

Turning more generally to the Reserve Defence Force regeneration plan, this was published in July 2024. It co-ordinates 27 actions across four objectives: recruitment and retention; resourcing; training and education; and integration and deployment. Twenty-six of the 27 actions are deliverable by the Office of Reserve Affairs, ORA. Importantly, 13 actions have been completed and significant progress is being made on all the remaining actions. There has been very good progress. I have had very good engagement with the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association, RDFRA, and it is my intention, as I think it is the Deputy's, to continue working with the association to make as much progress as possible for our Reserve Defence Force.

Defence Forces

97. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence if she will provide a study of the health outcomes relating to former Air Corps aircraft maintenance personnel. [77958/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I do not have much more to add on this topic, but I intend to keep raising it. It does not make sense to me. I just cannot get my head around it. The Minister keeps saying that she is precluded from acting as a result of litigation. I am not asking about litigation. I am asking the Minister to provide a health assessment for an entire category of people. They were exposed to dangerous chemicals. That is hardly disputed. What might be disputed is the extent of the health implications for them, so let us assess that. I do not think there is anything at all in that which would cut across litigation.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. We have spoken about it many times. The Deputy said that he does not believe his proposal affects anything separate that is happening. However, it is important to state that multiple legal cases are before the courts. These are all based on claims of alleged exposure of people in the Air Corps to hazardous chemicals. I have sought advice on and discussed this matter many times. I am limited in what I can say publicly without potentially prejudicing the litigation that is ongoing. That applies to anybody the Deputy is suggesting may be in similar circumstances or impacted in the same way. I appreciate that the Deputy contends that it is possible to discuss this issue generally without straying into individual legal claims. I am advised, however, that any view I express outside the process could cut across the State's position in the overall proceedings.

The State Claims Agency is independently managing these claims on my behalf, as Minister, under a statutory delegation. It has engaged formally with a number of plaintiffs to see if a mutually agreeable set of terms could be reached to bring their cases to a conclusion. Unfortunately, that process has not yet yielded an agreement. I encourage all sides to engage positively. As I informed the Deputy in a previous update, a number of these claims have been taken under active case management by the courts. This means that a judge can actively compel engagement by the parties, seek papers and testimony, and set binding deadlines, all of which is likely to see the cases progress through the courts more quickly.

By way of a further update, I can share a development with the Deputy since this matter was last raised with me in the House. In the event that an agreement cannot be reached between the parties, some of these cases may be listed for hearing in the near future. This is all the more reason I need to be careful in engaging in any public forum about any issues that could cut across or otherwise influence or interfere with the independent role of the courts. Consideration of these matters by the courts through civil proceedings will allow the necessary case-specific analysis of the allegations to be conducted, with the benefit of legal representation for the plaintiffs.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I know that this has been discussed by the Minister and her officials. It is obviously the Department's stance as opposed to the Minister's. A departmental decision has been made to be obtuse about this matter. If I steered any further clear of the litigation, I would be in the Shannon. I have not touched it or gone anywhere near it. There is an entire category of people whose health needs to be assessed, and the appropriate decisions taken on foot of that. It was done in Australia and the Netherlands. The Minister

will say that the situation in Australia involved different types of airplanes and chemicals. There was still chemical exposure among aircraft maintenance personnel. I am not saying the exact circumstances were the same. I am saying it is an appropriate process.

The State has dealt with whole categories of people in the past. The Magdalen laundries issue is an excellent example. Litigation continued through the courts while these Houses decided to put a package in place. Perfect or imperfect, a package was put in place that was totally separate from and independent of the litigation. There is no reason the Minister could not do that. She should do it because it is the right thing to do. I have not been too confrontational in the past few seconds, but, ultimately, some of these people have very serious health problems.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Deputy will have another opportunity.

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is not an attempt to be obtuse. The situation has not changed. That is why what I am saying is not changing. I do not like coming into the House and not being able to discuss things at length. It is very clear, however, that what the Deputy is referring to, while not specific to those current legal cases, relates and is specific to other potential cases he is talking about. Again, the intention is not to evade questions. I am here answering questions, but a process is under way. In the context of that process, I have to be clear and sure. The advice I have is that anything I stray into or discuss could have an impact.

An analysis was done by my officials with additional information and consideration from the State Claims Agency. It was provided to me specifically in light of the ongoing legal cases. It was never intended for publication and was not drafted with that in mind. The information contained in it is confidential and legally privileged but on foot of that, as I said to the Deputy and as he just said, I convened a meeting with the Attorney General, senior officials from the State Claims Agency and officials from my Department. We had discussions on this and, again, the advice is that as these cases are ongoing, we have to go through this particular process as it currently stands.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I will leave it at that.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Defence Forces

98. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence to provide a detailed explanation of the similarities and differences between the mandates of UNIFIL and the European Union Support Mission in Lebanon; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [77098/26]

105. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Defence for an update on the final dispatch of Defence Forces peacekeepers to the UNIFIL mission. [76828/26]

175. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Defence to provide an update on her recent visit to Lebanon, including her engagements with Irish peacekeepers serving with UNIFIL, and her assessment of the situation on the ground; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [77466/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: At the heart of the recent propaganda effort by the Government to try to convince people that we need to scrap the triple lock while pretending it has nothing to do with neutrality has been the attempt to portray the EU support mission in Lebanon as being some sort of continuation of UNIFIL of which, obviously, Irish people are supportive. UNIFIL has positive support for the idea of our peacekeepers playing a real peacekeeping role there. The question is to explore the differences between these two things. Indeed, when she was in Ireland, Kaja Kallas said the EU is not seeking to replace UNIFIL. It is a very different beast that is being proposed.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 98, 105 and 175 together.

I want outline very clearly that although both UNIFIL and the recently established European Union Support Mission in Lebanon, EUSM Lebanon, are intended to contribute to stability and security in Lebanon, they differ significantly in their mandate, legal basis and operational tasks. Nobody is suggesting otherwise. They are different and I am saying that very clearly.

UNIFIL operates under the authority of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) and subsequent mandate renewals. Its primary tasks include monitoring the cessation of hostilities, supporting the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces in southern Lebanon, accompanying and supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces as they deploy throughout the south, assisting in ensuring humanitarian access to civilian populations and contributing to the creation of conditions conducive to a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution. We know that the situation has changed, so we know that many of those duties are not possible at the moment because of the changed environment, in particular in southern Lebanon. UNIFIL conducts patrols, operates observation posts, liaises between the parties, monitors developments along the blue line - now, we have a yellow line, which is essentially an occupation in the south - and supports de-escalation efforts in a challenging security environment. I want to acknowledge that. I travelled to Lebanon and south Lebanon last week and witnessed the environment in which they are operating. I commend all of our personnel, not just those who are there now but those who have served in Lebanon for many decades.

While UNIFIL is fundamentally a peacekeeping mission, it is important to recognise as well that the mission is also authorised to take necessary action within its capabilities and area of operations to protect United Nations personnel and civilians under imminent threat and to ensure its area of operations is not used for hostile activities.

By contrast, the EUSM is a non-executive training mission. It has been established as an EU Common Security and Defence Policy mission focused primarily on capacity building, training, mentoring and strategic advice. The mission is intended to support Lebanese state institutions, particularly the Lebanese Armed Forces and, again, having engaged directly with our political colleagues in Beirut only in recent weeks, it is very clear that a lot of support is needed. Many who are working in the Lebanese Armed Forces are working on a part-time basis. This mission is, therefore, intended to support them and enhance their capabilities, and

other Lebanese security bodies, in strengthening their ability to exercise effective control over Lebanese territory, improve border security, enhance maritime security, counter illicit trafficking and smuggling and improve command, planning and operational capabilities. This is what we are setting out at the outset.

The tasks envisaged for EUSM Lebanon include the provision of training, mentoring and advisory support; assistance in areas such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; support for border management and security sector reform; enhancement of logistics and command structures; and co-ordination between Lebanese security institutions. It will be a much smaller mission. It will be focused primarily north of the Litani river. There is no suggestion that we are going to be sending troops to the south or, in particular, the occupied part of the south. Therefore, a separate UNIFIL area of operations will exist yet will nonetheless operate as an important indicator of EU and international support for Lebanon following the end of the UNIFIL mandate. If there are any future elements to that, in particular around fourth protection, which is another element that is being discussed but has not been agreed, we would, of course, have to look at that and take it on its own in the round. There was no suggestion that we are going to propose anything other than a mission that would align with our values, with the UN Charter and with international law, making sure we are focused on peace and security. Both missions reflect the international community's commitment to supporting a secure, stable and sovereign Lebanon, albeit through different mechanisms and mandates.

In addition, other potential missions in support of Lebanon are being planned and they may provide opportunities for Irish peacekeepers should the triple lock requirement be removed and, again, should they align with our national policies and legislation. However, any decision taken in that regard would have to be a decision taken by Government and would likely have to be a decision taken by the Dáil as well.

In terms of the UNIFIL mission, which will conclude at the end of this year, the 69th infantry group is currently completing its final preparations for deployment to Lebanon, with approximately 294 personnel due to depart later this month as part of what is expected to be Ireland's final infantry battalion rotation to the mission following the end of the mandate at the end of this year. They will not be carrying out the same level of actions that the previous and current missions have taken. This deployment will be mainly focused on the withdrawal arrangements for the Irish-Polish battalion. I look forward to attending the ministerial review in Aiken Barracks this Thursday and meeting the personnel, in particular, and thanking them for their contribution but also recognising their families. We know that when troops travel abroad, whether it is to Lebanon or anywhere else, their family members are behind them, they support them and, of course, they are a crucial part of that overall commitment to our State.

Furthermore, I reassure this House and the general public that the upcoming end to our participation in UNIFIL does not mark the end of overseas service opportunities. One of the things the troops asked me repeatedly when I met with them two weeks ago was that we would continue to provide them with opportunities to serve overseas. Many of these people joined the Defence Forces so that they can contribute to international missions overseas. They are trained and have the required expertise in this field. It is so important that we work to provide them not just with opportunities but that our long-standing history and proud tradition of

peacekeeping and supporting vulnerable communities, not just in Lebanon but in other parts of the world, can be continued. That is a commitment I made to them.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the Minister. I welcome the clarity, in fairness, that this is something very different than UNIFIL. It is not a continuation of UNIFIL in any way. It is not a peacekeeping mission. I will just dig into it a little bit in terms of what the Minister's position is. If this is a trade mission, and I agree that is what the EU mandate is, is it her position that she could not send Irish troops to participate in this training mission without her proposal in getting rid of the triple lock or does it require the triple lock at all? As I understand from media interviews, her position is that it does not actually or would not require the triple lock effectively and we could send troops there. If that is the case, then why has she said things like our ability to take part in missions in, for example, Lebanon, is now being diminished? Can she explain why she told the media that a future Lebanon operation could be undertaken on both a peacekeeping and peace enforcement footing when, in fact, what she is talking about here is neither but is a training mission?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Is this not a shared question?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): It is grouped-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: The other Members are not here.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): -----but the Deputies are not here.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I am here

Deputy Helen McEntee: They are here.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I am taking Deputy Currie's. She did contact the Ceann Comhairle's office.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Deputy may go ahead.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I thank the Minister for updating us on the position. I certainly regret that after 50 years, Irish involvement in Lebanon is potentially going to come to an end. Many men and women, including our Fine Gael colleague, Deputy Callaghan, have served proudly in Lebanon, providing an essential security presence to protect a hard-won and very delicate peace, as we can certainly see today. It is a humanitarian mission, which Irish personnel have provided with pride. As the Minister outlined, while the EU countries may maintain a presence, without a UN mandate, the Irish have no option but to withdraw. Is there any other country currently participating in the Lebanon mission that, due to the withdrawal of the UN mandate, is intending to withdraw its involvement in Lebanon?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank both Deputies. There are two elements to what we are proposing. The EU has been clear and I have been clear on this. There is a civilian side to it and a training element. I have outlined all of the different areas of that. It is still a relatively small number when we compare the 360-plus we have plus all of the other missions. We serve with Polish and Hungarian colleagues in our area alone.

Indonesia, Italy, Spain and every other country are contributing. It is a relatively small element. There is a second proposal, which will likely be around force protection. To restate, we are already contributing to force protection elements within the current mission.

On peace enforcement, I have said clearly - perhaps it has become muddled up with everything because a lot of that is happening - that we have taken part in peace enforcement missions across the UN for many years. There are 11 missions at the moment, one of which ended on Friday. Five of them are peace enforcement missions. They are all UN-mandated missions. As a country, we have engaged in peace enforcement. However, that is not what we are talking about. Anything we would agree to or even consider would have to be in line with the UN Charter and its principles and with international law. It would have to go through a process similar to what we have now but without the requirement for the UN mandate. We are clear.

I must push back on a narrative that is being pushed. Time and again, I have heard the Deputy, other Deputies, Senators and people on other platforms suggest that when we remove the triple lock, we are going to be sending our troops to fight with the IDF against Hezbollah. That is an absolutely ridiculous narrative. I received a report from the senior management of the Defence Forces, which has received reports from senior personnel on the ground in Lebanon. Defence Forces troops are concerned that the kind of narrative the Deputy is pushing, which is completely false and inaccurate, to the effect that we are going to send our troops to fight with the IDF against Hezbollah, which is what the Deputy is saying-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: No, it is not.

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is exactly what the Deputy has said. He said, "If they get away with [it] ... sending soldiers to Lebanon on the same side as Israel against Hezbollah will just be the start." That is exactly what the Deputy is saying. I am saying to him that our troops are saying that is putting them at risk. I have just come from the region. They are surrounded by troops from Hezbollah and the IDF who are in conflict with each other. The Deputy is actively saying that we are going to be sending our troops to fight with Israel against Hezbollah. It is completely false and inaccurate. If he had any respect for our troops, he would not be making up that kind of nonsense.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Minister answer the question about the triple lock?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Deputy O'Connell also asked a question. I apologise, but what was it?

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: Has any other country withdrawn?

Deputy Helen McEntee: A number of countries that have people there are re-emphasising their desire to be a part of civilian training and are considering what other type of element of force protection might be a part of any future mission. A number of countries, including Ireland, have already put up our hands for the civilian side. That is not a matter that requires the triple lock. Any future mission would require highlighting a desire to be a part of that mission. We are not yet at that stage. However, I have no doubt but that the vast majority of those on the ground will continue to want to be on the ground.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We did not get clarity there. What is the Minister's position? Do we need to get rid of the triple lock in order to send troops to participate in the EU support mission? Do we or do we not? It is a simple question and people deserve an answer. The Minister is saying that we cannot go to this mission because of the triple lock when I think her position is that we can and it does not require the triple lock because it is a training mission.

There is deliberate confusion coming from the Government. There is going to be mission creep here. It is about getting the training mission agreed, which may not require the triple lock. We are then going to get into peace enforcement. Listen to what Kaja Kallas said when she was talking about the EU mission:

> Our objective is to strengthen the Lebanese armed forces and the ability of the Lebanese state to provide security across its territory ... That also means moving towards disarmament of Hezbollah.

I do not want our troops involved in the armed disarmament of Hezbollah. I do not think our troops should be involved in that. I do not want to put our troops at risk of that. I do not know if the Minister wants to do so. She might clarify.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I thank the Minister for clarifying the position. The closure of Camp Shamrock is an absolute failure of our serving personnel. We have a duty to them to ensure that this does not happen. However, we also have a duty, and the Minister is trying to fulfil it, to ensure the public understands that without political action, legislative change and amending the triple lock, this is exactly what will happen. We hope there will be a training mission, but there will be other types of missions, too. This is a delicate piece in Lebanon and it will require more than just training missions. Why would we abandon people when they need us most? It is their most difficult time of need. How will we explain to future generations that we left Lebanon because we allowed foreign powers to decide whether we could go there and we, as a sovereign state, could not choose where to support those who need our protection? The Opposition says that this Government does not do enough for the people who are suffering in Gaza, even though we have done more than any other EU country. How does the Opposition then argue to retain the very measure that is forcing the withdrawal of Irish protection from the people of Lebanon?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Are we going to send troops to fight Israel? Is that the proposal? I would be surprised.

Deputy Helen McEntee: On Deputy O'Connell's last point, it is absolutely devastating to see what has happened in south Lebanon and, in particular, in what is referred to as the "buffer

zone". It is an occupation. The IDF has come in and occupied a significant part of southern Lebanon, south of the Litani River. It has demolished entire villages. Some 99% of certain villages is gone and has been demolished. There are small minorities of Christian communities. There are orphanages. Very vulnerable people are now left in the south. What will happen when we pull out is that there will be nobody to monitor what is happening. None of us wants to be in that position. I am not suggesting that we are now going to be a part of any mission that is south of that border. That is not what we are suggesting. I am suggesting that we are a country which has spent decades contributing to peace and stability in Lebanon. The result is that every person in Lebanon knows where Ireland is, knows our troops and knows the contribution they have made over the decades. The idea that we would not go to every means possible to participate in security and peace in that country is beyond me and beyond what is being suggested.

I am clear. There are two strands to what is being proposed. There is a civilian strand, which does not require the triple lock, and a military strand, which does.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Military training does require it, from the Minister's perspective, but it did not in Ukraine.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Please, the Minister has the floor.

Deputy Helen McEntee: No, not military training; a military strand. I have said that force protection could be a part of that. This is what our troops are trained for. This is what they take part in. There should be no suggestion that this is something different or a departure. As part of their current mission, there is an element of force protection. That would require the triple lock to be removed or a UN mandate. To those who say we are not trying, I say that there will be discussions at the UN in the next week or two. Countries are specifically advocating to try to put in place-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Does participation in the EU support mission require the triple lock or not?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy, please.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister is saying "No".

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister has the floor.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have answered that question twice. I am not sure if the Deputy is listening.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Is the Minister saying that the military element-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy Murphy-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----is a part of the EUSM or not?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): -----you had an opportunity-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Is it something separate?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): -----to ask the question.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This would be actually useful.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy Murphy, the Minister has the floor.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have answered very clearly. The EU mission has two strands. There are two strands to one mission.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Okay, the Minister is saying-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Deputy Murphy, please. I ask the Minister to continue.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The attempt that is being made by Opposition parties which oppose this consistently is to fire accusations, shout and suggest we are going to be dragging everybody onto this slide and into this mission creep. We have been hearing that for decades. We have been hearing that we are going to join an EU army but it has not happened. We have been hearing that we are going to be sending our men and sons off to war. It is not happening. We have been hearing that we are going to be forced into all of this. It is not happening. I am saying that there are two strands to the one mission. We are choosing to be a part of the civilian side. I hope everybody agrees with that. It is training. Much of it is office work. It is about supporting through surveillance, cybersecurity and all of these other elements through which we want to support the LAF. If we wanted to take part in the other element - the military element, which could include force protection - we would not make a decision until we saw what it involved, what its boundaries were and whether it aligned with our values, international law and the UN Charter. We would not make that decision unless we were satisfied, but we cannot decide if the triple lock is in place.

Defence Forces

99. **Deputy Maeve O'Connell** asked the Minister for Defence if members of the Reserve Defence Forces have received an allowance for additional duties undertaken during Ireland's term as EU President. [75853/26]

136. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Defence for a report on the Reserve Defence Forces regeneration plan. [76430/26]

137. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Defence to outline the measures her Department is taking to encourage recruitment to the Reserve Defence Forces. [77381/26]

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: Have the members of the Reserve Defence Forces received an allowance for the additional duties they are undertaking during Ireland's term as EU President?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Deputies whose questions are being taken with Deputy O'Connell's are not here.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 99, 136 and 137 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising the question. There is no specific allowance that is being provided or that we are proposing to provide for duties undertaken during Ireland's term as EU President. However, a number of different strands have been worked on this year. There are other strands that I hope to progress in the months ahead. As I mentioned in response to a previous question, a key priority for the Defence Forces' revitalisation and modernisation programme is that we support our Reserve Defence Forces in that transformation process. This summer, I was pleased to introduce supplementary military service, SMS, for the Reserve Defence Forces. The launch of the SMS on 1 June provides for support military service, within or outside the State, and is remunerated. Members of the RDF deployed on supplementary military service are entitled to the benefits of the working time directive, where appropriate, as well as allowances and subsistence. There has been strong engagement from RDF members since its launch on 1 June, with 494 requests to volunteer to undertake SMS, all of which I have accepted.

Members of the RDF can volunteer for SMS, both at home and overseas, where there is a particular deficiency in skills or expertise in the Permanent Defence Force that can be addressed by the deployment of a member of the Reserve or where it is otherwise in the best interests of the PDF to do so.

In terms of activities specifically linked to our EU Presidency, they are limited to maritime defence and security operations conducted by the Naval Service reserve in support of the Naval Service and, in certain instances, ceremonial activities such as motorcycle ceremonial escorts. Where possible, Reserve members will step into general positions of Permanent Defence Force members to free them up to take part in Presidency duties or activities. There is no specific allowance for this duty but, as I said, we have introduced a new allowance that had been sought by the Reserve Defence Force. The allowance has been backdated and we are already seeing quite a significant number of members applying for it.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I am delighted to hear about the many measures the Minister has introduced to support the Reserve Defence Force, including the supplemental military service allowance. It is great that the numbers applying for it are increasing.

I have a question about the security duty allowance, which would enable payment when reservists support An Garda Síochána. I do not know whether any such duty is being undertaken as part of the EU Presidency. It might not have arisen thus far but it certainly is something the reservists have been seeking.

I take this opportunity to raise another issue of concern to members of the Reserve. I refer to the risk they take, not as part of their duties but in respect of their day jobs. As we know, reservists are part-time volunteers, which means they also have careers and day jobs. However, they are not protected by the Unfair Dismissals Acts or equivalent legislation. Some reservists are lucky to work for an employer who is happy to release them for duty but many are concerned that they may be putting their day job at risk. We could lose some of these wonderful men and women on that basis.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is important to stress a point on which we all would agree, namely, that we must move to implement the actions set out in the regeneration plan and ensure we continue to engage and work with the union and with Reserve members to try to make improvements, where possible, in order to recruit more members and retain current members.

The security duty allowance to Defence Force Reserve personnel for regimental duties was agreed in principle by my Department and by the office of Reserve affairs, ORA, which is continuing its work to implement the allowance. The Defence Forces have advised that the mechanism to codify the conduct of security duty by members of the RDF has been developed and implemented in the personnel management system, PMS. The ORA is currently drafting a concise guidance document for the security duty allowance, which will be aligned to the current practice and procedures in place for the Permanent Defence Force. It is anticipated that this document will be completed in the near future. I am very keen to see it progress and be applied as quickly as possible.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: That is very good to hear. As the Minister may be aware, I am a former reservist, having joined during the first recruitment of women to the FCA, as the Reserve was then known. That is why I am so delighted with the many measures she has introduced, including the work that is ongoing on the security duty allowance. I would also like to see work done on the employment protection aspect. The Minister mentioned earlier that she intends to bring forward a defence (miscellaneous provisions) Bill some time next year. I hope to see some of those measures brought through in that legislation.

I would also like to hear about other measures the Department is working on to encourage recruitment and retention in the Reserve Defence Force, particularly to attract more women and a greater diversity of skills.

Deputy Helen McEntee: On the current status of recruitment efforts, between 2020 and 2024, we received 20 first-line Reserve applications for commissioning as officers, all of which were approved. In 2025, five first-line applications for commissioning as officers were received. More broadly, from 2020 to 2024, overall inductions each year were 69, 41, increasing to 90 in 2023 and 65 in 2024 to give a total of 268, with an additional 135 in 2025. Those numbers continue to go in the right direction this year as well.

The various measures that have been taken include trying to attract female members to the Reserve Defence Force. While that number probably still is not where we want it to be, similar to the overall recruitment campaigns for the Permanent Defence Force, there are particular measures within the four strategic objectives of the regeneration plan that specifically target and highlight the opportunity for women. I acknowledge the Deputy's role in that regard.

Legislative Process

100. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Defence the timeline for progressing the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 through the Dáil and Seanad, given that it was published in late June 2026 and is due to come before the Dáil early in this Oireachtas session; and whether the Bill remains on track for enactment by the end of the year. [69260/26]

111. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Minister for Defence to outline the constitutional protections relating to Ireland's participation in an EU common defence, including those introduced following the Nice treaty referendum in 2002; to clarify whether the proposed reforms to the triple lock have any implications for these protections; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [77518/26]

113. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 will ensure that Ireland’s long-standing policy of military neutrality is maintained while providing greater autonomy in the deployment of Defence Forces personnel overseas. [77379/26]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Will the Minister provide a timeline for the progression of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026, given it was published in late June 2026 and is due to come before the Dáil early in this Oireachtas session? Does it remain on track for enactment by the end of the year?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 100, 111 and 113 together.

As the Deputy stated, the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 was published in June of this year. It is a priority for the Government and we are committed to progressing it through the remaining Stages in both Houses as early as possible. While the precise scheduling of legislation is ultimately a matter for the Oireachtas, the Bill is on track and it is our objective that it be enacted by the end of the year.

The reforms contained in the Bill do not alter Ireland's policy of military neutrality. They do not impact it in any way. They do not change, weaken or qualify in any way what is set out in the Constitution regarding Ireland's participation in any potential European common defence mechanism, which does not currently exist. Ireland's policy of military neutrality is characterised by our non-membership of military alliances. That position remains unchanged.

The purpose of the legislation is simply to address a practical problem. Under the current system, larger overseas deployments require a mandate from the UN Security Council. In certain circumstances, that can prevent Ireland from participating in missions that are fully consistent with the principles of the UN Charter simply because a permanent member of the Security Council has exercised, or threatened to exercise, its veto. That happened again only last week in respect of a mission in which we are not involved. The Government's view is that we make the decisions on whether our personnel serve overseas in the interest of peace and that such decisions should not be blocked by external powers acting in pursuit of their own geopolitical interests. Unfortunately, such pursuit is happening at the Security Council.

That is why the Bill proposes to replace the existing concept of an international United Nations force with the broader concept of a "relevant international force". This will allow Ireland to consider participation in missions conducted in accordance with international law and the principles of the UN Charter whether they are organised by the UN, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, or other international organisations. This is consistent with what is required in neutral countries such as Switzerland and Austria.

It is important to note that the key safeguards remain. Government and Dáil approval will continue to be required. Compliance with international law and the principles of the UN Charter remains central to the framework. The Bill broadens our options in pursuit of peace while preserving democratic oversight and accountability.

The question of overseas deployments is completely unrelated to the issue of participation in a common EU defence. We inserted a provision in our Constitution following the Nice treaty referendum, which was reaffirmed by the Lisbon treaty referendum in 2009, stating that we cannot take a decision to join a common defence if the European Council were to make such a decision. We cannot do so without a referendum to seek the approval of the Irish people. Before even doing that, there would have to be a unanimous decision by every single EU member state to establish a common defence, of which there is very little prospect.

The legally binding Lisbon treaty protocols remain in place, despite what some in the Opposition seemed to think in the debate two weeks ago. The same parties opposed the protocols at the time, although one of them claimed credit for them in that debate. Security and defence are matters for member states and we have full sovereignty and control over all such decisions. The Defence (Amendment) Bill expressly states that nothing in it shall be construed as authorising the State to become a member of an international organisation of which we are not already a member.

To be clear for the benefit of the Deputies who asked these questions, the Bill is not about joining military alliances, it is not about joining a common European defence, which does not currently exist, and it is not about changing our military neutrality. The constitutional protections secured by the Irish people in the Nice and Lisbon treaty referendums remain intact. Nothing in the Bill changes that or can circumvent those provisions.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister. We have debated this issue extensively within our own party. I am sure similar conversations are being had right across the Government. The focus of my question is explicitly on the timing of the legislation. The Minister reiterated what was stated in the reply to a previous parliamentary question I submitted a number of weeks ago, namely, that the intention is still to enact the Bill by the end of the year.

With that in mind, I have a couple of direct questions. I do not expect the Minister of State to be able to answer them all, but he might give his views. The first is on Committee Stage. How quickly is that likely to come about? Are we talking about two, three or four weeks' time? The second question is on Report and Final Stages and when he expects those to be taken in the House. Third, will the Seanad and the Senators who anticipate a debate on this be allocated appropriate time? Finally, on the powers in the Bill to make commencement orders, once the legislation is enacted, when does the Minister of State envisage signing those orders? I am

asking these questions about timing because there is an awful lot to fit in before Christmas. My concern is that we will try to rush this through instead of allowing meaningful debate.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Many people at home are worried that the assurances they voted on in the Nice and Lisbon referendums are somehow being eroded. Those assurances were about Ireland retaining control over its own defence policy and preserving our traditional policy of neutrality. The Seville Declarations provided further reassurance on those points. Will the Minister of State confirm clearly for the House that those assurances remain unchanged, that Ireland retains full control over its own defence policy and that the proposed reforms to the triple lock do not affect the constitutional protections relating to an EU common defence endorsed by the Irish people through the Nice and Lisbon treaties?

Deputy John Clendennen: I start by acknowledging the RTÉ production last night, "Busted", a three-part series on anti-drug operations. We see the best of our gardaí, our Defence Forces and our customs officials, and the skills, expertise and sophistication with which they execute their job, while we have a debate here about keeping them at home and not allowing them to fulfil their true potential. It is astonishing to observe the charade of the Opposition in recent weeks on this. I will ask three questions. Is there any risk or any potential circumstance in which Ireland could abandon its neutrality as a result of this legislation? Is there any risk or any potential circumstance in which we would no longer recognise the United Nations? Is there any risk or any potential circumstance in which the Government could send troops anywhere overseas without the consent of this House?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: On the timing of the legislation, whenever we want to pass legislation or change a law, there should be a reason to do it. There should be a problem we want to solve. That is always what we are trying to do with legislation. The problem here, as the Minister has outlined clearly, is that the UN mandate for UNIFIL has ended. Our troops want to continue their service abroad if the Government decides it is appropriate. The Minister also said something important earlier about the safety of Irish soldiers in Lebanon in the context of this debate. I urge Deputies opposite, Senators participating in the debate and certain sections of the clickbait media to listen carefully to what the Minister said tonight about the safety of Irish troops abroad. It is important to keep our debates in the House to facts and to what is written in the legislation.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is our ambition to finish this legislation before Christmas. Time is a matter for the Houses, but there has been adequate time so far. Nobody was refused speaking time the last time. One thing is clear, and this is key to the misinformation: the constitutional-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government has given three-minute slots. That is a joke. The Government tried to pretend it did not guillotine it because we were all forced into one slot. That is a joke. It guillotined it and tried to ram it through. It keeps trying to ram it through.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: We have all read "Nineteen Eighty-Four". We do not need to hear the Minister of State's doublespeak.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The constitutional protections the Irish people voted for in the Nice treaty and Lisbon treaty referendums are fully intact. They are still there. Every time the European Union talks about anything to do with defence policy, because of the Lisbon protocol that is still in our Constitution and in the EU treaties, it says this is without prejudice to the defence policies of certain member states, in other words, Ireland and three other member states of the European Union. Every time an utterance or a publication is made, our officials make sure that is written in the document because we are a neutral country, and our officials and Ministers make sure that continues. The protections we voted for in Nice and Lisbon that are in our Constitution are still in our Constitution.

Decisions on the dispatch of Irish troops abroad are a matter for the Government and the Dáil. They can only be made in accordance with the Constitution and the law. The Constitution mandates that we work towards peace and friendly relations among the nations. That is what is required by our Constitution, the fundamental law of this land. It is written in Article 29. This legislation provides for peacekeeping, peace enforcement and conflict prevention. Peace enforcement, which is something our soldiers have always done in many missions-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: With the UN.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----was inserted into the legislation at the request of the defence committee, which is chaired by Sinn Féin.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I anticipate there will be hundreds of amendments when this progresses. To reiterate my question about timing, those amendments should be heard and given a platform. Second, the Minister of State is right that there is a lot of misinformation in this debate. We, as well as the Government, have to hold our hands up and say we can do a better job of explaining it to people. I suggest an information campaign explicitly going through the facts of what this legislation is likely to change would separate fact from fiction. That would be a worthwhile exercise for the Government to consider.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I would like to speak again about the genuine concern among people at home listening to this that changes to the triple lock could somehow lead Ireland into becoming part of what many describe as the EU army. It is important that we address those concerns clearly in this House because people deserve to understand what this legislation does and, just as importantly, what it does not do.

Whatever anyone's view of the triple lock, participation in an EU common defence remains a separate constitutional matter. Will the Minister of State confirm that the Irish people would have to approve a constitutional change before Ireland could participate in any EU common defence arrangement and that the proposed reforms to the triple lock do not in any way, shape or form alter that requirement? That reassurance would be particularly important to the Irish public at this moment in light of the misinformation constantly being spread by members of the Opposition.

Deputy John Clendennen: I do not believe that any one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council should effectively have the power to prevent Ireland from participating in overseas peacekeeping missions. I agree with the Minister of State on the clickbait media. Bad news travels around the world before good news gets out of bed. We have a problem here. Deputy O'Sullivan has touched on the misinformation. The Government will have to apply resources and run a campaign to address this and ensure the facts are filtering through because, at the moment, they are not. Deputy Callaghan spoke about an EU army, but there are also concerns that we will explore NATO as an option in the near future. Will the Minister of State give us categorical clarification that we will not explore either of those options at any time in the future?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I believe there is €200 million floating around in the communications Department.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputy O'Sullivan is correct that there will be lots of amendments, but when we read the Bill and the parts of it that relate to this, it is short. It could not be simpler. It concerns peacekeeping, peace enforcement, conflict prevention, the types of organisations with which we can go on a mission and the other long list of items we need to provide for. Deputy Clendennen mentioned drugs. There is an organisation called MAOC (N), or Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre - Narcotics, of which we are a founding member, that intercepts drugs in the Atlantic. It is in Portugal. We have a garda there because we do not need a UN mandate to send gardaí abroad. When we joined as a founding member, we told them we would give them a ship. We said we could help out, but we could not. We could not send a naval vessel into the Atlantic because of the triple lock, because it did not have a UN Security Council mandate. A separate provision in this legislation will allow that. It is these types of practical things with which we are mostly concerned.

10 o'clock

If there were ever to be a European army - it will never happen - or a common defence arrangement, in the first instance, every member state would have to agree to it. Second, any member state could veto such an arrangement. There is no prospect of it ever happening. If it did and if everyone said that it could go ahead, we would have to have a referendum on the matter. We could not join in the absence of a referendum of the people. That is in our Constitution.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What about NATO?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is written in the sacred text.

Deputy Helen McEntee: No one is talking about NATO.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is written in the sacred text of our basic law.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We are not thinking of joining NATO.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): There is one speaker, namely the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am not saying it. Micheál Martin said he would not need a referendum. I was just checking.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The reform of the triple lock does not in any way impact on that. To be clear, nobody on this or any side has suggested that we would join NATO. That is not happening. We could not join it anyway. It has a 5% of GDP spending commitment. We could not pay that. It is not going to happen. It would not let us in. That is the reality, because we could not meet that spending target. We want to increase defence spending and we are doing that but there is no way we would meet the conditions of membership of NATO. It is not going to happen. It is not on the horizon. What we are trying to do here is solve a practical problem whereby Russia, in the case of the west African mission that was stopped last week, China, in the case of North Macedonia 25 years ago, and the US, in the case of UNIFIL, have stopped peacekeeping missions and, effectively, made decisions for us. That is what the legislation is trying to achieve and what it will bring to an end.

Rights of Way

101. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Defence the measures being considered by her Department, in consultation with Galway City Council, to provide alternative access and connectivity following the closure of the walkway along the railway line at Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa Barracks, Renmore, Galway. [77456/26]

Deputy Seán Kyne: This question relates to access and connectivity through and around Renmore Barracks. The walkway along the railway line at the front of the barracks was closed. I understand why that happened. I have asked for the Minister's engagement in allowing access in the vicinity of the barracks to provide for greater connectivity for the community.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I also thank him not just for his interest but also for his proactivity in raising it and in working with our colleagues on the council and in the Dáil. It was good to meet with Deputy Kyne, Councillor Forde and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, in recent months in the interests of specifically seeing how we could move this forward and what progress could be made.

In 2021, Galway City Council, GCC, shared proposals with the Defence Forces to clear away, resurface and carry out ancillary works to the existing road on GCC lands to the east of Renmore Barracks in order to make a new permeability route linking Ballyloughane-Renmore to the Lough Atalia-city area, which, as the Deputy set out, would have involved using Defence Forces lands. Since then, the Department has engaged quite a number of times with the council

and its consultants on the proposals, with several site visits being held. Over the course of this engagement, the Defence Forces highlighted a number of concerns regarding the development's potential impact on security at the barracks and on road and pedestrian safety. They noted that the proposed route past the main gate would bring pedestrian and cyclist traffic into conflict with heavy vehicles leaving and entering the barracks. Additionally, security concerns were raised regarding the proposed route, particularly following a well-documented attack on Defence Forces personnel in August 2024.

Following further engagement in April 2025, GCC, the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces held a very positive discussion regarding the development. A further meeting was held in March this year at Renmore Barracks to discuss the future interaction between Defence Forces lands and the development of the Renmore neighbourhood project. I am advised that the meeting was very positive. As part of proposals for the Renmore neighbourhood project, a new separate foot-cycle route which could address the Defence Forces concerns requirements, including in relation to security, was suggested.

I am conscious that this matter has been ongoing for some time. I am also very conscious that there is still a lack of clarity as to what happens next. I have instructed one of my senior officials to meet with the city council-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----its chief executive and, I hope, members of the council and local representatives to determine definitively what role, if any, the Department has.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister for the response. We acknowledge that there are security issues, in particular following the attack on Fr. Paul Murphy. Thankfully, he has recovered. It is important to acknowledge that there were security issues. We respect the fact that a decision has been made to close access at the front of the barracks, but there needs to be an alternative in order that there is connectivity between the Ballyloughane-Renmore area and the Lough Atalia-city area.

The city council has lands that were previously Department of Defence lands, and there are possibilities in terms of the acquisition or sale of those lands and the construction of an alternative link over the railway crossing into the Dún na Mara area. However, there needs to be engagement and agreement between the Minister, her officials and the city council to try to get this sorted quickly.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy referenced Fr. Murphy. I was honoured to present Fr. Murphy and those who came to his aid following the attack with medals. Deputy Kyne was present at the ceremony. Those medals were to recognise the contribution of those who came to the assistance of Fr. Murphy and the dangerous position in which they put themselves.

We all understand the reason for the decision of the Defence Forces not to allow the initial route that was proposed to go ahead. I assure the Deputy and all of those who want to progress this project that the Defence Forces and my Department will be as constructive as possible. My understanding is that the next step is for the local authority to engage locally and to set out

the proposed route it has discussed in order to see what funding and possible options are available to try to progress this project. I have asked my officials to meet with the chief executive in person in order to see if there is a role for the Department to play in trying to resolve this matter. I will revert to the Deputy separately when I have received my Department's report. We are really keen to make sure that this project progresses and to support the Deputy in his aim.

Deputy Seán Kyne: My colleague Councillor Shane Forde has taken the lead on this. He is from the area in question. He is very familiar with it and knows the impact that this closure has had on the community. Instead of being able to walk to the Liam Mellowes grounds and Ballyloughane, people now have to drive there. That is bad for the environment, causes traffic congestion and increases the carbon footprint. We want to encourage people to exercise, so the closure of this lane has had a huge impact locally. We need a solution. There needs to be proactive engagement by the Minister and her Department with Councillor Forde and the city officials in order to ensure that we get a such solution. If that is going to involve a new walkway over the railway track, the question arises as to who is going to pay for it. Is there a possibility of the Department of Defence engaging and acquiring some of the city council lands, which were previously its lands, for use for security purposes, accommodation or whatever else for the barracks at Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I again acknowledge the work Deputy Kyne has done on this project. I also acknowledge Councillor Forde and the ambition to move it forward. For so many different reasons, including ease of access and providing a walkway and cycleway to encourage people to get out, be more climate-efficient and climate-friendly and improve their health and well-being, it is really important that this route be reopened. It is also important that we move this project forward. There is a way forward and there is an option open to the local authority. What I want to ensure is that if there is a role for the Defence Forces in helping to move this forward, we will be front and centre in providing assistance and support.

I hope the meeting that has been requested will be of assistance in moving the matter forward. It is really important that the Deputy and local representatives are part of the discussion and are able to move things forward after the meeting at a local level.

Defence Forces

102. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence whether peace enforcement missions are a new departure for Ireland or whether members of the Defence Forces have historically participated in UN and UN-authorised operations involving robust mandates and the potential use of force to protect civilians, uphold mission mandates or maintain international peace and security. [77449/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Can the Minister please confirm if peace enforcement is a new departure for the Irish Defence Forces or if there are some historical examples of missions in which they have been involved that entailed peace enforcement or other robust mandates?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. As the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, and I have set out this evening, there is a lot of disinformation and attempts to suggest that what is being proposed in the Defence (Amendment) Bill is new and represents a departure from what we have already been involved in and for which our troops have been trained. That is quite simply not the case. There is a requirement to remove the UN mandate, but that is to ensure that we can continue to operate on these types of missions.

I again thank the Deputy for raising this matter. As I said, since 1990, the majority of overseas deployments by members of the Defence Forces have been peacekeeping - that is, Chapter VI missions - including service with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, in the Golan Heights and the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization, UNTSO, in the Middle East.

However, Irish personnel have also served on quite a number of UN missions operating under more robust authorisations for the use of force, under what is known as Chapter VII. Examples include the United Nations Mission in Liberia, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, and East Timor. Irish personnel have also served in UN-authorised and underpinned missions such as KFOR in Kosovo, the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, in Afghanistan and EUFOR Tchad/RCA in Chad, all of which operated under robust international mandates.

I will outline and explain the distinctions between peacekeeping and peace enforcement to the House. In simple terms, peacekeeping involves helping to maintain a peace that already exists. Peacekeepers monitor ceasefires, support political agreements, protect civilians and help create the conditions for long-term stability. Such operations are generally associated with the principles set out under Chapter VI of the United Nations Charter. Peace enforcement involves the use, or threatened use, of force to restore peace and security where violence is ongoing or where parties have not agreed to stop.

I want to highlight that one of the significant developments in UN peace operations over the past two decades has been the increased use of more robust Chapter VII mandates. Of the 11 mandates - I mentioned this earlier - five of the UN mandates, which Deputies in this House are suggesting we should be looking towards-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----already have peace enforcement elements to them. It is part of what we do. It is not black and white; there are different elements to peace, security and support.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. It is very clear that peace enforcement is not, therefore, a new departure for the Defence Forces. It is unfortunate that much of the Opposition's messaging around this debate has left some people genuinely believing that Irish soldiers are going to be sent abroad to fight another country's war. This is not what peace enforcement means and it is important that we have an honest debate about it here in this House.

Our Defence Forces have served with distinction in some of the world's most dangerous conflict zones, where civilians are often caught in the crossfire. It is in those situations that the protection of civilians may sometimes require the use of force against armed aggressors. That does not mean force will automatically be used. It means our personnel have the authority to act when innocent lives are under threat. Would the Minister agree that there is a world of difference between using force in the service of peace to protect innocent civilians and taking sides in somebody else's war?

Deputy Helen McEntee: They are very clearly two different things. We are setting out clearly, through the proposed changes to this legislation, that we are not suggesting - as some in this House are suggesting - that we are going to take sides in any conflict.

I am going to read from an article written by Senator Tom Clonan, who seems to have a lot to say on all of this at the moment. He wrote this and many other articles back in 2003, when he referred specifically to peace enforcement by Irish troops. He said:

> Significantly, the Irish – despite being peacekeepers as opposed to peace enforcers – fought a conventional battle in the south Lebanese village of At Tiri in 1980, preventing its ethnic cleansing by an Israeli-backed Lebanese militia under the command of Major Saad Haddad. More recently, Irish men and women participated in robust peace enforcement operations in Somalia in the mid nineties, in East Timor in 1999 and currently in the Finnish-led Battle Group in Kosovo [which we are currently still a part of] and in the UN UNMIL peace enforcement mission in Liberia.

It has been the case, as has been set out by the Senator who now seems to think the complete opposite of this, that we have been part of these types of enforcement to protect civilians and innocent people.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I have no difficulty whatsoever with Members of the Opposition disagreeing with this legislation - that is democracy - but I do have a serious concern about the misinformation and unnecessary fear that has crept into this debate. Parents and grandparents are genuinely worried that their children and grandchildren could be sent to fight somebody else's war. People at home are worried about one simple thing: if the United Nations is not involved in approving a mission, does that mean that Ireland is stepping away from its traditional policy of being militarily neutral? Those concerns are real and people deserve straight answers based on facts, not fear. Can the Minister assure this House and the public that our soldiers will continue to serve under very clear and lawful mandates, regardless of which international organisation is leading any future mission? Could she please confirm to the House that Ireland's traditional policy of being militarily neutral will not change?

Deputy Helen McEntee: To the Deputy's last question, I can confirm and will continue to reaffirm that our position of military neutrality, which is our non-alignment with a military alliance, will continue. I will repeat that Article 29.4.9° sets out that:

> The State shall not adopt a decision taken by the European Council to establish a common defence pursuant to Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union where that common defence would include the State.

That is in our Constitution. I am not sure what those who seek a referendum on this want to change because it is very clearly set out there.

Deputy Paul Murphy: An ordinary referendum on the legislation.

Deputy Helen McEntee: If we were to join a military alliance, we would have to change this and we would need a referendum. Unless that is what the Deputies are suggesting, that is not where we are going.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No. An ordinary referendum on the legislation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Please, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister is asking a question. I am telling her.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Second, I want to make this clear. Anybody who serves in our Defence Forces serves in a voluntary capacity in that they choose the path of the Defence Forces. They choose to serve our State and we are indebted to them for the security they provide at home but also the contribution they make overseas. Many of them choose to serve because they want to take part in peacekeeping missions. They want to support those who need our assistance. That is what we are trying to ensure by removing and changing that element of the triple lock, so we can continue to do that but on our own terms.

United Nations

103. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Defence the engagement her Department has had on joining one of the ten UN peacekeeping missions outside of UNIFIL, or any global non-UN missions which have a UN mandate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [77437/26]

148. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Defence if she will reaffirm Ireland's commitment to United Nations peacekeeping; to outline the contribution made by Irish Defence Forces personnel to UN missions over recent decades; and to clarify whether the proposed legislation will in any way diminish Ireland's ability to participate in UN-led peacekeeping operations. [77494/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: As I have raised already and we have all discussed many times this evening, I am very concerned about the pivot away from peacekeeping by this Government. The Minister maintains that moves to abolish the triple lock are not about sidelining the UN or peacekeeping. What has the Minister's Department done to engage with the active missions around the world that she referenced multiple times tonight and which continue to enjoy that UN mandate - there are ten, I believe - so that Irish troops can participate in them?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 103 and 148 together.

As Deputies will be aware, overseas deployments by the Defence Forces can only considered on a case-by-case basis. Any proposal for participation in an international mission is assessed on the basis of military advice, the nature and requirements of the mission, capabilities that we have, international law, our policy of neutrality, the safety and welfare of personnel, and our wider foreign and security policy objectives. Any deployment abroad has to have recourse to Government to decide, on the advice of the Attorney General and with Dáil approval, where that is applicable. These decisions are not taken without due consideration of the range of factors I have just set out. Some missions will be suitable for Ireland and others will not be suitable for members of the Defence Forces. That remains the case.

The Department and the Defence Forces remain in regular engagement with the UN, the European Union and international partners regarding current peace support operations. When I attended various meetings - and I am sure the Minister has had some discussions as well - the options, for example, for increasing troop numbers in KFOR have been discussed by me. No request has been received, and no decision has been taken, in relation to participation in any specific additional UN or UN-mandated mission. We will always examine opportunities to contribute to international peace and security where appropriate and where we have the capability to make a meaningful contribution.

The Minister for Defence and the Government need to be assured that the necessary safeguards and mitigations are in place when it comes to the safety of our personnel. Even though it is peacekeeping, peace enforcement and conflict prevention, it can be dangerous, as we know. Some have lost their lives and we need to continue to remember them. Defence Forces personnel continue to serve with pride with UNDOF in the Golan Heights, EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina and KFOR in Kosovo. When I met the Prime Minister of Kosovo two weeks ago, the first thing he said to me was to thank the Irish soldiers and the thousands of soldiers who have contributed to peace in Kosovo over the years. I am happy to pass on those thanks from the Prime Minister of Kosovo. Ireland remains firmly committed to supporting international peace and security through multilateral engagement, including in UN-led and UN-mandated peacekeeping operations. All options can be explored by the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces.

Ireland has engaged with planning for the EU support mission in Lebanon. While no decision has been taken regarding participation - that requires Government approval - the mission could offer opportunities for our Defence Forces to support stability in Lebanon through training, advisory support, border security assistance and capacity-building with the Lebanese armed forces.

I again emphasise to the House that Ireland will always be able to participate in UN-led and UN-mandated operations where there are UN resolutions underpinning them. The reform we are doing provides what we believe to be necessary flexibility to participate where appropriate, and where those considerations are taken into account. This is not something the Government decides on a whim. These are carefully made decisions. We could take part in missions organised by other bodies such as the European Union, the OSCE or other international organisations as is the case for neutral Austria and Switzerland. The purpose of these reforms is not to weaken our commitment to UN peacekeeping or to the UN. We are one of the most committed to the UN, and that is recognised across the system. It is to ensure we have the flexibility to contribute to peace and security in a changing world. We are, and remain, neutral.

We are, and remain, committed to the principles of the UN Charter and supportive of UN peacekeeping. Our Constitution provides that we are committed. We affirm our "devotion to the ideal of peace and friendly co-operation amongst nations founded on international justice and morality" and "the principle of the pacific settlement of international disputes". We "accept the generally recognised principles of international law". I have just read out of the Constitution, which is the law of the land. That is what governs all of these decisions.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: With respect, the Minister of State has spoken a lot about the Government not making these decisions on a whim. He has talked about the Attorney General, the analysis that goes into it and the guard-rails. That is all the triple lock is. It is another guard-rail that exists outside of the control of the Government. We talk about the other elements of the decision-making. There is the Government and the Dáil, but of course the Dáil is controlled by the Government when it has a majority, which it does. It is ridiculous to suggest, as the Minister of State does, that these guard-rails are just as effective or as strong. They are not. They simply are not. We asked for this mandate so we would have that guard-rail, and the Government is just chucking it away. While I hear the Minister of State's assurances about how much this Government respects and values peacekeeping, its actions tell a completely different story. The prioritisation of participation in EU battle groups, which do not have a peacekeeping function, meant that we had to pull out of the UN-backed peacekeeping force in the Golan Heights, a UN mission that continues to this day. The Government's proposed plans after abolishing the triple lock are devoid of any proposals for peacekeeping or for new and expanded involvement in UN missions. Instead of supporting the UN and championing multilateralism we are seemingly following in the footsteps of other EU countries that pursue regional and non-neutral interests first and foremost.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The UN mandate is an article of faith in this House. It has been for a long time, and I have always supported that. However, it is no guarantee of success. I was in my first year of work when I watched Srebrenica unfold on television. Some 500 Dutch UN troops were totally overrun by Bosnian Serb forces and that was followed by the ethnic cleansing of 8,000 people. It was one of the worst atrocities of that entire conflict. They had a UN mandate. It did not protect them. It did not work. UNAMIR, which was a UN-mandated force, got to Rwanda in late 1993. It could not prevent the genocide that happened in 1994. By the time it got a revised mandate and the support and troops it needed it was too late. More than 400,000 Rwandans were dead.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question is about UN reform and our commitment to following through and looking to use our soft power to get the UN to reform itself.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: What does reform of the triple lock do? It allows us to continue to do what we have always done, which is to service peace abroad. It allows us to undertake peacekeeping, peace enforcement and conflict prevention including in UN-led or UN-mandated operations. It allows us to participate in missions organised or led by the EU, the OSCE or other regional arrangements.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Like NATO.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It allows Ireland, and Ireland alone, to make decisions on where we deploy Irish personnel in the service of peace abroad. Any decisions on peace missions will have to be done in accordance with our Constitution, in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter, and in accordance with international law. The guard-rails that Deputy Gibney has spoken about have been abused by the permanent members of the Security Council, most recently last week by Russia. They have been abused by China with regard to the North Macedonia peace mission. The US, working with Israel, has effectively ended UNIFIL. That is what this legislation is trying to achieve. The Deputy has complained about us leaving missions, which actually demonstrates the point. These are not easy decisions for the Government. On some occasions the Government has had to tell the UN or other people that something is not suitable for our soldiers. On some occasions they may be suitable. Bringing in the Iraq war to saying we definitely would have done that-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: That is not what I said. It was the opposite.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----and on the other hand asking why we are not doing other UN peacekeeping missions-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: But you could have.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister of State has the floor.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----I think shows the absurdity this debate is reaching.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I think it shows the Minister of State does not understand-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister of State has the floor, Deputy. You will have an opportunity in a moment.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I am looking forward to Committee Stage of this legislation where we can go through it line by line and test the assertions of the Opposition, which I think are complete and utter bunkum.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: First, it is not reform. It is the abolition of the triple lock. It is not reform of the triple lock. The Minister of State talks about accordance with the Constitution and international law, etc. The Minister of State mentioned the proposed new mission in Lebanon, which he will consider, and which has no peacekeeping function. When he spoke to Deputy Murphy about that new EU training mission in Lebanon, he assured us that it is just training and that any claims otherwise are scaremongering and he referred to mission creep. I draw everyone's attention to a previous EU training mission in Mali introduced in 2013, which ended up supporting not one but two military coups by the Malian army. It was suspended in 2024. If that is the track record in EU training missions I think we need to question that.

The other point is that we are not saying that we would not go to the Constitution with the EU defence army. However, the Minister of State has to acknowledge the €800 billion of EU ReArm funding and the ways in which Kubilius, the EU Commissioner speaks about-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Ó Muirí.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: -----European defence union. This is not scaremongering. That is the direction of travel of the European Union.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Teachta Ó Muirí has the floor.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I say again that I want to hear a strong commitment to the UN from Ireland, which I think does exist. I want to hear a strong commitment to multilateral co-operation and the development of multilateral relations, which as far as I recall we have always tried to do. We have always boxed above our weight, to use that awful cliché. We have done that. I want to hear that we accept the UN has to reform itself. It has a big job of work to do. It is hard to see how it can be delivered, but we are committed to it. Obviously, we have a commitment to the International Criminal Court, ICC. These are all important commitments from this House, the Government and the State. I want to hear that we are committed to multilateralism on all its fronts, working with international partners.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: First, I pay tribute to four Italian military personnel who were killed last week in Bosnia taking part in Operation Althea. It is important to remember them. That is an EU mission keeping the peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Irish people have died over the years too.

Ireland has one of the strongest commitments to the United Nations. That is why we have consistently been elected to the UN Security Council. We have pushed for reform of the United Nations. We are well known as advocates for reform. We work on issues of international justice all around the world. We are well known for it and we are highly respected for it. We are highly respected because we are seen as a neutral country. There is nobody outside this country saying our neutrality is going to change in any way because of this legislation. None of the member states of the United Nations that sometimes depend on us to be advocates for them have ever said that, and they are not saying that. They do not agree with what the Opposition is saying. Ireland has the strongest commitment to the UN. We have an incredibly strong commitment to multilateralism. We have strong teams of diplomats in the UN, the OSCE and all of the multilateral organisations. We have just joined the United Nations Human Rights Council. We are such an important player because we put the effort in.

I pay tribute to all of our civil servants who work really hard in the multilateral bodies to which they are assigned, with the support of the Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, myself, the Taoiseach and the entire Government. They do incredible work. One is so proud when one goes to these multilateral organisations and sees our officials or diplomats with "Ireland" in front of them, or on occasion when "Ireland" has been in front of me. It is an incredibly proud moment.

We are all conscious of the history we have and we will continue to work within the system that is there - the international multilateral system - but we are very much convinced of the need to reform the UN. However, in the meantime, while that veto remains, we have to be able to make our own decisions and not allow them to be made by Russian, China, the US, the UK or France.

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Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.31 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 4 Samhain 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.31 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 4 November 2026.