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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 17 Samhain 2026

Tuesday, 17 November 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Grace Boland) i gceannas ar 1 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Grace Boland): 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 Michael Cahill - To discuss the need for improvement works in schools, especially in Kerry.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss endometriosis services in Galway.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the integration of artificial intelligence into the education system.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss the need for an integrated, co-ordinated mental health emergency response.

Deputy John Connolly - To discuss the cost associated with the medical report required by people aged 75+ when applying to renew a driving licence.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss the need for a systemic review of school transport systems.

Deputy Keira Keogh - To discuss provision for another ambulance in Erris, County Mayo.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss the growing uncertainty facing Dealz workers.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara - To discuss financial supports for community cafes.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman - To discuss LGBTI+ rights in Türkiye in light of the "My Family is Safe" operation being undertaken by the Turkish government.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss HSE-funded counselling services for young people in Finglas.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss road safety risks associated with horse-drawn vehicles on public roads.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the issue of wandering horses in urban areas.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss recent frequent water outages in Ashbourne, County Meath and accountability issues.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss the progress of essential renovations at St. Brigid's BNS in Foxrock.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss published homelessness figures, and the Government's recently published Aire, the Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the need to ensure full provision of NEPS in schools across Lucan, Clondalkin, Palmerstown, Rathcoole, Newcastle and Saggart.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for footpaths from Waterfall village to Bishopstown.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss the planned compulsory purchase order for the 440 acres of commonage on Achill Island.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the extension of a cost of disability payment to people over the normal retirement age.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss Government childcare policy to increase the supply of places.

Deputy Seán Kyne - To discuss an update on the Claregalway relief road.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the continued closure of Dunguaire Castle, Kinvara, County Galway.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul McAuliffe, Keira Keogh, Richard Boyd Barrett, Louis O'Hara and Sinéad Gibney have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Youth Services

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I want to raise with the Minister of State the issue of HSE-funded counselling services for young people in Finglas. To some degree, we are coming to the end of a successful process where earlier this year, like in many communities, *ad hoc* funding had been used to provide counselling through the two youth services in our area. That was coming to an end and there was a real fear about whether we would be able to continue to provide these counselling services. Like any good community, when the Finglas community heard it was under pressure, they held a fundraiser. They also did what they do best and came together.

I was delighted to chair a group involving the Finglas Counselling Service, Crosscare, the Finglas Youth Resource Centre and Barnardos which came on board to try to identify how we could mainstream funding for what was called the Hear Me Out service. We are very

appreciative that when we reached October, we had put in place funding of almost €100,000 for new adult counselling services in Finglas west through Barnardos. I understand there is also funding, which the Minister of State may outline in her reply from the HSE, for other counselling services in the area through Crosscare.

The reason I say all of this is that the HSE social inclusion unit stepped in, saw a need, saw a local solution and provided funding. I am incredibly appreciative of the HSE officers. I will not name them and embarrass them but I thank them for the work they did because it is a great example of what we should be doing right across the country. It is about making sure that when young people ask for help, that help is available and it is available in places where they feel comfortable, not necessarily in a clinical setting but in their local youth service, family resource centre, where the proposed service in Finglas west will be, and in local places they have access to. I commend the work of the local HSE in my area. I thank it for the funding but there is a lesson there on how we apply this right across the country.

It is so important because so many of the issues we see in mental health begin in adolescence. That is when some of those concerns arise. We all know being a teenager is a difficult thing but for those people who have complex needs and are living in families where there are multiple issues, counselling can be a really valuable and lifesaving service. When you combine it with other interagency work, like youth services or family intervention through places like the family resource centres, the State is getting value for money too because there are two or three interventions coming together around one person or one family.

There are plenty of times when people come in here to ask the Minister of State for money or to make an intervention. To some degree, the system has worked here, with a lot of local co-ordination and I have been happy to play a part in that. We would like to see this as a template for what will happen elsewhere. There are many families in Finglas who have been benefited from the Hear Me Out counselling service and would be relieved to hear we are recruiting that additional adolescent counsellor. They will say to me that if it works well in Finglas, we should do it elsewhere.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has a very ambitious programme for expanding mental health services. Much of that is around supporting local groups but I wanted to point out something that has worked well here. My former colleague, Pat Carey, always used to say if something works well in Finglas, we should be trying to do it elsewhere in the country. This is something that has worked well and I would like to see it expand.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to address the House today on the issue which I know is of real and ongoing importance to Finglas and the wider Dublin north-east region. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who is responsible for mental health and has worked very well with the Deputy.

There is significant work under way across Government to improve all aspects of child and youth mental health care. The aim of Government is to deliver a modern, responsive service that meets the needs of young people and their families. This is central to our national mental health policy, Sharing the Vision 2020-2030, and our suicide reduction strategy, Connecting for Life: 2026-2035, and the broader ambitions of Sláintecare. Youth mental health supports are made up of a tiered approach. CAMHS is a specialised service available to the small

proportion of children and young people who experience moderate to severe mental health difficulties. While approximately 2% of children and adolescents require the specialist care that CAMHS provides, the majority of needs can be met through early intervention, primary care and community supports.

In recent years, the Department of Health, in conjunction with the HSE, has expanded investment in these early intervention and downstream services. In the case of Finglas specifically, a number of targeted HSE-supported interventions have been developed locally to improve access to youth counselling, therapeutic support and early intervention services.

I thank Deputy McAuliffe for his long-standing leadership and advocacy on mental health issues in Finglas. His work in highlighting the needs of young people and families in the community has helped to ensure that youth mental health remains a priority in his locality. I am aware that earlier this year, Deputy McAuliffe brought together Barnardos, Finglas Youth Resource Centre, Finglas Counselling Service and Crosscare in an interagency partnership to explore how local youth counselling provision could be sustained and expanded for the future. This collaborative approach has helped to secure ongoing access to essential supports for young people and their families in Finglas.

Building on this work, HSE social inclusion has agreed to provide funding of €100,000 a year to Barnardos Finglas West Family Resource Centre to establish a dedicated youth counselling service in Finglas West. Recruitment will shortly commence for an adolescent counsellor, providing 27.5 hours per week of direct counselling and therapeutic support for young people aged from 12 to 24. This is an important milestone for Finglas West and will strengthen access to early intervention and mental health supports in the local community. More broadly, a number of targeted HSE-supported interventions have been developed locally to improve access to youth counselling, therapeutic support and early intervention services. Total funding of almost €820,000 has been provided in 2026 to support young people in Finglas and surrounding areas, including the Crosscare Hear Me Out project, with two whole-time equivalent counsellor and psychotherapist posts dedicated to the Finglas area; Finglas Youth Resource Centre's Mincéiri project with 1.5 whole-time equivalent youth workers; Barnardos adolescent counselling services; Crosscare teen counselling; and Crosscare drug and alcohol projects. The Hear Me Out project has become a key therapeutic support service specifically for young people in Finglas West and surrounding areas.

These services were initially developed to address clear gaps in youth counselling provision and have demonstrated strong outcomes in supporting young people experiencing emotional distress, anxiety, family difficulties and substance-use concerns and other mental health challenges. The successful transition of the Hear Me Out project from Finglas Counselling Service to Crosscare, in collaboration with Finglas Youth Resource Centre, along with increased resourcing, has ensured the continuation and sustainability of this important service model, maintaining local access to therapeutic supports while strengthening governance, organisational infrastructure and long-term service delivery.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister of State and I appreciate her kind words about bringing people together. As politicians, we do this all the time. Sometimes it is successful and sometimes it is not but we have learned a lot through this process too.

I want to state on the record that earlier this year, we had a service with *ad hoc* funding which has now been translated into two services. We will have the Crosscare Hear Me Out project, which will now be mainstream funded by the HSE, and Barnardos adolescent counselling as well. This is a huge step forward in terms of the security and provision of mental health services in Finglas. It is exactly what the community needs and deserves.

I cannot come to the end of this process without thanking Finglas Counselling Service. It originally carried out this process. It is an adult mental health service that previously secured funding through the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, three years ago. It made the decision not to continue doing it because it was not core to its work. It wanted to stick to what it did well but it also recognised that the service needed to be provided on a mainstream basis by an organisation with dedicated adolescent experience. Audrey in Finglas Counselling Service has been a fantastic mentor to other organisations in helping them to get this funding. I thank her for the work she has done and for the honesty of the service in saying it wanted to focus on what it needed to focus on. It did not just drop the service but worked with other people to ensure it was handed over and it now has mainstream funding.

This shows the power of communities coming together. The Minister of State is from Carlow and she knows what communities can do when they come together. Community-based mental health services have had different types of experiences and there are often concerns about governance and clinical standards. This is an example of how we can work with community organisations and partner them with organisations such as Crosscare and Barnardos, which have considerable experience, to ensure a community-led service with good governance from the larger experienced organisations and funding from the HSE. I thank the Minister of State for her work. I invite her and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to visit these services in Finglas.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We certainly will. I again thank the Deputy.

In addition to the service I mentioned previously, the HSE has supported the development of the Mincéirí project through the Finglas Youth Resource Centre to improve engagement with younger members of our Travelling community and other marginalised young people in the Finglas area. That is also really important. The HSE social inclusion and addiction service has a service level agreement with Crosscare for the delivery of a teen counselling service. These are all the services the Deputy mentioned. The level of demand demonstrates the importance of maintaining and continuing investment in community-based counselling and psychotherapy provision for young people in Finglas. These services play a critical role. I will go back to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. The Deputy will know of her commitment and dedication to mental health. I will also ask, as the Deputy suggested, whether this is an area that could be looked at with a view to rolling out services across the country. When communities come together to provide a service, that really works well. At the end of the day, this is very beneficial to the people who need the service and to their families. I congratulate the Deputy and thank him for his work. The progress outlined today demonstrates what can be done with leadership and working with the HSE and all of the different Departments.

Ambulance Service

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue. Today, I will highlight a matter of deep concern to the people of Erris and the north-west Mayo region, namely the lack of adequate ambulance cover. The people of Erris are known for being exceptionally resilient. They are accustomed to overcoming the challenges they have to face because they live in a place that is, while a really beautiful part of the world, really rural and geographically isolated. They are very resourceful people but they deserve timely access to life-saving emergency services. Every second counts in the case of a medical emergency, whether a heart attack, a stroke, a serious road traffic collision or a farming accident. For far too long, communities across Belmullet, Bangor Erris, Ballycroy, Geesala, Pullathomas and so on have been repeatedly raising concerns about ambulance availability and response times.

In December 2025, I was contacted by a local retained fireman who was really traumatised by an experience where no ambulance was available for a critically injured young adult. The firefighters and local doctors did their very best to improvise and they themselves called off-duty paramedics they knew to reactivate an off-call ambulance and to come as urgently as they could to transport that man to Mayo University Hospital. They talked about that experience being deeply traumatising as they knew the man was gravely ill but had been told there was no estimated time of arrival for any ambulance. I wrote to the Minister in December to ask for engagement and urgent action.

Tragically, in January, this House became aware of the sudden death of Stephen Lavelle from Binghamstown, who fell ill close to his home. Family members had to drive him to Mayo University Hospital because there was no ambulance available. Their experience was also extremely traumatising and ended devastatingly. We wish them very well. I know an investigation is ongoing.

Nobody should fear that there will not be an ambulance if they or one of their family members suddenly becomes ill. On 30 January, that fireman and I met with Paul Gallen, head of integrated services. We were informed that an extra ambulance with a daytime crew for the period from 12 noon to 12 midnight was ready to be approved. There was going to be no difficulty in staffing that ambulance. A base was being sought outside of Belmullet but primary notification from the Minister was awaited. We, therefore, wrote to the Minister. On 3 March, the Minister told us that primary notifications are actually an internal HSE process and that the decision did not depend on the Minister's direction. We feel a little bit like we are being pushed between different Departments. I really hope the Minister of State has a really clear update for me today. In June, this firefighter came back to me again because there had been a 75-minute wait in the case of a cardiac arrest. As recently as a fortnight ago, he reached out again. At this point, he was making contact in desperation. He talked about the distress that he and his colleagues faced while they waited over an hour for an ambulance for a critically ill patient alongside a family member.

I will give credit where it is due. Last week, the Minister came to visit Belmullet Community Hospital. She is the first Minister for Health in living memory, or possibly ever, to visit that hospital. She met with Mary Noone and her staff, who provide an exceptional service.

I welcome that the design team has now been appointed and the commencement of the preliminary design for the 50-bed community nursing unit, which will include a ten-bed dementia household and the relocation of the National Ambulance Service. That is so exciting

and positive but the reality is that no family should face the fear that distance could determine the outcome of their medical emergency. I hope the Minister of State has a clear update for me.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this very serious issue. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. It gives me the opportunity to speak to the Deputy about the ambulance service in County Mayo, including the Erris region.

As the Deputy will be aware, the National Ambulance Service, NAS, serves Mayo on a 24-7 basis from 24 ambulance bases across the HSE's west and north-west region through a highly-skilled workforce of paramedics, advanced paramedics and emergency medical technicians, and a fleet of modern emergency ambulances, intermediate care vehicles and rapid response vehicles. As the Deputy said, the work they do is exceptional and it is important to mention that today.

The region is also served by the NAS's alternative care pathways designed to treat patients at the most appropriate level of clinical need while avoiding unnecessary patient conveyances to busy hospital emergency departments where it is not clinically necessary. These pathways include pathfinder "see and treat" services located in Letterkenny and Galway, as well as community paramedic services based in Castlebar, Roscommon and Donegal. Further emergency response capacity is provided in the region through the newly established Government-funded helicopter emergency medical service, HEMS, operating out of Sligo Airport. This service commenced operations on a testing basis in July and is providing enhanced access to care for critically ill patients across the west and north west of the country.

Turning to additional ambulance resourcing for north County Mayo, the Deputy's engagement on this matter with the NAS head of integrated services is acknowledged. What I can say to her is that the NAS has advised that an additional ambulance is being actively considered for north County Mayo as part of new service developments for 2027. While nothing can be confirmed at this stage, the NAS has indicated that north County Mayo is one of several possible destinations considered to have the most critical patient need for further resourcing.

The Deputy will be aware that this Government has continuously invested in the NAS, with significant increases in investment in recent years. Government investment in 2026 of over €292 million is supporting HSE plans to increase capacity in the NAS with 263 additional posts as part of an investment of €20 million in new service developments.

This investment includes provision for six additional paramedic positions to be based in Castlebar as well as for hospital ambulance liaison supervisors to be located at Mayo University Hospital to assist in facilitating timely patient handovers to hospital emergency departments to improve ambulance turnaround times at the emergency department. Recruitment for these positions is in progress. I should add that investment in 2026 has seen significant increases in the NAS capital funding, including €34 million for the renewal and expansion of the NAS fleet of emergency ambulances and other response vehicles. Indeed, overall investment in recent years has seen total NAS staffing rise to 2,550 whole-time equivalents as of the end of September, a rise of 32% or 622 staff since 2020, with over 85% of all NAS staff working in direct patient facing roles.

I thank the Deputy for highlighting this issue. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, about this later on.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I too thank the paramedics, firefighters and GPs, especially those in the Erris region who are providing exceptional service. I welcome the helicopter emergency medical service, HEMS, operating out of Sligo Airport. I know that will benefit the people of Mayo, even though we hoped it would be located in Erris. However, I have to say that I am really frustrated to read the paragraph that states that the NAS has advised that an additional ambulance is being actively considered for north County Mayo.

In January 2026, I was told by that person that they thought we would have that extra ambulance by the summer, but now it sounds like it is just being considered. We were told there was one for 12 a.m. to 12 p.m. being approved and was just waiting on a primary notification, but now it seems we have gone backwards where it is being said it is being considered. I am seeking more clarification on what is happening there and whether we have gone backwards. Realistically, the people of Erris are not looking for any special treatment; they are looking for fair treatment. They are seeking the assurance that if a loved one suffers a cardiac arrest, if a child is seriously injured or if an elderly neighbour becomes critically ill, help will arrive as quickly as possible.

I have tried not to come in here to talk about this issue and instead deal with it in direct contact with those in the Department and the HSE so as not to scaremonger or make people fearful when they call 999 or 112, so that they have that confidence that an ambulance is going to arrive. It is not good enough and it is not a new problem. This existed long before I became a TD and it is one the firefighters, GPs and paramedics have consistently warned us about in the area. As a public representative, I have a duty to ensure rural Ireland is not left behind. Investment in an ambulance service in Erris that is fit for purpose, timely and serves the needs of the people is absolutely paramount.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. She is advocating on behalf of her own constituency for the provision of an ambulance service in Erris and Mayo. Again, the line is there. I assure the Deputy that the request for additional ambulance resourcing for Erris remains under active consideration, but I will also speak to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on this. I also assure the Deputy that this Government remains committed to investing in increasing capacity in our national ambulance services for patients across the country. As the Deputy said, there is a fear of not getting an ambulance on time. Nobody ever wants to be in that situation. I totally understand that.

I thank the Deputy for highlighting this. It is important we go back and get clarification for her, particularly for those who need to know what is happening within the HSE, which is working with the Department. I will get the Minister to come back to the Deputy. I thank her again for raising this very serious issue.

Homeless Persons Supports

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The latest homelessness figures are an absolute disgrace, shame and scandal for a wealthy country such as ours. There are 18,000 people in emergency

accommodation including almost 6,000 children. While we have a report that has some good aspirations in it, it is very difficult to stomach the situation we are in particularly because the Government was warned that its reliance on private developers to deliver even social housing was going to cause a problem. For at least three or four years, we said private developers were not interested in building three- and four-bedroom homes because if they build one- and two-bedroom homes, they can get more units. The Government did not listen. Even when output goes up, child and family homelessness continues to increase because they are not building three- and four-bedroom homes. We finally got an acknowledgement from the Government but is the reliance on the private developers, who do not give a damn about the homeless figures and are only interested in how much money they can make from a site, going to have any impact when Government continues to rely on them for housing?

I might say as an incidental that about two years ago, I reported an apartment block in my area, Domville in Cherrywood, where there were 30 empty apartments built by a private developer for an approved housing body, AHB. I got a message from that AHB to say they are still empty two years on because of some row with the developer. This is the sort of stuff that goes on. While we get aspirations from Government that it is going to do something, the underlying policy of relying on private developers who are profit driven is not capable of dealing with the problem.

The human cost of this is terrible. I will give some examples in my area that I am dealing with. Amy is a mother of two and one of her children has Down's syndrome. She is currently couch surfing.

She has to pick up her kids from school each day and then wander the streets because she has nowhere to go. She has been offered a housing assistance payment, HAP, homeless rate of €1,900 but she needs a three-bedroom home. There is no such thing as a three-bedroom home for €1,900 to rent. The only emergency accommodation she has been offered is in Kildare. She lives in Dún Laoghaire and her child needs therapies in Dún Laoghaire so that is an absolute non-starter for her but there is no emergency accommodation in Dún Laoghaire at all. In fact, I was told yesterday that 5% of the homelessness in Dublin, or possibly in the country, is in Dún Laoghaire but Dún Laoghaire has only 2% of the homeless accommodation. These days, a homeless family with children is just told to go to Kildare because that is the nearest. It is unbelievable.

Given the aspiration expressed in this that children should not be put into these situations, what is the Minister actually going to do for people like Amy or Saoirse, who has spent two years in homeless service and has a three-year-old and a four-year-old, one of whom has additional needs? She has a three-bedroom need and is going from one emergency hub to another. Charlotte, who has a four-month-old, has to separate from her child three nights a week so her child can stay with her sister. The only place she has been offered is Kildare when she lives in Dún Laoghaire. Again, with the €1,900 HAP limit, it is impossible to find the accommodation she is looking for. Let us not forget older people, although they are not affected by the report. Christine is a senior citizen with cancer and COPD, has had a heart attack and is sleeping on a couch in a mobile home with her family. She has been homeless for three and a half years and despite weeks of representations to the council, all she is being offered is emergency accommodation in a family hub. That is just a small glimpse of the suffering that people are going through. What is going to change?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue today, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne. Behind every statistic is a person, a child and a family facing uncertainty and stress, as Deputy Boyd Barrett outlined. As a TD, a Member of this House and a member of Government, I certainly recognise that. We understand the anxiety that is being felt by parents trying to provide stability for children and families worried about where they will live. The latest homelessness figures are deeply concerning. The most recent report shows that over 18,000 people accessed emergency accommodation, including 2,821 families and 5,897 children. Any increase is really disappointing and neither the Minister nor anyone else in Government is satisfied with those figures.

However, while we must be honest about the scale of the challenge, we must also be honest about what is being done and what progress is being made. The most effective response to homelessness is to prevent people from entering it in the first place and to support those in emergency accommodation to move on into secure permanent homes as quickly as possible. In the second quarter of this year alone, 748 households, including 405 families and 644 children, were prevented from entering emergency accommodation. During the same period, 613 households, including 276 families and 539 children, exited emergency accommodation into secure tenancies. Overall, over 1,360 households and almost 2,900 individuals either avoided homelessness or successfully exited emergency accommodation into secure housing during that quarter. These figures matter because they represent real families securing stability, real children returning to routine and real people getting the chance to rebuild their lives.

Addressing family homelessness is an absolute priority for the Government and that is why under the new housing plan, we committed to developing a dedicated child and family homelessness action strategy. Last week, the Government published the Aire children and family homelessness action plan that was developed following considerable engagement across Government, stakeholders and, importantly, children with lived experience of homelessness. The plan contains 43 actions backed by an additional €20 million of investment. The plan is structured around three clear priorities, the first of which is prevention - stopping families entering homelessness in the first place. The second is protection, which involves supporting children's well-being while families remain in temporary accommodation.

The third is progression and helping families move quicker into secure, long-term housing. This is not simply another housing response. It brings together housing, health, education, childcare, youth services and family support in order to provide a more co-ordinated response to family homelessness. The Government remains committed to increasing housing supply because the long-term answer to homelessness is more homes. That is why we are targeting over 72,000 social homes and over 90,000 affordable housing supports. In budget 2027, we provided over €7.7 billion for housing, a figure which rises to €9.1 billion when investments in the Land Development Agency, LDA, and the Housing Finance Agency, HFA, are included.

We do not pretend there is a quick fix to this challenge. We need to continue to build housing supply over the years ahead. Equally, we need to continue to support those families who can be prevented from entering homelessness in the first place.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will go slightly off topic and mention the tragedy that happened in Monkstown Farm. There is a housing implication in this regard. Terrible injuries were inflicted on a number of young children. I have been contacted by a number of the affected families. As a result of severe, life-changing injuries, many of them are going to need transfers and adapted accommodation, even to be able to exit hospitals. I ask the Minister of State to contact Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and encourage it to provide assistance to the affected families.

On the topic itself, I do not understand how the Minister of State can talk about prevention when the Government has refused to impose a no-fault eviction ban, which is one of the major reasons people end up homeless. I do not understand how he can talk about prevention when we have a report stating that rents have increased by 7% in the past year. The Government allowed this to happen because it refused to impose a rent freeze, which is what we want, in order to stop an increase in rents and, indeed, to reduce rents.

The average rent in this country is now €2,300 per month. In my area, it is more like €3,000 per month. It is completely impossible. When it comes to the housing assistance payment, HAP, rates, as I said, an individual with two children, one of whom has Down's syndrome, is looking for a three-bedroom house at €1,900 per month. That is like finding a needle in a haystack. It is despair and desperation stuff. She and her children are being traumatised, as are others in homeless accommodation. Saoirse has spent two years with her children in homeless accommodation. Charlotte has been separated from her four-month-old child because there is nothing for them. The HAP rates have not increased, nor have the social housing income thresholds. The Government continues to rely on private developers rather than upscaling the amount of social and affordable housing to a level that will meet demand and the target of ending housing waiting lists rather than the decade or so that people are currently waiting.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I also wish to convey my best wishes to those impacted by the Monkstown incident. I will relay the Deputy's concerns and the need for follow-up support to the Minister, Deputy Browne.

In respect of the figures published last Friday, I fully understand why people are frustrated and why the Deputy has come into the House in the manner he has. I share that frustration. The question is not whether the figures are too high - they are – but, rather, what actions we are taking to turn the situation around. As I said earlier, we have implemented a number of prevention measures. The figures demonstrate that over 748 households were prevented from entering homelessness. Indeed, 613 houses exited emergency accommodation into permanent tenancies. These families matter too.

We are not ignoring the problem. We are tackling it on multiple fronts, ranging from prevention measures, exits, housing first, social housing delivery and the new child and family homelessness action plan. Homelessness will only be reduced sustainably when we have more supply in the system. That is why we need a combination of private housing, social housing, approved housing bodies and the Land Development Agency. We need an array, focused on delivery.

Only delivery will combat the challenges being faced by many of those in insecure tenures. We want to continue to invest as a Government. That is why we put record levels of investment

into housing. As I said, there is over €9.1 billion for housing in 2027. The commitment is here on this side. We have to work, not only with local authorities but with all housing operators across the system to deliver. That is the focus now.

Heritage Sites

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Dunguaire Castle has been closed for the past three years. There has been a long-running saga whereby Galway County Council was expected to take ownership of the castle from the Shannon Group but that did not materialise as the Government has not provided it with the funding to acquire the building and carry out the necessary repairs. All the while, the castle has lain idle and closed to the public. It has not been properly maintained. We are told that a significant amount of work and investment is needed to bring it up to a safe standard for reopening to the public. This is a real shame because Dunguaire is an iconic landmark on the Wild Atlantic Way. It is one of our region's greatest tourism and heritage assets. It is such a missed opportunity for Kinvara and the wider region that it has remained closed for so long. Kinvara is a small picturesque village on the Wild Atlantic Way. A huge number of people visit and pass by, particularly during the summer months. Many visit to see Dunguaire Castle but when they arrive they find the gates locked. This has been a source of great frustration for the local community who cannot understand why this situation has been allowed to persist. They cannot understand why former Shannon Group assets like Bunratty in County Clare have been taken into public ownership at a cost of millions of euro while Dunguaire is left in limbo. This needs to be sorted finally. There should be an aim of having Dunguaire open again for the next summer season.

I received an update that officials in the Department of housing and the OPW have been in discussions around the site. I understand they have inspected the site and have identified significant repairs and upgrading which are required, including to the castle roof, fire and security systems, electrical installations and conservation repairs. I understand that if the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage acquires the site, the OPW will be responsible for its conservation and care and would require additional resources to address the complexity and range of works required on the castle. That would be very welcome. The OPW has a number of similar sites in County Galway, including Athenry Castle and Portumna Castle, and it does a fantastic job of running those sites. I have a lot of confidence and faith in the OPW's ability to make a success out of Dunguaire Castle as well but the longer the Government continues to delay and allow it to drag on, the more the castle will deteriorate. That is the fear. The local community, which is following this closely, is not particularly concerned with which State body takes it on; they just want it brought back into public ownership for necessary repair works to be carried out, to be maintained properly into the future and to be in a position where it can open its doors again.

Is the Department of housing and heritage going to take ownership of this castle? Can the Minister of State give that commitment here today? Can he, at the very least, give the community an indication as to when they can finally expect a decision to be made and for there to be clarity around the future of this castle?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy O'Hara for raising this important issue which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James

Browne. As the Deputy outlined, Dunguaire Castle is one of Ireland's most recognisable heritage landmarks. It is situated on Galway Bay close to Kinvara. It has enormous historical, cultural and tourism significance, both locally and internationally. For generations it has been a real source of pride for the local community and an important attraction for visitors in the region. I fully accept the concerns that were raised by Deputy O'Hara regarding its continued closure and I understand the frustration felt by local residents, businesses, tour operators and elected representatives who want to see the castle reopened and to welcome visitors once again.

It is important to understand, however, how the situation arose. Back in 2020 the Shannon Airport Group advised the Government that significant restructuring work was required to secure the long-term future of its heritage operations and employees.

The organisation faced considerable challenges, including the specialist expertise and investment required to maintain heritage sites, together with the severe impact of Covid-19 on visitor revenue. As a result, the Government decided in 2021 that the group could explore transferring heritage sites to local authorities as the most sustainable way of protecting those important assets into the future. This approach led to a number of successful transfers. King John's Castle in Limerick was transferred to Limerick City and County Council, while four heritage sites were transferred to Clare County Council. However, Dunguaire Castle proved more challenging. It is now the only remaining site that has not transferred from the Shannon Heritage portfolio, and Galway County Council confirmed it was not in a position to take ownership of the castle, meaning an alternative long-term solution had to be found.

Rather than allowing uncertainty to continue, the Minister has stepped in. For that reason, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, working alongside the Office of Public Works, OPW, is progressing the acquisition of Dunguaire Castle because of its exceptional heritage value and national importance. While the legal conveyancing process remains ongoing, it would be inappropriate to speculate on any completion date, as the Deputy is looking for, but there is a clear direction of travel now and a long-term plan for the future of the site. Once the acquisition is completed, the OPW will assume responsibility for conservation and maintenance, bringing Dunguaire Castle into the national heritage estate while ensuring its long-term protection, preservation and management as a national monument.

This is not simply about ownership; it is also about safeguarding this iconic part of our national heritage for future generations. It is about creating the conditions that can facilitate renewed access for local communities and visitors when it is practically safe to do so.

The Government recognises the importance of Dunguaire Castle to Kinvara, Galway, the west of Ireland and, indeed, Ireland's tourism and heritage offering. The acquisition process is now in train to protect the historic asset and put the foundations in place to allow the castle to have a sustainable future for generations to come.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I thank the Minister of State for the response. I cannot stress enough the frustration in the local community that Dunguaire Castle has been left closed for so long. I have received over 3,000 emails in the past six months alone from people right across the world who cannot understand why such an incredible castle and one of our region's greatest tourism and heritage assets has been left closed indefinitely. The local community expects this to be resolved and expects it to be resolved quickly. The castle has been left closed for three years now. That has resulted in a huge loss of employment, a loss of visitors to the area and, of

course, a loss to our history and heritage. Therefore, we cannot allow this historic building to remain closed and deteriorate any further. We need to see those remedial works carried out to bring it up to a safe standard to ensure it can be opened once again to the public.

I appreciate the update the Minister of State has given today in terms of the Department of housing working together with the OPW to acquire the castle and bring it back into use. That is all very welcome. We have had three years of false promises and commitments in relation to the castle, so the community wants a real assurance that this matter is going to be resolved and that the castle will be opened again in the near future for the next tourist season.

I welcome the comment that there is a clear direction of travel, but we need to see urgency. We also need to see a timeline from the Department and the OPW as to when they are going to acquire the castle, begin the remedial works that are so badly needed to protect the integrity of the castle and ensure it can be reopened to the general public as quickly as possible.

I appreciate the update given today, but I urge the Government to treat this with urgency. The castle has been closed for three years and the local community wants to see movement on this. I want to see the castle reopened again.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I understand the frustration.

People have seen the castle closed for far too long. Indeed, I spoke to Senator P. J. Murphy with regard to this. I know he has engaged with the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, on the tourism aspects of this project. However, before reopening can be considered, it is critically important that the ownership and the legal matters are resolved. That is happening at the minute with the conveyance. The Department of housing and the OPW are working as we speak through the acquisition process, which will finally provide a long-term future for Dunguaire Castle rather than just a temporary fix. The Government has been working through the complex transition following the restructuring of Shannon Heritage. As the Deputy knows, this was part of its portfolio. That Galway County Council was unable to take ownership of it was challenging. The Minister has intervened. He is working through it, considering the exceptional national significance of this historic site, its importance to Galway, to the west of Ireland, and to Ireland, and we look forward to a speedy resolution.

Schools Refurbishment

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: St. Brigid's national school sits on a small site in the community of Foxrock, where approximately 400 children go to school every day. The original schoolhouse is over 112 years old. It is a protected structure and is in need of major restorative works. As it stands, it is not fit for purpose. There are also two dilapidated prefabs where further classrooms are located. As many people who went to national schools will know, prefabs were installed as temporary measures. They have an expected lifespan of about ten years. One of the prefabs at St. Brigid's is now about 40 years old. The building is rotten. There are holes in classroom floors that staff have had to patch themselves so that students and staff do not fall through. There is mould in the principal's office and it is spreading uncontrollably over files stashed in what limited space there is. Mr. Flood has to work with the window open to protect his health, so of course his office is freezing. The skylight in the secretary's office is so old and

bowed inwards that birds bathe in it after it rains. Most classrooms have buckets to catch the rainwater when it starts dripping through the ceiling.

In one prefab, 15 female teachers, hard-working professional adults, must share one toilet between them at break time but it barely flushes. All the toilets in these antiquated prefabs take about ten minutes to refill after a flush. Ms Ramirez showed my team the basins that staff and students have to use to ensure the toilet is properly flushed after them. The bathroom facilities are, to put it succinctly, grim. Add to this the indignity of having to use a toilet that is literally within the classroom, separated by thin partition walls. The toilets in the old building are cold and smelly. Students do not like using them, so they often hold it in all day. There are large cracks in the walls of the old building, the plaster is falling off and the wind is coming through. The staff room is never quiet or private because it is a throughway for students to get from one part of the school to the other. The roof on one prefab received an emergency patch job in 2023 because it was leaking. Money was spent on maintaining a crumbling building that was no longer fit for purpose. This is in Foxrock in 2026. It is one of the most affluent areas in this country. The school is losing pupils, and who would send their child there after visiting for an open day?

Conversations with the Department of education regarding building upgrades have been ongoing since 1996 to coincide with the supposed retirement of the prefabs that turned ten years old that year. Thirty years later, nothing has been done. In 2018, St. Brigid's board of management received positive updates from the Department and was asked to fill out application forms for upgrades, and nothing happened. In 2023, the Department confirmed that the school's building project would go ahead under the accelerated delivery of architectural planning and tendering, ADAPT, programme, with a construction date planned for spring 2026 to be completed by autumn 2027. Three years after the school applied to the ADAPT programme and with almost €500,000 spent by the school on planning and architectural plans in preparation for this long overdue renovation, the project stalled without communication from the Department. There was radio silence. The school then received unofficial word that it will be 2031 before the renovations could start.

I point out that there was a delay in the progress of the project because the Department wanted the plans to be changed. It wanted a third special educational needs class, so the architects amended the plans and resubmitted them.

Approval for the new design is supposed to take one month. Nine months after submitting the new plans that the Department strongly recommended, the school has heard nothing. Nobody will answer their questions. Will the Minister of State ensure the plans submitted to the Department approximately nine months ago are approved? If there are any outstanding issues with the plans, will he communicate clearly with the school and project management team so the project can move to the next stage? Will he commit to an estimated timeline for this? Will he confirm what the plan is for decanting St. Brigid's while construction is under way? I have plenty more detail to provide to him.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Gibney for raising this important matter. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for education, Deputy Naughton. I recognise the importance of the project, not just for the pupils but for students, staff and the wider school community. The proposed project represents significant investment in education infrastructure and will deliver

a 17-classroom primary school, together with three special educational needs classrooms. That will ensure the school can continue to meet the needs of current and future pupils.

The project is at stage 2a, developed design, a critical phase during which the design is further developed, costed and refined, and preparation is made of the statutory approvals. The stage 2a report was submitted to the Department in February of this year and is undergoing the necessary due diligence review. On completion of the process, engagement will take place with the project manager and the school regarding the next stakeholder meeting. While I appreciate school communities naturally want projects to move on as quickly as possible, it is important all major school building projects progress through each stage in accordance with the Government's infrastructure guidelines and capital works management framework. Government remains committed to investing significantly in school infrastructure nationwide. A total capital allocation of over €7.55 billion has been confirmed by the Department of education under the national development plan for the period out to 2030. Emphasis will be placed on the provision of accommodation for children with special educational needs and ensuring school place requirements can continue to be met across the country.

Across the school building programme, approximately 1,000 projects of varying scale will be on-site during 2026. This represents one of the most significant periods of investment ever undertaken in the education sphere. Since 2020, over €2.1 billion in capital funding has been invested in Dublin schools, with hundreds of projects delivered through new school building programmes, expansions, modular accommodation and other improvement works. The Government remains committed to delivering modern education facilities, including at St. Brigid's, expanding SEN provision and ensuring investment is targeted where it can have the greatest impact on students, families and school communities.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I want to give a shout-out to the teaching staff and entire school community. I will never cease to be amazed by the ingenuity and resourcefulness of teachers in the Irish public education system. Unfortunately, they have to show those qualities when dealing with stagnant funding and increasing complexities in childhood education. I share my most heartfelt respect for the dedicated staff of St. Brigid's. They have squeezed sensory areas into every corner they can find to provide calming areas for children with complex sensory needs.

Despite all the grim circumstances I have described in St. Brigid's school and the grim predictions, the community of staff, students and families is warm, united and dedicated. They adore their school community. It is a multigenerational community. Parents who went there now send their children there. The principal's young son is a student. Ms Ramirez was a pupil there and is now a senior teacher. She teaches in the same prefab she attended as a child. The senior staff and board of management decided to keep the project secret so as not to get everyone's hopes up. The lack of clarity from the Department has prevented the school moving forward with other big projects and management decisions but they have now decided to share this with me and their other TDs because they cannot wait any longer. They have informed the entire school. The children and staff cheered with delight upon hearing it. The parents are chatting excitedly at the gates.

After three decades of promised renovations for these incredibly difficult circumstances in which people are trying to teach and learn and a predicted five-year delay until 2031 before it

can start, will this Government and the Minister of State please commit to doing this immediately?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I completely understand the frustration from the parents, staff and wider school community, who want to see visible progress and understandably want certainty regarding the timeline. The important point is that this project is active and progressing. The stage 2a report on the proposed development was delivered in February of this year and it is an enormous project, with 17 classrooms and three SEN classrooms, which is a substantial investment in the future of the St. Brigid's school. I do not want to mislead the House by giving dates that cannot yet be guaranteed. I know the Minister, Deputy Naughton, is working on future capital programmes. The Department is very much committed to progressing projects as quickly as possible and ensuring the appropriate oversight is in place where there is value for money and compliance with all the requirements. Schools are being delivered right across the country. There is record investment in the schools capital programme. The focus of the Minister and the Department will ensure St. Brigid's Boys' National School advances successfully to the next stage at the earliest possible opportunity so that this important investment can ultimately be delivered for the pupils, parents and wider school community.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome everyone in the Gallery but mention in particular the college students from Ballymote, County Sligo, who attend a former college of Deputy Eamon Scanlon, of whom they are guests. They are most welcome.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Sa bhliain 2002, dúirt Brian Cowen, a bhí mar Aire ag an am, nach mbeadh aon athrú ar an nglas triarach gan reifreann a chur ar na daoine. Cén fáth go bhfuil an Taoiseach ag briseadh an ghealltanais seo anois?

In 2013, the Taoiseach told this House the triple lock was "at the core of our neutrality". He said the push to weaken it was part of a wider effort by "a wing of Fine Gael to erode neutrality" and he was unequivocal at that time. He said, "My party and I completely reject this." Now he is doing the very thing he once condemned.

During the Lisbon treaty referendum, the Irish people were given legally binding assurances that the treaty would not affect Ireland's military neutrality. As Minister for Foreign Affairs, he helped to secure those assurances. The declaration accompanying Ireland's ratification reaffirmed the triple lock. Overseas deployment required UN authorisation, Government agreement and Dáil approval.

Of course, he was not the first Fianna Fáil Minister for Foreign Affairs to make such a commitment. In 2002, ahead of the second Nice referendum, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen, assured this House that "there will be no change to [the triple lock] unless the people first give their assent in a referendum." Now, as Taoiseach, Deputy Martin is walking away from these solemn commitments. He cannot ask people to trust assurances on neutrality and then discard the safeguards that gave them practical force. He cannot tear out

that safeguard and insult the intelligence of the Irish people by claiming that nothing is changing.

This is a fundamental breach of trust and reports suggest it is not even a settled position within the Taoiseach's own party. His own colleagues, members of his parliamentary party, have described what he is doing as "a fundamental change in Fianna Fáil policy". If they are advising the Taoiseach to stop this, it is because they are listening to the Irish people in a way he simply is not.

Do not take the Irish people for fools. The proposed EU mission in Lebanon shows exactly what is at stake. It is not a peacekeeping mission. On RTÉ's "This Week" on 25 October the Minister, Deputy McEntee, said Irish troops should join an EU mission in Lebanon, that the role was likely to involve peace enforcement and, crucially, that Ireland could not take part in this mission unless the triple lock was changed - in other words, an EU mission without UN authorisation.

In other words, it would not be a peacekeeping mission at all but something very different.

What the Taoiseach is proposing is no mere technical adjustment. It is a fundamental change to Ireland's foreign and defence policy. The Government wants to remove the triple lock so it can deploy Irish troops on missions without a UN mandate. The Government cannot break its word, remove the triple lock and fundamentally undermine Irish neutrality without at least first asking the Irish people. If the Taoiseach is sure that he is right and that the Irish people would support this course of action, he should put it to them and let them decide. We need a referendum on this question.

The Taoiseach: Fundamentally, ní aontaím in aon chor leis an méid atá ráite ag an Teachta maidir le neodracht na tíre. Níl aon amhras ach go bhfuil an Rialtas taobh thiar den pholasaí a bhaineann le neodracht na tíre. Nílimid chun é sin a athrú in aon chor. Tá a fhios ag an Teachta é sin. Gach aon bhliain agus i rith na mblianta, tá Sinn Féin ag rá go bhfuil deireadh le polasaí na neodrachta ach níor tharla aon deireadh leis an bpolasaí sin. Bhí Sinn Féin aiféalach 50 bliain ó shin agus tá sé aiféalach i mbliana.

Over 50-odd years, the Deputy's party and movement have declared that Irish neutrality was at an end. In 1972, they said the same. It was quite extraordinary commentary at that time. They said that if we joined the European Union, it would be the end of Irish neutrality. Every single EU treaty was to be the end of Irish neutrality. There was going to be conscription, just like the Deputy is saying now.

It was all false and all proven to be false subsequently. No Irish soldier ever joined a European army. After all the treaties and after joining the European Union, we never joined NATO. That did not stop the Deputy's party saying it, though, during every single referendum on a European Union treaty. Sinn Féin opposed every one of them because it is fundamentally anti-European Union. Then it accuses the European Union of being militarist, when it is not. It is the biggest peacekeeping project in the history of the 20th and 21st centuries. That is why the European Union came together, but the Deputy's party opposed it and continues to oppose it.

I take issue with some of what the Deputy has said, some of what she said last week and some of what she has said on social media, where she blatantly told a false narrative and an

untruth when she was saying that Irish soldiers will end up on the side of Israel. That is endangering Irish troops who are currently on a United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, peacekeeping mission.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please allow the Taoiseach to finish.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy should not do that. It is a very tense situation in Lebanon.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Did the Taoiseach tell Kaja Kallas that?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, it applies to both sides.

The Taoiseach: We have been down the middle as peacekeepers and Irish soldiers have lost their lives. Unnecessarily creating false narratives of that kind endangers soldiers who are currently on a UNIFIL peacekeeping mission-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Did the Taoiseach say that to Kaja Kallas?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: -----and Deputy McDonald should desist from doing that.

What happened in 2002? We had a referendum to amend the Constitution and inserted Article 29.4.9°, which reads:

> The State shall not adopt a decision taken by the European Council to establish a common defence pursuant to Article 1.2 of the Treaty referred to in subsection 7° of this section where that common defence would include the State.

So we cannot join any European army. We cannot be part of any European defence pact because the Constitution prohibits it. The only way we could be part of that would be to seek the deletion or amendment of that Article 29.4.9°. Sinn Féin has ignored that for the entirety of this debate.

The world has changed very significantly for the worst because of the rogue behaviour of members of the UN Security Council that Sinn Féin wants us to defer to. In essence, it is saying Russia, which has violated every principle of the UN Charter, should be the decision-makers in respect of where Irish peacekeepers go in future. That is the de facto reality right now. There is no point in the Deputy nodding her head-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I was shaking my head. This is nodding and this is shaking.

The Taoiseach: -----because the UN Security Council has Russia as a member. UNIFIL is ending. Why? Because the United States, under pressure from Israel, wanted it to cease. We have been peacekeepers in Lebanon since the 1970s.

That has come to an end because of another member of the UN Security Council.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Deputy McDonald is on her feet.

The Taoiseach: We should not have to be dictated to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up.

The Taoiseach: -----and Russia, the US or the United Kingdom should not have a veto-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald is on her feet and your time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: ----over where Irish troops go for peacekeeping.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The only decision-makers on this question, a question as fundamental as this, are the Irish people.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is why the Government should go to a referendum. In 2002, the Taoiseach's predecessor Brian Cowen acknowledged this. Let me repeat, "there will be no change to [the triple lock] unless the people first give their assent in a referendum." That is the correct and democratic position. That is the position that recognises the importance of this issue to Irish people. The triple lock is fundamental to our foreign and defence policy. The Taoiseach knows this. That is why it was introduced in the first instance. He knows that removing the need for a UN mandate transforms entirely the nature of the deployments of our soldiers and of Irish neutrality itself. If anybody is proposing a course of action that will put Irish lives at risk and Irish soldiers in danger, it is the Taoiseach and not I.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me repeat again-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On this issue-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let us have the debate where it needs to happen-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ----among the Irish people. Have a referendum and allow them to make the democratic call.

The Taoiseach: We have never had a referendum that does not involve either adding to, deleting from or amending the Irish Constitution. That is when we have referendums - to amend, delete from or add to the Irish Constitution. We then have, under our Constitution, a parliamentary democracy. That is the basic, fundamental tenet of how we operate our democracy. We are not Switzerland; we do not have referendums on issues *per se* where we are not adding to, removing from or amending the Constitution. That is a clear point.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That was not Brian Cowen's view.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, your time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That was not the Taoiseach's predecessor's view.

The Taoiseach: We have been proud peacekeepers.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes, no one is disputing that.

The Taoiseach: That is our defining contribution to the world, through peacekeeping.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Nobody is disputing that.

The Taoiseach: That is what we will continue to do-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, not without a UN mandate.

The Taoiseach: -----but I really take issue with the idea-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Brian Cowen said otherwise.

The Taoiseach: The Security Council will not sanction any significant new measures and has in our peacekeeping missions. Look at Russia-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There are substantial peacekeeping mandates still in place. That is rubbish.

The Taoiseach: -----with the Sahel in Africa, where the Wagner Group has been deployed by Russia to exploit for the benefit of Russia.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Was Brian Cowen wrong?

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach, thank you.

The Taoiseach: And you want us to be dictated by that kind of geopolitics?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, I want you to keep your word.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want you to keep your word.

The Taoiseach: It is incoherent and ill informed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cian O'Callaghan. If you are not on your feet I will move on, Deputy.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I spoke to Yvonne Nolan yesterday. Yvonne and her three children are due to be evicted from their home today by a vulture fund. She is trying to put on a brave face for her children but she is struggling. Her 16-year-old twin boys are autistic and non-verbal and have severe and complex needs. They have no idea they are going to lose their home and Yvonne has no way to explain it. Their home has been specially adapted to keep the boys safe and yet the initial response from the State was a one-bed apartment in Dublin city centre - a one-bed for a mother, her teenage daughter and her two autistic teenage sons. It is absolutely scandalous.

Yvonne has been begging for help for months. She repeatedly asked for a permanent residential placement for her boys but was told nothing was available. It was only after she went to the media that an emergency placement was eventually found. She was told yesterday that her boys would be placed in temporary respite accommodation, but this means her sons being transferred between two separate places during the week. This arrangement is only on a week-to-week basis. She has no guarantee of what will happen next week or the week after. There is no clarity about what comes next and what will happen to her children.

There are now a record 18,065 people living in emergency accommodation. This includes more than 5,800 children, so Yvonne and her family are not alone in this pain. What is happening is inhumane; there is no other word for it. Yvonne told me that the very last thing she wanted was to go to the media but that she was left with absolutely no choice because her boys were being put at real risk, with no permanent residential place to live and no idea when one will be available. This is a catastrophic failure of not just planning but care. Exactly as the Before We Die campaign has been trying to tell the Government, the State is knowingly failing these boys and thousands of other disabled people across the country.

Yvonne and her family need the Taoiseach's help. The eviction needs to be halted at least until the end of the school year. The HSE needs to provide a permanent home for her two sons. Yvonne and her family need enough time to plan for this transition. Will the Taoiseach call on the vulture fund to halt this eviction?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I am always reluctant to go into the specifics of any individual case in the House and in public because invariably there can be complexities behind every individual case that may not always be apparent. One always has to be careful and cautious about doing that and extrapolating from any individual case. That said, I do not believe any eviction should take place in this case. I do not know the full circumstances behind the decision to seek an eviction but that would be the first point in terms of prevention of the eviction. I think there is perhaps complexity in this case that may not be immediately apparent, so I am not going to comment any further on it because we are often restricted.

On the broader point about housing and residential, I have met the Before We Die campaign. The Ministers for housing and disability have taken steps to ensure all future housing allocation will have a ring-fenced quota from local authorities in respect of social housing allocation for people with disabilities. More work has to be done in fleshing that out but it has already been communicated to local authorities.

This year, we will go close to 10,000 social houses. In the decade from 2020 to 2030, we will have well over 80,000 social houses built if not more. There has been extraordinary growth in the delivery of social housing since 2020, which no one wants to acknowledge but it has been hugely substantial. Within that, there has to be room for people with disabilities, just as we have ring-fenced housing for elderly people and people who need housing. The same should apply to disabilities. That is the direction of travel the Government has taken and a recent Cabinet subcommittee meeting reinforced that position.

On social housing, about 61,569 homes were added to the social housing stock between 2020 and 2026. That compares with 34,800 social homes provided by local authorities and the capital assistance programme between 2015 and 2020. We are now doing nearly 62,000 compared with 35,000 in a previous five-year period. That is huge progress on the social housing front. We are going to keep that momentum going because there are another 40,000-odd in the pipeline already over the next two years at different stages of construction, and within that we will provide for people with disabilities. There is work to be done in tying up local authorities with approved housing bodies and then the health services will have to provide wraparound services-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Deputy O'Callaghan

The Taoiseach: -----but we are not going to wait for that. We are going to get houses built for people with disabilities.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Before We Die campaign has been warning the Taoiseach again and again that there need to be plans in place to meet the residential needs of people with disabilities. Does he think it is in any way acceptable that this family was offered a one-bed apartment for a mother, her teenage daughter and her two autistic sons? Does he think it is in

any way acceptable that what is now being provided are temporary respite placements where her two teenage sons will have to move every week from place to place? They do not even know how long that respite place will be there for. They are told it will be there for a week and that they might get another week, or another week after that. That is no way for people to be treated. When will the Taoiseach and the Government get their act together and provide the housing needed for people with disabilities and their families so they are not thrown into a crisis and an emergency? Plans need to be in place so they can make transitions together as a family in the time they need.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is the family has been told respite will be continuous until the complex family situation is dealt with and addressed in terms of accommodation.

As I said to the Deputy before, the situation is quite complex but our priority is the family and the children in that case. I have met with Before We Die. The Tánaiste and I, along with key Ministers, met with Before We Die. It was a very positive and engaging meeting. We will continue regular meetings and we are solution-driven in respect of the issues raised by the Before We Die campaign, which I would not conflate with this case. It is not the same.

Deputy Rory Hearne: They are absolutely connected.

The Taoiseach: The Before We Die campaign is a broader issue in terms of parents getting older and wanting to have certainty and security about where their adult children will reside in case either parent or both parents pass. That is the core issue, along with others, the Before We Die campaign put before us in respect of housing.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: This was supposed to be a landmark year for the reform of our health service. The Minister for Health had promised rigorous oversight, transparent reporting, population-based funding, savings of €181 million and no supplementary health budgets. It turns out those so-called promises were the stuff of fantasy. In reality, hospitals are in chaos and the HSE is plunging into a deficit of more than €1 billion, which is potentially the second largest in its history. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, claimed the HSE broke even last year but it actually recorded a massive deficit then, even with a supplementary budget, too. Now, we know that next year's health budget will be swallowed up before it can deliver any of the improvements patients need.

Those improvements are needed badly. Professor Matthew Sadlier of the IMO gave a startling interview on "Morning Ireland" yesterday. He warned of sharp rises in pressure in our hospitals. Almost 1 million people are already languishing on waiting list and the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation has warned that accident and emergency departments face a dire situation this winter, with admissions already up on last year. Shockingly, 2,900 nursing and midwifery posts are currently vacant and yet the Government tells us the health service is overstaffed. This is Orwellian doublespeak, especially for the many patients languishing on trolleys and for any of us with a family member in hospital. We know those patients receiving care on trolleys face a higher mortality risk than those who are treated in hospital beds. In a month's time, we all fear that chairs could sit empty at Christmas dinners around the country because of terrible failings in health and short staffing.

My thoughts are with hospital patients but also with healthcare workers. Because of the Government's recruitment freeze and spending restrictions, they are forced to work in impossible circumstances and they know they are working under unsafe conditions. They know their patients might get sicker because of staffing pressures. To add insult to injury, it seems they are being gaslit by the Government. At Cork University Hospital, we saw the double counting of staff who moved from agency contracts to HSE contracts. The same people were carrying out the same work at the same hospital but were counted twice for the purpose of fictional staffing figures.

It is time for honestly in healthcare. Tomorrow morning, the Labour Party will bring a motion to the Dáil calling on the Taoiseach to tell the truth on health spending and health staffing. We are demanding an honest, multi-annual funding plan, based on the actual needs of patients and the health service. We are calling for a supplementary estimate to meet the actual cost of health services this year. Why is the Taoiseach systematically under-resourcing our hospitals and will he support our Labour Party motion tomorrow?

The Taoiseach: We have no issue with telling the truth about the exponential growth in public funding in the health service over the past five to six years. The spend has broken all records. We need a debate, not just on spend, spend and spend. We need to make sure we prioritise and get good outcomes from the spending. Equally, that is an important debate to have. The Government passed a supplementary budget for health today.

Deputy Ged Nash: About time.

The Taoiseach: It was a very substantial one, over and above what was provided. Health funding will have risen by about €13.7 billion, or 88%, between 2019 and 2027. The overall 2027 health allocation is €29.1 billion, comprising €27.4 billion current spend and €1.7 billion capital. The workforce has grown by 31%, or 31,544 whole-time equivalents, to over 133,000, currently. Those are the facts.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What do we have to show for it?

The Taoiseach: By any yardstick, that is a very significant expansion of our health service. The population has grown. Demand has increased. Pressures on the hospitals have increased, particularly as our population is ageing and growing on an ongoing basis. We have recruited about 11,125 additional nurses and about 5,000 additional health and social care professionals. In our hospitals, spending has gone up by about 52% and staffing by 33% since the start of 2020. There is no argument that there has not been a very significant increase in spending.

As I have said, we have had significant population growth. We have increased acuity and complexity among presenting patients and there has been a sustained rise in demand for urgent and emergency care. Emergency department attendances by the end of August this year have gone up 7.2%. It went up 9.8% for those aged over-75. We fully accept that but that, in itself, does not explain what was the HSE overspend.

To be fair, for any deficit in any year, some of that is because of demand-led schemes. Some of that is down to structural pressures, such as drugs, pensions, State claims and demand across

community health schemes, which have to be met. That always leads to the necessity for a supplementary budget. There are other areas, from pay to agency overtime and so on, which are outside of that. Basically, no one could disagree that we have to have some framework in terms of public expenditure and spending within the health service. The Deputy says there has been a freeze. There has been no freeze. A total of 400 whole-time equivalents have been recruited in September of this year alone.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We absolutely agree with the Taoiseach that we need an honest framework for health spending. The problem is his framework is not honest. It is fictional. What he says happens every year is overspending. The Taoiseach says the health service is overspending. What we say and what patients and healthcare workers say, and what they see, is underfunding. The Government is under-resourcing the health service and then accusing hospital managers of overspending. It is not adding up, either way. These budgets that the Taoiseach presents us with are fictional because you need supplementary budgets every year to meet what he has acknowledged are the increased pressures on hospitals. The increased pressures are being felt everywhere and being felt most of all by patients who are not receiving the care they need. Just this morning, I heard from a distressed woman whose 87-year-old sister was admitted to St. Vincent's hospital in my constituency on Saturday night. By yesterday evening, she still had not heard from her. The previous time she was admitted to hospital, the same patient spent months in turmoil because they could not discharge her. For two thirds of this year, more than 500 patients who were medically fit to leave hospitals had nowhere to go. Delayed discharging is costing more than €20 million a month and yet the Taoiseach persists in saying that hospitals are overspending. They are patently being underfunded and we need to fix this.

The Taoiseach: That is not the case, actually.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is the case.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy talked about limits and so on. Staffing in the HSE increased by almost 400 whole-time equivalents in September of this year, bringing the net increase in staff for the first nine months of the year to 4,000 whole-time equivalents. That is the net figure after departures. It is not simply the number of people recruited. There has been a net increase of 4,000 in the first nine months of the year. Recruitment has not stopped. At the end of September, we were at 133,000 plus whole-time equivalents. The number of nurses and midwives increased by 992 in the first nine months of 2026. Those are the facts.

As I said earlier, you get supplementary budgets and it is a substantial supplementary budget this year. A lot of it is demand-led schemes, although not all of it, and about 65% is spent on structural demands that are ongoing within the public health service. When I came back in in 2020 during the pandemic, we dramatically increased the base of health spend. We actually dealt with all of the supplementaries. We were told to gave another €1 billion. Does the Deputy remember that? We did.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The vacant posts-----

The Taoiseach: The Deputy needs to be a bit more honest herself. In Opposition, I understand the rigours of trying to control budgets is not an appetising prospect but the Government has to have some framework.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We are now in the 13th year of the housing crisis and the Taoiseach's Government is a record breaking Government for all of the wrong reasons. That latest figures in terms of homelessness are record figures.

There are 18,000 people homeless in this State. It is absolutely astounding. It is the equivalent of every man, woman and child in a town the size of Maynooth homeless. This does not include those who are the hidden homeless. Nearly 6,000 children will wake up on Christmas morning without a home of their own. Think about that. It is equivalent to 272 classrooms of children who are growing up with the massive challenges that come with not having a home. All of this is because of the Government's housing policy. According to the Deloitte crane survey, the Government's housing delivery will miss its target by 120,000 by 2030. Either the target is disastrously out or the delivery of homes is a disaster. The Taoiseach will counter by saying the numbers are up this year but that is partially because the suspension of the development levy has front-loaded completions before the end of the year. Shockingly, planning applications last year were well below target, meaning this construction will not be sustained.

I talked to a builder in Meath recently who is under massive pressure to avail of the development levy measure before the end of the year because the ESB will not connect him in time. I spoke to another builder in Meath who is thousands of euro out every week because he is waiting for Uisce Éireann to connect his new estate. Uisce Éireann and the ESB are semi-State bodies. They operate on the basis of Government policy and their inaction is physically blocking the building of thousands of homes across the country at the moment.

Despite this being the 13th year of the housing crisis, the Government presides over the slowest planning, permitting, licensing, tendering, procurement and judicial review systems in the whole of the European Union. It takes twice as long to build a home in this country now as it did ten years ago. The viability issue remains. Right now, there are hundreds of builders across the country who are not building homes during this crisis. The development levy is a tax on building homes. The Government recognised this when it introduced the waiver. Yet, in the middle of this housing crisis, the Government's aim is to return to the development levy.

VAT is also a tax on building homes. Other jurisdictions recognise this. There is no VAT on the building of homes in the North of Ireland. The Taoiseach recognises it too because the Government reduced VAT on the building of apartments but it will not reduce VAT on the building of homes. Will the Government keep the development levy waiver for another three years and reduce VAT on the building of homes in this country?

The Taoiseach: I do not accept Deputy Tóibín's presentation at all. The Deputy mentioned the European Union and referenced Ireland in that context. The facts are that Ireland ranks fastest in Europe on completions *per capita*. We are building houses faster than anybody in Europe by a long shot, with 7.2 units per 1,000 population. This is according to EUROCONSTRUCT and it covers 19 countries. It was published in August this year. That is

more than double the European average of 3.0 and triple the United Kingdom's 2.4 per 1,000. We are way ahead of anybody else in terms of house construction and we need to do more.

Completions rose by 40% between 2022 and 2026. I have been in Government since 2020. We had Covid for the first two years, which did knock us back a bit. We are one of only five European countries where output grew while the Continent overall declined. We will have delivered over 180,000 houses since 2020. Commencements between January and September this year were up by 156% on comparable 2025 data. Residential construction employment, meaning those working in housebuilding, is up by 14%. The volume of first-time buyer mortgage drawdowns rose by 6.6% year on year. We had the highest quarter 1 volume since 2007. Ireland is one of the few European Union countries where home ownership rates have increased since 2021. Our home ownership is going up because of the schemes we introduced, including help to buy and the first home scheme, and the grant schemes for dereliction and vacant houses.

On the social housing front, as I said earlier, we have added about 61,569 social houses to the social housing stock during that five-year period, compared with 34,000 in the previous five years. We are up by 50% in the first six months of 2026 in terms of completed social houses. It is the highest ever first-half delivery of new-build social homes recorded and there are a further 22,000 additional social homes in the pipeline. Over 22,800 starter-home supports were delivered from 2021 to the end of quarter 2 of 2026.

In relation to homelessness, we have a strategic plan and an allocation of resources. Fundamentally, it is a population growth issue and it is also a migration issue, quite frankly. This is clear from the figures in terms of those in emergency accommodation, particularly in Dublin but also across the country. We have to continue to build more and more homes to get people out of emergency accommodation as quickly as we possibly can. The Minister has a child and family homelessness strategy with resources behind it. We need buy-in, particularly in terms of the location of large families across the community, which has proven to be somewhat challenging in recent times.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Output is growing because it is starting from a collapsed base. Imagine, in 2013, 8,000 homes were built in the whole country. The Taoiseach is talking about figures that are coming from a disastrously low base. We have raised the immigration issue for the past five years and have been poo-pooed by the Government for doing so. The Taoiseach is making an achievement out of failure on this. The Government's target is 50,000 and its output is 20% lower than the target. No end of spin can change that.

Today, we have the shocking information that rents are now, on average, €2,239 per month. This is 43% higher than five years ago. If we look at it, it is equivalent to an annual gross salary of €30,000. This is the full gross salary of somebody on the minimum wage in this country. The Taoiseach said the removal of rent caps would increase availability but availability of rental properties is down by 7% since 2024. This is Leaders' Questions where we pose a question to the Taoiseach and he answers it. My question is whether the Government will keep the development levy waiver for another three years.

The Taoiseach: We will not be doing that for another three years because we have undertaken quite substantial reforms over the last two years which will further enhance the pipeline. The

big issue is that approximately 80% of all houses are State backed. The Government is funding or subsidising the vast majority of housing one way or another, building social houses and through a variety of schemes we are putting in huge supports.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am talking about viability

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt Deputy Tóibín. We have taken a range of measures, which the Opposition opposed for different reasons, that will help the supply side in terms of housing and apartments.

Regarding infrastructure, the housing activation office has been particularly effective in enabling sites to become shovel-ready for housing construction. That relates to infrastructure to do with water, the grid, roads or whatever the particular issue is on a given site. The housing activation office and the head person there are having a very impactful role in getting more housing done faster.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have a very busy Gallery today. I welcome Brian and Jerry McSweeney and Nellie Crane from Bandon who are here today with Deputy Michael Collins and also Ballynog national school in County Cork who are in the Public Gallery at the behest of Deputy Noel McCarthy.

The Taoiseach: I think that should be Ballynoe National School.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is his handwriting, I am afraid, is the issue.

The Taoiseach: His handwriting is notorious; he should go back to school.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry about that.

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:

- Motion re Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled "Post-enactment Reports" (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Motion re Leave to Introduce Supplementary Estimates [Votes 6, 9, 12, 14, 18, 20, 21, 24, 26 to 28, 30 to 34, 36 to 38, 42 and 44] (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Finance (International Financial Institutions) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Defending Irish Neutrality, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on Childcare (not to exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes)

- Media Regulation Bill 2026 (Amendments from the Seanad) (to conclude within 1 hour)

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2026 (to conclude within 1 hour and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a Regulation on the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) and repealing Regulation (EU) 2018/1727 (to conclude within 1 hour and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Supplementary Estimate for Public Services [Vote 21] (back from Committee) (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Health Budget and Recruitment Restrictions, selected by Labour Party.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on International Men's Day (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the School Meals Nutritional Standards Bill 2026, sponsored by Deputy Jen Cummins.

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 proceedings on the Motion re Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled "Post-enactment Reports" shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Leave to Introduce Supplementary Estimates [Votes 6, 9, 12, 14, 18, 20, 21, 24, 26 to 28, 30 to 34, 36 to 38, 42 and 44] shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

4. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Finance (International Financial Institutions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round, which shall not exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes, 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					

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a Regulation on the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) and repealing Regulation (EU) 2018/1727; and

(c) the weekly division time shall be taken on conclusion of proceedings of any motions without debate with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the Statements on Childcare shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 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	35	25	15	15	5
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	15	15	5	12	15
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	5	12	15	5	8

Total: 3 hours 22 mins					

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

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be in accordance with the table below;

(b) members may share time; and

(c) any divisions claimed thereon shall be taken immediately

-	Gov	SF	SD	Lab	IPTG	ITG	OM	Min Resp.
Mins	10	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	5
Total: 60 minutes								

5. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a Regulation on the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) and repealing Regulation (EU) 2018/1727 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be in accordance with the table below;

(b) members may share time; and

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

-	Gov	SF	SD	Lab	IPTG	ITG	OM	Min Resp.
Mins	10	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	5
Total: 60 minutes								

6. the proceedings on the Supplementary Estimate for Public Services [Vote 21] shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, Thursday evening business pursuant to Standing Order 169 may be taken earlier than 8.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on International Men's Day 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					

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements agreed to? Not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: For months I have requested at the Business Committee that we have statements on the preparation for Irish unity. We have a blueprint from Fine Gael and letters going from the Fine Gael leader to political leaders across the island. This is all very welcome. We have the Taoiseach finally seeing the light and accepting that we need to prepare for Irish unity, for God's sake. When are we going to have statements whereby both sides of the House can debate and have a discussion through statements on preparation for Irish unity?

Deputy Rory Hearne: We need an emergency debate on rents and homelessness. We see today that according to Daft the average rent is €2,200 and €2,700 in Dublin city. The Government tried to bury the homeless figures last Friday evening. There are 18,000 people homeless in this country.

We need an emergency debate on that because the Government is refusing to take emergency action. Why will the Government not debate homelessness? It is trying to bury the issue, deflect from it and blame other people. We need an emergency debate to see emergency action.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Over the weekend, there were leaked reports stating that the future of public sector recruitment is in jeopardy and could be slashed because of the public sector pay deal that is on the table. Notwithstanding how concerning the leaking of such a message

is in advance of a ballot, we need a debate on the future of public sector recruitment with particular regard to the use of AI. It is clear that AI is being used by certain Government Departments. We are receiving responses with mad symbols attached to them and template responses with no information and misgendered applicants. We need a debate on the future of public sector recruitment.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need an urgent debate and an explanation from the Government as to why it appears to be supporting the extrajudicial sanctioning of an Irish journalist, Chay Bowes, without any hearing. Do not get me wrong; RT is a mouthpiece for Putin and Putin is an imperialist. However, we have plenty of mouthpieces for Israel, NATO and EU militarism and they are not being sanctioned but an Irish citizen is being sanctioned. The Government needs to explain itself.

Deputy Michael Collins: Last week, most of the country was stunned to see the Taoiseach handing over €25 million to Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry. I cannot hear the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: Last week, you handed over €25 million of Irish taxpayers' money to Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Just to be fair, Independent Ireland held a poll. Over 15,000 people responded and 91.7% said the Taoiseach was wrong and that there should be proper debate in this House in relation to any funding given. That has not happened. I am calling for a proper debate in the House.

The Taoiseach: You want Ukraine to surrender to Russia. That is what you want. It is low politics.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have listened to what the five Whips have said.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach can respond if he wants.

Deputy Mary Butler: There were quite a lot of new suggestions on top of the suggestions made at the Business Committee's meeting last Thursday. We have a very busy schedule to get through this week, so the Order of Business stands.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 62; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	

Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Devine, Máire.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Canney, Seán.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Currie, Emer.	Healy, Seamus.	
Daly, Martin.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kelly, Alan.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Kyne, Seán.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	

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

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

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome Deputy Butler's family who are also in the Gallery today. They are most welcome.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Renters are being hammered by a crisis that the Government created. We see today that rents have risen by 7.3% in the year to September. The average rent now is €2,239 a month and €2,700 a month in Dublin. The Taoiseach was warned last March when the Government's rent hike Bill was introduced and it removed the protections that renters enjoyed that this would happen, rents would increase, and here we see it happening. We need affordable rents. We need a three-year ban on rent increases. We need an end to the sweetheart deals with the vulture funds which get hundreds of millions of euro from the Government when they gouge tenants. What has Taoiseach got against renters? Why does he refuse to intervene to assist them rather than put more punishment and expense on their backs?

The Taoiseach: We do intervene to help renters. We did it in the budget when we substantially increased the tax credit for renters. National rental inflation has slowed to its smallest increase for the third quarter since 2020. Rents are still too high, but the rate of increase is slowing significantly. It was 0.9% between June and September, which is below

the average quarterly increase of 1.6% seen over the last decade, but rents do remain over 7% higher compared to the same time last year; not because of the changes or anything like that. Supply is the key. Almost 2,800 properties were available to rent on 1 November, representing a 47% increase on the same date last year and the highest November figure since 2021. The bottom line is this: we need to build more houses. We are building them. If we implemented Sinn Féin's policies like the three-year rent ban-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We would not have homeless kids nor one-in-sevenyoung-----

The Taoiseach: -----that would depress supply and make things even worse for the future.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Seven out of ten of our young people are leaving because they cannot get a home.

The Taoiseach: All of Sinn Féin's propositions so far would have made things worse.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Come on; that is pathetic.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The stand-off in relation to Cork University Hospital, CUH, continues. At the core of this is the dispute over the number of staff that are needed to run that hospital safely. There is a huge disconnect between what the Taoiseach and the Minister are saying, and what the hospital is saying locally. The Taoiseach and Minister are saying that they are 200 staff over, they say locally that there are 1,000 vacancies. We need to get a solution to the impasse, and that is an independent assessment. We need to see how many staff are out on sick leave and maternity leave, how the counting is done and how the ceiling calculation was made. Why will the Taoiseach not allow that independent assessment to take place? What is he afraid of?

The Taoiseach: There should be no need for a stand-off. This is one organisation: CUH, HSE south-west and HSE national. It is surely within the remit of all concerned to resolve these issues. There should not be a stand-off.

There should be engagement, dialogue and working things out. That is the solution.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: There is a solution on the table.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do not interrupt, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Having spoken to the Minister about this, my understanding is the HSE has gone in and is supporting Cork University Hospital now with the issues raised; it is working to try to get underneath the bonnet of these issues. However, what one cannot deny is that there has been a significant increase in the staffing in CUH in recent years.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Historic under investment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. There are standing orders.

The Taoiseach: We can go on about historic all we like all over the country if that is what the Deputy wants to do but I went through the figures earlier on what has been going on in the health service since 2020. There has been exponential growth in numbers and funding. That said, I have also acknowledged that workers are doing great work in the health service, and people are working hard on behalf of people.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: However, the point is there is no need for a stand-off. This is one organisation.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I condemn the continued use of ploys by the Christian Brothers to seek to evade its responsibility to survivors of sexual abuse. I welcome the Taoiseach's comments today when he called on the Christian Brothers to face its responsibility and deal properly with survivors. I also welcome the comments of the Tánaiste who said the Christian Brothers, in refusing to put forward a nominated individual in court actions being taken against it by survivors, is hiding behind a bizarre legal structure. They are both right. This is appalling behaviour by the Christian Brothers, an organisation which last year had net assets in Ireland of €51.7 million. However, the Taoiseach's Government should be doing something about this. The Labour Party brought forward a Bill that was debated in the Dáil in July of this year to ensure complicit religious orders cannot dodge accountability. The Government secured a stay of our Bill until Christmas Eve, promising it would do six months of work in the meantime. I have submitted parliamentary questions seeking updates on this. Can we see Labour's Bill supported or a legal mechanism brought forward-----

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----to ensure religious orders can be sued as entities by survivors-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Have respect please, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----so that we no longer have to see the naming of hundreds of individuals by survivors in this way?

The Taoiseach: I fully agree, and I said this morning and on several occasions that what is going on is unacceptable and shocking, and that survivors would be treated in this manner. In essence, as an organisation, the Christian Brothers is refusing to deal with its responsibilities to acknowledge some among them carried out the most appalling abuse against young students and young pupils when they were in their schools. Those young people, who are now no longer young but have been through a journey in life which has been very traumatic, are entitled to

recompense, compensation and acknowledgement of what happened, and the Christian Brothers has a duty to do that.

In respect of the Deputy's legislation, time is moving very fast and Christmas Eve is mere weeks away now. This Bill will then come back into play for the new term. I will certainly speak to the Minister in respect of working with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: COP31 in Türkiye is entering its final week, and the key issue of the lack of funding for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, has now arisen. This is the very organisation that compiles and reviews data on climate change around the globe, and the IPCC could run out of money by the end of the year. If this happens, the science that underpins the entire Paris Agreement will not be progressed.

The running costs of the organisation are tiny. It is only €9 million per year but much of that was funded by the US and Trump has pulled that funding. Our former president, Mary Robinson, highlighted the funding gap at COP this week. Ireland holds the EU Presidency and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, leads the EU delegation. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister to use his role to get EU member states and allied countries to guarantee the IPCC budget? He cannot allow climate science to be defunded on Ireland's watch.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about this. It should be within the remit of the international community to do this, notwithstanding the US position. The intergovernmental conference is essential for maintaining the global issue and the research and science behind it. I will engage with the Minister on this as well as with other like-minded countries to see how we can take up the slack on this.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is bracing itself for a record number of calls this Christmas. Louise Bayliss of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul said people will suffer more this Christmas against the rising tide of inflation and a lack of central Government support. The organisation is expecting 270,000 people to reach out for help this winter. Putting that into context, that is the equivalent to the population of all of Leitrim, Longford, Carlow, Monaghan and Sligo. These are people who need help to survive in Ireland in 2026. It is not 1886; it is 2026.

Some 500,000 domestic gas and electricity accounts are currently in arrears, and hundreds of thousands of families simply cannot afford to pay their electricity bills. Ireland has the highest cost of electricity in the world at present, with €550 from each family's bill going towards network charges.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The ESB is making a profit of €650 million per year. Will the Taoiseach ask the ESB to reduce the dividends to the Government so that it can reduce the network charges to the families who cannot afford to pay for electricity?

The Taoiseach: The Government is responding to the cost-of-living crisis and pressures on families through our budget and social protection-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Not according to them.

The Taoiseach: -----and pension increases. Today, we provided funding in a supplementary for the Christmas bonus and more than €625 million alone is being provided for that. There is also the €10 increase in the core payments on social protection. The cost-of-disability payment and the fuel allowance are significant increased payments that will go to people who are under pressure due to the war in the Middle East and the Ukraine and Russia situation.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Behind Government taxes on fuel.

The Taoiseach: They are the fundamental drivers of high energy prices. ESB is a State company which reinvests everything-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No, it does not.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: But it does not.

The Taoiseach: -----to ensure we can expand the grid and have enough for new homes and houses that young people need.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It pays €150 million dividends to the Government.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: In these volatile times, food security has never been more important in Europe. However, food security depends on the well functioning, viable farming sector and some stability in commodity prices. The Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, is central to providing that stability, yet the current proposal amounts to a 24% reduction in CAP funding nationally. The IFA estimates this will break down as an annual reduction of €2,178 per annum for Clare families, or if you want a countywide figure, a €12 million reduction per annum.

Agriculture can be a very unpredictable business, and I saw this first hand on Saturday at the Sixmilebridge mart. I also met with the IFA in Cooraclare last night and in Dublin a couple of weeks ago. It has a pan-European position with other farming bodies. Given this level of unanimity among farmers across Europe, what is the Government's position in these final crucial weeks, and will it stand up for a properly funded CAP?

The Taoiseach: The Government has stood up for a properly funded CAP, and will continue to do so. There are approximately 17 countries out of the 27 that are in the CAP cohesion side of the argument. The Commission had reduced it, although it is not quite as presented either. There are a number of variables yet in how this ultimately lands. We produced a negotiating box that protected the CAP and provided cuts elsewhere from the Commission's levies in terms of the competitiveness funds and other areas. This was largely well-received by the CAP countries as protecting CAP.

There are variables there, and by that I mean how you calculate inflation, where you front-load and other measures and flexibilities within the national envelopes that touch a different structure this time. Our objective is to do everything we possibly can to close the gap. There are a key three months ahead, and it is essential we have a deal by the end of the year. That would be most advantageous for farmers, as opposed to not having agreement on the EU budget because this will not happen in the early part of 2027.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Since September, I have been trying to help an 18-year-old student from Kilkenny who is at university in Belfast. She cannot get a student Leap card because the system does not recognise that her university is in Belfast, and Leap card customer care has told her she is not entitled to one. However, the Minister for Transport confirmed to me in a parliamentary question last month that students normally resident in the South who attend a university in the North are absolutely entitled to a 50% reduction in the southern leg of their travel.

Yesterday, I heard the same thing from a 36-year-old mature student who is living in the South and studying in Belfast. He is also being refused a student leap card. I have repeatedly contacted Leap card about this but I have not received a response from it in a month. Will the Taoiseach please ask the Minister to work with the NTA and Leap card to ensure the policy is being implemented as intended so that students are not paying more for their public transport than they need to?

The Taoiseach: I will engage with the Minister on this issue but it seems the Minister has already given an answer to this. I am not particularly *au fait* as to why this has not occurred given that the Minister has been very clear that students are entitled to Leap cards and a 50% reduction in this jurisdiction. We will see what we can do through other mechanisms to make it possible in terms of an all-island basis.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: This winter, there have been increasing concerns of overcrowding and severe staff shortages with recruitment controls and capacity deficits in our hospitals. HIQA stressed last year that overcrowding in emergency departments compromises the safety of patients and CEOs and regional executives of hospitals are raising red flags. While the Mid West Health Planning Board is tasked with furnishing a report to the Minister, this could take up to nine months to complete. Could the Taoiseach reassure and guarantee the people out there who have real concerns about attending accident and emergency departments, especially at UHL, that there will be no deaths of patients on trolleys this winter as a direct result of overcrowding or staff shortages?

The Taoiseach: Again, I think I answered this at length during Leaders' Questions when a number of leaders raised the issue in terms of pressures on hospitals over the winter period. I know that the Minister is working with the HSE on measures to optimise the resources that are going to the hospitals and also to alleviate pressures, particularly in emergency departments, as effectively as we can.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Ten years ago, I first heard about Huntington's disease when I went to record the stories of young people for Rare Disease Day. I will never forget the stories that

those young people told me, mostly because it is a disease that affects not just an individual but an entire family. There has been a campaign to provide a dedicated integrated care pathway for families with Huntington's disease and a draft pathway was approved for clinical design in August. I ask that when funding requests come to the Taoiseach and Government, everything possible is done to support a dedicated integrated care pathway for people who desperately need the support and who desperately need the support of Government.

The Taoiseach: I certainly will talk to the Minister in respect of this. Again, we are making progress on a lot of rare diseases and it makes sense that there would be such a pathway. I am not clear as to what is required to enable that to happen in terms of personnel and so forth but I will talk to the Minister about it.

Deputy John Brady: Coastal erosion at the Murrough in Wicklow town has reached crisis point and we simply cannot afford to stand by and watch our coastline disappear. The Murrough is an invaluable community asset and a designated special area of conservation. The accelerating erosion is also posing an incredibly serious threat to the Dublin-Rosslare railway line, with the coastline now rapidly approaching the track. Despite this developing crisis, the Department and Irish Rail have indicated that works will not commence until 2029 at the earliest as part of the broader east coast rail infrastructure protection project, which is simply too long to wait. Every storm brings further damage, with metres of coastline lost every year. Will the Government provide the necessary funding, direction and co-ordination to ensure the Department, Irish Rail and the NTA act to protect this vital public immunity and to safeguard the Dublin-Rosslare rail line?

The Taoiseach: Everything will be done to try to safeguard the Dublin-Rosslare rail line. Obviously I am not fully *au fait* with the engineering for ports and designs as to whether all that work is done or that work has to be done to enable construction to begin in 2029. The Government recently took a decision that the Department of climate now would lead on coastal erosion, working with the OPW and the Department of housing. Coastal erosion is a very significant issue facing the country because of climate change and rising sea levels. As part of an overall adaptation framework, I have had a number of recent meetings to bring clarity to the lead role that the Department of climate will now have to play to make sure that we deal with coastal erosion in a very proactive manner that prevents problems from arising.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is mid-November yet I still have to bring up the issue of school transport. I still have many families and many children in Swords who are unable to get school transport to Coláiste Ghlór na Mara in Balbriggan. It is a 22-mile round trip for parents who then have to begin their own commute, most often in the opposite direction, to Dublin. I raised a couple of issues with the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, back in August and only got replies this week. This is unacceptable. We know next year is going to be worse. At a minimum, there will be 26 new children who will be going to Coláiste Ghlór na Mara in Balbriggan from Swords. It is compounded by the fact that we do not have a Gaelcholáiste in Swords itself, the third-largest town in Ireland. Can we find a solution for these children in this calendar year so they can get school transport to Balbriggan and can we progress a Gaelcholáiste for Swords?

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, in respect of that. Is it the only Gaelcholáiste in the area?

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is.

An Ceann Comhairle: Rhetorical only.

The Taoiseach: Apologies - I am not allowed. I will talk to the Minister of State about it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Does the Taoiseach see how sinister it is that the European Union can now sanction an Irish citizen and eight European citizens for their exercise of speech? I disagree very fundamentally with Chay Bowes. I do not share any politics with Chay Bowes but freedom of speech is not much good if it is only for those you agree with. How can the Taoiseach talk about the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights being values of the European Union when the guy is denied any right to a fair trial - no trial whatsoever - when freedom of speech is attacked and when any separation of powers is entirely ignored? The ministers simply decide and then sanction. Is this not extremely concerning? One of the EU citizens who is being sanctioned is not even being sanctioned for anything to do with the Ukraine. He is being sanctioned for his reporting on Palestine.

The Taoiseach: In terms of all the people who were sanctioned yesterday, it does not happen easily and there can be very good reasons as to why the European Commission would put forward a list for sanctions, particularly in the context of a war involving Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the denial of all human rights to people in Ukraine and violating the UN Charter. Russia has a lot of people supporting that war effort and justifying that war effort. I do not necessarily call that freedom of speech when it results in the deaths of thousands and thousands of people. These are serious issues on the Continent-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Are we going to lock up Alan Shatter? No. We should not lock up Alan Shatter.

The Taoiseach: There are serious issues on the Continent of Europe. Everything is relative. The Deputy creates false comparisons.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am for freedom of speech.

The Taoiseach: I do not think that what he said about Alan Shatter is valid. The Deputy might disagree with him but he is not an advocate for war.

Deputy Paul Murphy: He should not be jailed but nor should Chay Bowes be sanctioned. People have a right to freedom of speech.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I want to ask the Taoiseach about the respite facility in Mountrath in County Laois that is operated by Muiríosa Foundation, a section 38 not-for-profit organisation. It generally takes seven to eight people at a time. People come in for a couple of nights or for

a week to give families and family carers a break. It is particularly important for elderly carers and people who are dealing with complex and high-demand situations. It has now stopped until 2027 due to a funding issue and that is because two vulnerable residents who came in on a short-term basis are now actually residing there. HIQA has said that because the facility has two long-stay residents, the whole thing must be closed down and it is frozen. That is the situation. Alternative long-stay accommodation has been sourced with a private provider but funding for this is frozen by the HSE until next year so there is deadlock and dozens and dozens of people are without respite until next year. This has to be sorted out with regard to long-term care. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Health to sort it out?

The Taoiseach: I do not have the full background to the case. I did not get the name of the institution but the Deputy can forward it to me. I do not have the full background to this. The Deputy said HIQA became involved. HIQA does not get involved lightly and does not make decisions like that lightly either. We do not want a situation where people have no opportunity to avail of respite but it has to be in the right conditions and in accordance with the right standards. If the Deputy can send me the name of the institution, I will refer it to the Minister.

Deputy William Aird: I want to raise the issue of access to Risdiplam for adults with spinal muscular dystrophy. I welcome the reimbursement agreement effective from 1 October last.

I am particularly interested because two people in my community are waiting for the treatment. I acknowledge the work of the Taoiseach's colleague, Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, in this area. However, there are concerns about the practical arrangements for accessing the treatment. Adults with spinal muscular atrophy, SMA, must undergo individual assessments. I understand they are being directed to Beaumont Hospital's neuromuscular service. Unfortunately, I am told that these specialist assessments are currently restricted. I am asking that additional resources are provided to complete the assessments, waiting times are minimised and eligible adults are approved promptly. Reimbursement must translate into access. The medicine, in this case, is in the cabinet. Will the Taoiseach unlock the door?

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in respect of this and get the full background as to the timelines involved, how many patients have access to medicine and how many have not and the reasons.

Deputy James O'Connor: I wish to raise the important work of the Before We Die campaign. The campaign's information is that 2,300 carers in Ireland over the age of 70 are caring for loved ones and children. It is an extraordinary number. When we break down the number, we know that approximately 78% have yet to make future plans for their loved ones. Does the Government need to do more to build purpose-built disability housing in partnerships with local authorities? Perhaps the €1.5 billion sitting in development levies nationally could be used to help achieve this. There is an acute need for this. I commend the work of the Before We Die campaign. It has brought many of these issues to light with the public in Ireland.

The Taoiseach: I met the Before We Die campaign. The Government, represented by myself, the Tánaiste and a number of Ministers, met the Before We Die campaign about three weeks ago. We went through a comprehensive programme and we had a very good, positive

discussion. The Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, already had written to all of the local authorities. Given that we are building about 10,000 houses per year, we are saying that quite a substantial number of those should be reserved for people with disabilities, particularly for those who come under the framework of issues identified by the Before We Die campaign, namely, adult people with disabilities, and that they would be given priority by local authorities in respect of housing and then the wraparound needs would follow. We will also work with section 38 and section 39 bodies in respect of respite and sub-residential supports. Given the huge investment in public housing, just as we provide for the elderly in social housing, there is no reason we should not provide also for people with disabilities. One size does not fit all because there are different needs and so on but, certainly, the capacity is there to do more in a more effective manner.

Retained Firefighters (Extension of Service and Fitness Assessment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I move:

> That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the continuation in service of retained firefighters until the age of 66 years, subject to annual fitness and medical assessments, and to provide for the making of regulations concerning such assessments; and to provide for related matters.

I am sure every Member of the House appreciates the valuable work of the fire services within their local communities and, indeed, the long service many firefighters provide. Despite the Government raising the retirement age two years ago from 60 to 62 years of age, the problem for many long-serving firefighters is that they continue to be forced to retire at 62 when they may still be able to continue to work until 66 years of age.

I pay particular tribute to Wayne Cox and others in the fire service in Gorey who have been regularly raising this. This legislation has the support of SIPTU, which represents most of the retained firefighters around the country. We are talking about a voluntary extension of service. It is only in cases where firefighters wish to continue working past 62 years of age. However, it speaks to a broader principle that we should apply not just across the public service but more generally. If someone is fit and able and wants to continue working, we should not force them into retirement. This does not apply to the fire service alone.

The provisions in this legislation are quite clear. It recognises the experience and valuable skills of those who have continued to work but, before they are allowed to continue to work past 62 years of age, they will be required to undergo a fitness test. It will, obviously, be rigorous in order to ensure they are able to continue in the roles that are so vital to all of our communities. In other jurisdictions, in instances where it is deemed that some of the physical nature of the work might be too much for someone of that age, some of those firefighters are transferred away from operational roles into administrative or driving roles that are not as physically demanding. In Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, firefighters are allowed to work until 67 years of age. As I said, if they do not pass the fitness test or do not want to remain on front-line duty, there is the possibility for them to remain within the service.

On introducing a Bill on First Stage, I am aware of the chances of it getting to Second Stage because of the lottery. As the Whip knows, I have asked that more time be provided for Second Stage debates on Private Members' Bills. I am conscious this is an issue that has been raised by Deputies on all sides of the House so I hope the principle of the Bill will be accepted by the Government and that we move to a situation where we allow those valuable public servants in all of our communities to continue to work past 62 years of age, should they wish to do so.

We know how difficult it is to attract new firefighters in many of our communities. All of our local authorities talk about how difficult it is with the recruitment campaigns they run. In fairness, when the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, was the housing Minister, he improved the terms and conditions of retained firefighters. Why is it, however, that we are losing and forcing those with such extraordinary and valuable experience out of the fire service at 62 years of age if they want to continue serving? I hope the Government will accept the principle of this Bill and that the Minister moves to ensure we can quickly move to a situation where what is provided for in it can be enacted.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not being opposed. My father was a retained firefighter for 26 years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well done.

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 Malcolm Byrne: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

I am sure the Whip will expedite it, given the information she has provided.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am not sure that is the case.

Question put and agreed to.

Power of Local Authorities to Set Rents Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move:

> That leave be granted to introduce a Billentitled an Act to amend the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 so that the provisions in that Act for the setting and revocation of rent schemes to become reserved functions of local authorities are commenced within 90 days of the passing of this Bill.

The Bill I am introducing today is straightforward. It would give local elected councillors the power to set local authority rents for council and housing assistance payment, HAP, tenants.

This has already been passed by the Oireachtas. It was passed 17 years ago in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 but no Government has enacted it. It is pretty obvious why previous Governments have noted enact it. It is because it suits the parties in government and those in favour of increasing rents for council tenants. Looking around the country, who is voting for increases to council rent? It is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael consistently, often joined by Independents and, sometimes, joined by the Labour Party and the Green Party. It suits all of them to say that they are not actually voting on this and that they do not have the power over this but that it is unelected council officials. It is a built-in excuse for when council rents increase. Of course, they are not able to get away with this completely because people can see the reality that if they vote for council budgets - they are being voted on in the next few weeks - that include increases to council rent, they are voting for the council rent increases themselves.

The excuse for the hikes to council rent across the country is that they are needed in order to fund the maintenance of council properties. However, there are plenty of other funding options available. Take the case of South Dublin County Council as an example. The council already takes in a fair bit more in rent than it spends on maintenance. In local authorities where there is a gap, they could increase rates for big business, such as data centres or pharmaceutical companies. The easy option, although I am sure they will call it a hard choice if pressed, is to rob the poor instead.

Look at the reality of the conditions facing council and HAP tenants. After housing costs, 58% of HAP or rental accommodation scheme, RAS, tenants and 41% of local authority renters are at risk of poverty.

That compares to a rate of 20% across the general population. These are the people who are most at risk of poverty. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and the Green Party want to increase their rent and drive them further into poverty.

We heard only yesterday that grocery price inflation is running at 6%, winter energy bills are landing and half a million people are in arrears in electricity or gas. How are they supposed to cope? I knocked on a door a couple of months ago. An elderly couple's rent is going up from just over €100 a week to €145 a week in South Dublin County Council. There are some tenants in South Dublin County Council whose rents are going up by more than 50%. Private landlords would not be allowed do that - it would be illegal - but HAP tenants, local authority tenants and affordable housing body tenants can all legally have that done. It is HAP tenants who do not get any maintenance from the council, by the way. They are the only private tenants who do not really have rent controls because the council can jack up their rent whenever the Government wants.

Protests are being organised against this round of rent increases. On Saturday, there is a protest in town and, on Thursday at 2.45 p.m., there is a protest at South Dublin County Council. I am sure there are protests happening in Sligo, Carlow and elsewhere. People are organising against these budgets to pass amendments on rent increases but this is just the start. We know the Government plan is to merge social housing and cost rental. That means the end of social housing as we know it, the end of the differential rent based system and the end of a system where you pay a percentage of your income, which is very fair. The Government says in black and white that the plan is to merge those to form a single affordable rental sector based on the principle of cost recovery. Cost recovery means that tenants collectively will be charged

the full cost of building, financing and maintaining their housing with profits for developers, banks and private management companies baked in at every stage along the way.

Cost rental has already led to exorbitant rents for cost-rental schemes across Dublin. In Citywest, cost-rental rents for a three-bedroom apartment are €1,750 a month. In O'Devaney Gardens in Dublin 7, for units built on public land, it is €1,895 a month for a three-bedroom apartment. With rents that high, tens of thousands of workers are priced out of cost rental completely because the rules say you cannot end up spending more than 35% of your net income on rent.

South Dublin County Council's maximum income limit for social housing is €40,000, so there are tens of thousands of workers who are caught out, caught in the middle, who are under the €60,000 you need to qualify for cost rental and over the €40,000 for the social housing. It is why we need universal access to social housing with differential rents based on incomes and ability to pay, not cost recovery. It is why, at a first step, we should say that this is a democratic decision that should be made by elected councillors.

An Ceann Comhairle: 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 Paul Murphy: I move: "That Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann adopts the Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled "Post-enactment Reports", a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 13th November, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2026: Leave to Introduce

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move:

That leave be given by the Dáil to introduce the following Supplementary Estimates for the service of the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026:

Vote 6 — Office of the Chief State Solicitor *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 9 — Office of the Revenue Commissioners *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 12 — Superannuation and Retired Allowances *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 14 — State Laboratory *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 18 — National Shared Services Office *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 20 — Garda Síochána *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 21 — Prisons *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 24 — Justice, Home Affairs and Migration *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 26 — Education and Youth *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 27 — International Co-operation *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 28 — Foreign Affairs and Trade *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 30 — Agriculture, Food and the Marine *(Second Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 31 — Transport *(Second Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 32 — Enterprise, Tourism and Employment *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 33 — Culture, Communications and Sport *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 34 — Housing, Local Government and Heritage *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 36 — Defence *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 37 — Social Protection *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 38 — Health *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 42 — Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Vote 44 — Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science *(Supplementary Estimate)*.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79026/26]

2. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79597/26]

3. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [80755/26]

4. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [80782/26]

5. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [81006/26]

6. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [81056/26]

7. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [81116/26]

8. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [64526/26]

9. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79417/26]

10. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [66874/26]

11. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [67767/26]

12. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79367/26]

13. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79264/26]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79098/26]

15. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79024/26]

16. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [64511/26]

17. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [79002/26]

18. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [78977/26]

19. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [78954/26]

20. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [64346/26]

21. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will meet next. [77363/26]

22. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [81288/26]

23. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [81414/26]

An Ceann Comhairle: We have 23 Deputies for this group of questions. I remind Members that it is 22 minutes for each group of questions and the Standing Order will be enforced.

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 23, inclusive, together.

My reply is quite lengthy so I may not be in a position to deliver all of it. I will just give the essence of it. The Cabinet committee on health last met on 20 July 2026 and is due to meet again shortly. The Cabinet committee oversees implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to health, receives detailed reports on identified policy areas and considers health reforms, including Sláintecare, the reform of public health and health system preparedness for future health threats and commitments in the areas of mental health and drugs policy. It is attended by myself, the Tánaiste and the Ministers for Health, Finance and Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

Sláintecare 2025+ aims to forge the way towards accessible, affordable, high-quality, healthcare for the people of Ireland when they need it and where they need it. The six new health regions and 20 integrated healthcare areas have now been established.

The public health sector workforce has grown by more than 31,570 since 2020; an increase of over 31%, with more senior staff rostered in emergency departments during weekends and public holidays for better decision-making.

We are focused on having a public healthcare service in which everyone has timely access to high-quality scheduled care, where and when they need it. However, we do need to reduce the list but, more importantly, the waiting times as many people are waiting too long for healthcare.

These increases are due to changing demographics, including population growth and a growing ageing population, as well as increased awareness of services and new service developments, including diagnostics of chronic disease.

However, there have been significant achievements in improving the length of time patients are waiting through the action plan approach initiated in September 2021. The waiting time action plan, WTAP, for 2026 aims to build on this progress. Since the implementation of the plan in September 2021 to October 2026, there has been a 46% reduction in patients waiting over 12 months. This equates to a reduction of 131,000 people. In the same period, there has been an improvement of approximately 43%, or 5.2 months, in the weighted average wait time, with average waiting times reducing from 12.2 months to 7 months. The waiting time action plan 2026 acts as a key enabler for each region to improve planned care delivery and sets out the national level priorities and actions, with a particular focus on patients waiting longest.

The Department of Health will continue to work with the HSE and NTPF to improve waiting list performance, including through the waiting time task force, which provides governance and oversight of the implementation of the plan for 2026 and is co-chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Health and the CEO of the HSE.

The public only consultant contract, POCC, was introduced to strengthen clinical decision-making capacity within the public system and to improve patient access to timely care. It also aims to align consultant activity fully with public service provision by removing private practice from public hospitals. Total consultant numbers have grown significantly, with more than 5,000 now in post, an increase of over 50% since January 2020.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Uptake of the POCC has also been strong with 70% of hospital consultants now signed up to the contract. The focus has now shifted to ensuring consistent implementation and compliance, particularly in relation to increased rostering of consultants on evenings and at weekends.

Government also continues to be committed to providing more timely care at home, in the community and at hospitals.

Our health budget has grown significantly in recent years, from €17 billion in 2019 and €25.8 billion in 2025, to over €29.1 billion under budget 2027. This is an increase of €1.76 billion on budget 2026 to increase capacity, strengthen community services and accelerate reform across the health service.

This builds on the investment and reforms undertaken over the past number of years, including: delivery of approximately 1,493 more acute beds to the end of September 2026; an increased workforce of approximately 31,544 WTE since 2020; more affordable healthcare through reductions in the drugs payment scheme threshold to €80; removal of hospital inpatient charges; extension of the eligibility for free GP cards for all children under eight years of age and to all earning no more than the median income; State-funded IVF; free contraception for women aged 17 to 35; and free access to HRT therapies.

On specific budget 2027 measures, the capital programme will deliver new facilities such as surgical hubs, including additional theatres and six-day operations. The surgical hubs in Cork and Swords opened in the past few months. There is additional capacity and upgraded

equipment nationwide and to enable additional weekend work, fuller use of theatres and outpatient clinics and diagnostic equipment. Some 1.8 million additional home support hours will be provided in 2027. We will grow virtual care capacity across all six health regions and for those living with and beyond cancer, provide follow-up care closer to home.

All of these measures are aimed at keeping people out of hospital and helping to relieve the pressures on acute services. In addition, budget 2027 will allow for: expanded training places in nursing and midwifery, medicine, health and social care and GP training, which has been initiated already in academic year 2026-2027; improved access to oral health and orthodontic services for children; implementation of the new national drugs strategy; introduction of a phased national shingles vaccination programme for eligible cohorts, starting with those who are immunocompromised over 85 years of age; eligibility for free contraception to be extended from age 35 to age 37; and the continued rollout of the HSE health app and shared care records and ePrescribing, alongside the progress on Ireland's first national electronic health record.

Funding for mental health services will increase to over €1.65 billion. It will advance key priorities aligned to our national mental health policy Sharing the Vision and Ireland's strategy to reduce suicide and self-harm, Connecting for Life, which Minister of State, Deputy Butler, launched earlier this year. This investment will support a significant expansion of community-based mental health services in crisis care, suicide prevention, early intervention, child and youth mental health and specialist national clinical programmes. The suicide crisis assessment nurse, SCAN, programme will be extended to all counties, two new rural crisis resolution teams and six Solace café's and four new Jigsaw services will be established.

Over €3.4 billion has been allocated to older person's services, the largest ever, providing a package of new investment in practical, locally delivered services, helping older people to remain living independently in their own homes, including Meals on Wheels, the community supports grants scheme, Family Carers Ireland and dementia services. This significant investment will support our older population to remain in their homes for longer which is what the majority wish.

Budget 2027 delivers significant progress for disabled children and adults, bringing the budget for disability services to over €4 billion for the first time. Building on significant increases over recent years, this investment will provide, through the HSE, dedicated funding to essential disability services, including for additional residential, respite, day service, therapy and personal assistance supports, ensuring that disabled people continue to be supported.

The national development plan, NDP, 2026-2030 provides an unprecedented level of investment of €9.25 billion for health infrastructure and digitalisation, representing the largest ever investment in public health infrastructure in the State. Investment in the electronic health record and improving systems is taking place at a time of an increasing population and increasing demands on our health services.

The HSE is forecasting winter 2026-2027 to be the busiest on record, with significant additional emergency department attendances expected between November and March, compared with last the same period last year, and is planning on that basis. A final HSE UEC winter 2026-2027 priorities and actions plan is being developed and is due to be submitted to the Minister by the HSE by 19 November.

In addition to the budgetary measures outlined earlier, we are committed to supporting care closer to home with continued expansion and optimisation of community-based and digitally enabled models of care, community pharmacy, chronic disease pathways, enhanced community care and virtual wards.

Our health and social care service has its challenges, like many worldwide. We are seeing the increasing cost of new drugs and medicines coming to the market but our health service has responded and has expanded significantly in recent years. We are seeing this reflected in self-perceived health status, with approximately 80% of citizens rating their health as good or very good putting Ireland at the highest in the EU. Life expectancy for men as well as women is increasing too above international averages and it is commendable that many of our older citizens are living independently with community-based supports.

The Government is committed to both investing and delivering reform to change the way health services are delivered this year and into the future.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The dysfunction in the health service is costing lives. A parliamentary question I submitted to the health Minister found that almost 10,000 people are waiting on cardiovascular surgery. These are serious, life and death operations. People with these conditions feel like they are living with a ticking bomb. Some 1,643 patients are waiting longer than a year for surgery while 696 are waiting longer than 18 months for surgery. Geography also plays a part. In Kerry, the average waiting time is 14 months. Will the Government fund these services? Will it reform the services, so we actually get value for the money we spend and so that people's lives can be saved?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Accident and emergency services at Our Lady's Hospital in Navan are vitally important for the community. Their long-term viability will be dependent on surgical services at Navan hospital. Will the Government invest in surgical services and bring them back to Navan? The Minister said she was looking at the region as a whole. There is a real opportunity to increase investment and provide acute surgical services in Navan hospital.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: MRIs and CT scans are vital diagnostic tools. I am sure the Taoiseach will agree. Last week in the Dáil I raised the fact the MRI scanner in Connolly Hospital was not working for over a week. However, I have been contacted by other families to say this is not a one off. Another woman is currently in Connolly Hospital waiting since 10 November for an MRI. She almost died and here she is waiting for an MRI. I was contacted by another family who told me their father waited one whole month in the summer, from 10 June to 8 July, in Connolly Hospital for an MRI and never got it. He was discharged to wait for one for an outpatient department, OPD, appointment. Unfortunately, he has actually died since. I am not saying it is related but my point is that MRIs can cost lives. What is going on? If there is pressure on the MRI scanners in our hospitals, it must be investigated and the Taoiseach should ask the Department to report on it.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I want to raise the issue of home care staffing shortages around the country, in particularly in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny.

An elderly man in my constituency was recently discharged and approved for a home care package for five mornings per week but there was no such package in place when he arrived home, due to staffing shortages in the HSE and the subcontracted companies. Another constituent emailed me this morning about his elderly mother, who broke her hip, suffers from dementia and is due to be discharged in the coming days. She lives on her own and her family have not been given any clarity on how her needs will be assessed.

These are not isolated cases. I come across them regularly at my constituency clinics. Families cannot be expected to fill the gaps. What are we going to do to address HSE home care staffing shortages and ensure approved care packages are in place when patients are discharged?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I was told that the medical assessment unit, MAU, in Our Lady's Hospital in Navan is to close for a number of months over the winter. It is to close, I understand, because it is to act as an overflow unit for the accident and emergency department in the hospital, so busy is the location. A number of years ago, an average of 60 people used to go through the emergency department each day. Now it is 120. Thirty thousand people went through the emergency department in Navan last year. The Government tried to close the emergency department. If it had been closed, where would those 30,000 people have gone? Will the Taoiseach make sure Navan hospital has enough money to operate both the emergency department and the MAU in a safe manner?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Yesterday, a motion came before Kerry County Council supporting the Beat Blood Cancer campaign to bring stem cell transplant services back to Cork University Hospital. This is a campaign organised by Mags McCarthy and backed by both Kerry County Council and Cork County Council and their respective mayors, Mikey Sheehy and Bernard Moynihan. This service was temporarily closed in 2008, 18 years ago. Patients are still awaiting its return. People from Kerry and Cork and across the south must travel to Dublin or Galway for these treatments, if there is even capacity there for them, adding travel costs, accommodation expenses and separation from their families to the enormous burden of fighting cancer. How can a closure lasting nearly 20 years be considered temporary?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I want to raise the Before We Die campaign with the Taoiseach. I am aware he met members of the group recently, which is very much appreciated. As he knows, these are parents of generally adult children with intellectual disabilities, and the parents' concern is what will happen to their children after they pass on. Over 500 adult children are being minded by parents over 80 years of age. The Taoiseach will recognise that this is a very significant worry for those parents. They want reassurance from the Government that the issue will be prioritised. After decades of underinvestment and a lack of focus on this area, it needs to be addressed. One of the cruellest aspects of this is the displacement of many of these people when they are given a placement hundreds of miles from their home.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Nurses, assistant officers and essential staff in the HSE have been given legally binding contracts and a start date. Does the Taoiseach consider it illegal to break a contract when it is signed by both parties? What compensation for loss of earnings will be given to those affected? Given that they have been given a date to start and that there is a

legally binding contract signed by both parties, is it not illegal for the HSE not to start those nurses and other essential staff members on the agreed date?

Deputy Martin Daly: In keeping with Sláintecare, we have been trying to provide alternative pathways for patients to access imaging in the community. In Tuam Health Centre, a very successful ultrasound imaging programme has been closed unilaterally by the HSE without communication with the GPs in the area for want of a half-time clerical staff member each week. This is simply unacceptable because we now have referrals at Tuam Health Centre that have not been read and GPs have not been informed why their patients have not been called for ultrasound scanning.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I have been contacted by many constituents who are struggling to access GP services across east Galway. Access to a GP is critical for people's health and well-being but it is at crisis point now. Many people cannot access a GP because practices are not taking on new patients. Many more people are waiting weeks on end for an appointment. Over the past five years, only four new GP positions have been created across Galway city and county, while the number of GPs who accept medical cards has decreased. There is a clear need to increase training and recruitment of GPs, especially in rural areas like east Galway. What is the Government's plan to increase capacity?

Deputy Liam Quaide: Consultants in Cork University Hospital, CUH, have explained that recording management meetings is standard practice in CUH because of shortages of administrative staff to take minutes, yet the Taoiseach and the HSE CEO have portrayed the recording of a meeting in August as evidence of a sinister hospital culture. The Taoiseach expressed no concern about the fact that a manager was threatened with a performance review after raising concerns about patient safety. Will he withdraw those damaging insinuations, acknowledge that his criticism of CUH staff was misplaced and commission an independent assessment of staffing needs for the hospital?

Deputy Paul Murphy: A month ago, I raised with the Taoiseach the delays in reimbursing women for lipoedema surgery overseas. He said he would follow up with the HSE. What was the response? The HSE has now officially suspended reimbursements altogether, supposedly pending a clinical review but with no date for when that will be finished. Sixty-three women are waiting for reimbursements. Some have been waiting for over a year. They are owed an average of €14,000 each. That is a huge amount of money. They do not have it. They have to borrow it, expecting to get it back in four weeks. Lipoedema Support Network Ireland is rightly calling this a national women's health scandal. It is another one. The HSE is refusing to engage with women. It is stalling a freedom of information request. Lipoedema is not a rare disease. One in ten women has it. Will the Taoiseach follow up and demand better for women?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is a major issue with staffing levels in hospital wards across the country. Much of it comes down to the lack of nurses within the system. Seven thousand Irish nurses are currently registered for work in Australia, which is quite incredible, yet nurses who have gone through the education system and were promised contracts have not had those contracts realised. Many of those nurses are being forced to look elsewhere. On top of that, I understand that 2,000 nurses were brought in from outside the country last year to fill certain

roles. We need to make sure that we have better workforce planning and that we commit to giving nurses who go through our education system the jobs they are entitled to.

Deputy John Connolly: The daily data published by the HSE on hospital admissions and accident and emergency waiting times continue to highlight that patients at University Hospital Galway, UHG, are among those suffering the worst experiences in the country, with one of the highest numbers of people waiting on trolleys and some of the longest waits for admission. There is a plan to address this. There is a plan to increase bed capacity at UHG by building two new bed blocks. However, I have to say I was a bit concerned by a response I received recently to a parliamentary question on that issue. It stated that estimates of timelines and costs cannot be made until the completion of a final business case, the completion of a tender process and, worryingly, a determination that the proposal remains affordable and continues to represent value for money. We need these new bed blocks in Galway urgently.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I wish to raise the ongoing difficulties in accessing residential care. At the moment, approximately 90 people who are awaiting residential placement are fit and ready to be discharged from our hospitals but have nowhere to go. Forty-two of these, I am led to believe, are people with intellectual disabilities. The debate over the last few weeks has shown that this situation is completely unacceptable. We have been reassured by the Minister, and she has been reassured by the HSE, that placements will be made available for these people if or when they arise. Last week, when I asked the HSE's head of finance about this at a meeting of the budgetary oversight committee, he seemed perplexed about the Minister's clarifications. Will the Taoiseach guarantee that these people will receive the residential placements to which they are entitled so that we can draw a line under this issue once and for all?

Deputy James Geoghegan: In answering questions on RTÉ Radio 1 on Saturday last, the Tánaiste, Simon Harris, made it clear that he would like to see an apology given to the thalidomide survivors by the end of this year. He acknowledged the good-faith engagement that he and the Taoiseach had had with the survivors, and I know that across these Houses we have all had engagement with Finola Cassidy and others involved in the thalidomide survivors association. Does the Taoiseach envisage that it will be possible for a State apology finally to be given to the survivors this year before Christmas?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all know that there are huge issues with the mental health services. I have spoken before of those who are in severe need of mental health services but who cannot avail of them. There is a particular issue in relation to authorised officers, who do not necessarily have the powers they would have in the North or in Britain when dealing with those who need help. I have raised this with the Minister a number of times. We have all come across the specific issue of people who want help but who cannot get it.

It is a significant level of resources for councils, the Garda and so on. I need to see that the Taoiseach will engage with the Minister on this.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I have been contacted by constituents facing lengthy delays in reimbursement under the cross-border healthcare directive. They are often people who are

seriously unwell, recovering from complex operations and treatments, who have paid substantial sums upfront. They are now being left out of pocket for months while waiting for reimbursement. The HSE has confirmed to me that the average processing time is now five months, against a target of 30 working days.

Will the Taoiseach ensure that the necessary resources are provided to clear this backlog and get reimbursements back on track? I have raised individual cases with the Minister through parliamentary questions. Some women with endometriosis have had to leave work because of their condition and are now facing further financial pressure while awaiting reimbursement. Others have been waiting almost a year following hip and knee operations. Will the Taoiseach give this the attention it requires, please?

The Taoiseach: In the North, is it?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: No, the processing of the reimbursements in this jurisdiction. I can send the Taoiseach details.

The Taoiseach: North-South operations, using facilities in the North?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to write.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Yes, using the cross-border healthcare directive.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who raised issues. Deputy Tóibín raised cardiovascular surgery. There is enough capacity in the country to deal with 1,600 waiting over a year. There can be reasons why perhaps some of those have not been undertaken but the capacity exists. The HSE and all those collectively in cardiac surgery centres need to come together in respect of this. There has been change. I note in my own city, for example, how cardiac surgery has changed with the growth of two new private facilities. We spent close to €60 million or €70 million on a cardiac renal centre in CUH, which is now not, in my opinion, being fully used to capacity. People should not be waiting over 12 months for cardiac surgery unless there are complications in respect of conditions and so.

Deputy O'Rourke raised emergency department services in Navan, the long-term viability of surgical services there and investment in them. The Minister is examining the north-east services in their entirety. That is happening in all regions. We no longer take it on a hospital-by-hospital basis. There has to be complementarity across hospitals in a given region and obviously Navan is a vital and key hospital in that regard.

In response to Deputy Coppinger, management of equipment, MRI scanners and CTs is fundamentally a hospital management issue and a HSE management issue. There has been a lot of investment and there will be more investment in health services. I do not have the specifics regarding Connolly Hospital and the specific issues there but that is an issue the HSE should work with the hospital on.

In response to Deputy Cleere, there have been challenges in the recruitment of home care personnel, even though we have expanded home care dramatically in the last five or six years,

and particularly the last two to three years. The only issue has been recruiting people, not because of resources but because of availability. That has proved very challenging.

Deputy Tóibín spoke about Navan. He said the Government wanted to close the emergency department. We did not.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The medical assessment unit.

The Taoiseach: The Government did not want to close that. That is a false statement. The HSE, working with the region and hospitals, developed its strategies and worked with clinicians. Most of this work is decided by expert review and expert analysis based on personnel, multidisciplinary teams availability and so on.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is an overflow.

The Taoiseach: It is a false, old-style political polemic to just say the Government was responsible for a given unit in a given hospital closing.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It was during the austerity years.

The Taoiseach: A lot of politicians over the years successfully exploited that and played games with people's health for electoral gain. The most important thing in hospital configuration and the provision of services has to be best outcomes for the patient. How we configure and deal with bigger hospitals has to be patient-centric, not vote-centric. I have to be straight. I have experienced it. I was a Minister of Health for four or five years. I saw the games being played during my time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government is trying to-----

The Taoiseach: Deputy Tóibín was part of it. They were games that had scant regard for the best outcomes for patients and for people. That is what we should all be motivated by.

In response to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, I am aware of that issue, although I do not think it was temporarily suspended. That is from 2008. I do not buy that argument. Maybe back then someone said it would be, but obviously it has not been a service for a lengthy period, from 2008 to 2026. My understanding is that the HSE is working with the hospital towards building that up, but I would have to meet the consultant concerned, because it takes build-up to do a service like that. You cannot do something as complex as this overnight. It needs infrastructure, which is acknowledged, including laboratories and so on. Given population growth in the southern region, it makes sense that we would create a centre. Again, however, it comes down to prioritisation by HSE South West and what priorities for funding it sends upstream. I do not know, but I suspect that is a factor in this.

In response to Deputy McGrath, I met the Before We Die campaign. It was a positive meeting. I have met them twice now, and the Tánaiste and a number of Government Ministers have met them. They identified Cork city as being one of the areas they would like to see replicated across the country in terms of how the council is taking a proactive view on the

housing issue with the HSE and other services, including disability services. It needs a forum-type approach in every county and then we need to ring-fence housing for people with disability, particularly adult children with disabilities. We should make sure that a certain portion of social housing that is built is reserved for them. The Minister has articulated that policy and we will follow through on it.

Deputy Conway-Walsh raised nursing contracts. I am not quite clear on her point. Health service recruitment is continuing, and in respect of nursing, there has been no direction from the Department not to recruit graduates. Recruitment obviously has to be planned against funded posts and patient and service needs. As of November, the Department has received applications for 554 whole-time equivalent graduate nurses and midwives under the enhanced process, all of which have been approved.

An Ceann Comhairle: That leaves nine Deputies to whom the Taoiseach will have to write

Cabinet Committees

24. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [79027/26]

25. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [79599/26]

26. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [80710/26]

27. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [80709/26]

28. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [80756/26]

29. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [80785/26]

30. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [81000/26]

31. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [81015/26]

32. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [81119/26]

33. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [66875/26]

34. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [75838/26]

35. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [78972/26]

36. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [78955/26]

37. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [64348/26]

38. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [81207/26]

39. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [81136/26]

40. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [81415/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 24 to 40, inclusive, together.

Under the programme for Government, we are committed to delivering a step change in disability services and supports and advancing the rights and improving the lives of disabled people. To deliver on this, I established a stand-alone Cabinet committee on disability. The committee has met ten times to date, most recently on 28 September, and is scheduled to meet next on 3 December. I have also established a dedicated disability unit in my Department. A programme plan for the unit has been published, outlining the work of the unit, including its role in supporting the Cabinet committee on disability and ensuring a truly all-of-government approach to disability. The committee plays a central role in overseeing the implementation of the key programme for Government commitments and the Government's National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. To date, it has considered a wide range of issues, including the provision of therapists in special schools, improving the delivery of services, the establishment of new training places for health and social care professions, growth in the disability workforce, housing for disabled people and reform of the assessment of need process.

The committee has also considered issues relating to special education provision, including work under way by the Department of Education and Youth to move towards a child-centred, needs-based approach to access special classes and special school places in our school system. This will build on previous reforms that removed diagnosis requirements for access to mainstream supports and more recently to access SNA supports. The purpose of this reform

is to ensure that children can access the services and supports they need based on their individual circumstances and needs. The Government recognises that diagnosis will continue to play an important role for many children, young people and families. The objective is to ensure that no child is left waiting for necessary support solely because a diagnosis has not yet been obtained. This work remains at an early stage of development and ongoing engagement with education stakeholders, advocacy groups, parents and families has commenced and will be central throughout the process.

The Government's National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 provides the framework for our whole-of-government approach to advancing the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We are backing these commitments with significant funding, most recently through budget 2027.

Building on the unprecedented investment provided in budget 2026 and its step-up in resources for specialist disability and mainstream services, budget 2027 will see a strong focus on direct payments and the introduction of new supports. Budget 2027 marked a milestone with the introduction of Ireland's first cost-of-disability payment. A lump sum of €500 will be paid in the first quarter of 2027 to approximately 240,000 people receiving a long-term disability payment. This new payment is being delivered alongside a range of enhanced supports, including increases to disability allowance, amendments to income disregards and introduction of schemes to reduce disability-related costs, such as a new vehicle adaptation scheme.

Budget 2027 also saw a record €4.1 billion allocated to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for specialist disability services including delivery of residential, respite and therapy services for children and adults. Despite significant increases in funding and resources in recent years and the continued committed efforts of so many to provide services, we acknowledge we can and must do more. I am determined this will be a Government that moves forward with purpose on disability issues, improving the level and scale of services and supports provided for disabled people and their families.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: According to a reply I recently received to a parliamentary question, there are currently 1,486 active applications for disability residential placements and the Government is going to provide 212 placements next year. That is an incredible disparity. Demand is seven times the number that will be supplied next year. Every one of those 1,486 applications is a person with a disability and a family trying to plan for the future. Many of them have ageing parents who are increasingly worried about their future. It is estimated there is a need for 3,900 residential places over the next ten years. Why is the Government only supplying a seventh of what is needed in the sector? Will the Government get real about investing and providing services for people who need residential places?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Taoiseach mentioned this in his opening statement, but the issue of removing diagnosis as an entry requirement for a special education placement is causing major concern in school communities. Is the Taoiseach aware of those concerns? Principally, they are that it will effectively enshrine in Government policy the giving of inappropriate placements to children. If the structures and supports are not in place first, this will have a detrimental effect on children and their ability to reach their potential, not just

children with additional needs but every child in the classroom. It will have a knock-on effect on the learning and teaching environment.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I want to follow on on assessment of need waiting lists. A reply I received to a parliamentary question stated nearly 1,300 families and children were in limbo, waiting and overdue for completion at the end of June. I recognise a huge amount of work is ongoing in the health service and the Department of Health on this but families need to see this work translate into shorter waits and access to therapies, ensuring our children receive the diagnosis and, more importantly, the interventions they need.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I raise the issue of housing for people with disabilities. Such housing should not be delivered solely through our social housing system. People with disabilities have diverse needs and aspirations and housing must reflect that, whether that is independent living or through supported accommodation or purpose-built accessible homes. We need proper forward planning between housing, disability and the health services, rather than responding to needs when families reach crisis point. Will the Taoiseach outline what progress has been made in this regard?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The treatment of children and the failings in healthcare for disabled children in CHI is absolutely critical. Families have written to every TD about their inability to support the proposed commission of investigation. This is a bad sign. Families talk about the limitations on examining historical failures, insufficient focus on clinical outcomes and patient safety, and the absence of meaningful consultation with the families affected, and they call for a full, open and transparent statutory tribunal of inquiry with appropriate protection for those who wish to give evidence privately. There has to be real analysis of what happened. They have also said the mediator that was agreed a year ago with Simon Harris has never come to fruition. They will be coming to the Dáil yet again tomorrow. Is this not a real indictment of the Government's treatment of disabled children?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I raise a dangerous practice: the promotion of so-called cures for autism by sinister individuals online, often with connections to the far right. They promote chlorine dioxide and miracle mineral solution, in reality a dangerous, potent bleach that has caused death and serious illness. It is obviously illegal to promote a medicine that is not regulated. These are not medicines, of course. They are extremely harmful but they are widely found on Facebook and other social media platforms. I have sent a long list to the Minister for Health. Will the Government act against Meta allowing these to be promoted? Will it instruct it to take them all down and shut down these closed groups where vulnerable families are told they need to do this and to damage their own children? If they do not act, will it prosecute Meta and other companies?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I know the Taoiseach will remember that when other people might have been on holidays at the height of the summer, he gave freely of his time and came to St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort, which was very appreciated. He gave a lot of time there listening to and understanding the difficulties and needs of people with intellectual and severe physical disabilities. I want to keep that issue at the heart of government. I know the Taoiseach has a serious concern about it and is very interested in helping. I want to make sure St. Mary's

and St. Francis Special School are kept to the forefront of deliberations when it comes to managing an excellent facility, It is a centre of excellence, in my opinion, and has been for many years.

Deputy Martin Daly: I raise St Teresa's Special School in Ballinasloe, County Galway. It is in crisis and about to lose its secretarial administrative staff - it is allowed 12 hours. The reason is the stress and burden they have carried for many years and they have just given up. I have spoken to the principal. He is looking for a review of the administrative requirements for the school. It has 48 special and additional needs students with complex medical needs and it needs that support. I ask for its situation to be reviewed, please.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I raise the proposals from Ability West and others to develop equine therapy facilities on the HSE-owned Toghermore site at Tuam, County Galway. Such a facility would bring huge benefits to children and adults with disabilities and provide important respite for families. However, we have been waiting months for the HSE to start the process of assessing the future of the site. The longer the assessment is delayed, the longer it will take to see any form of development at the site. Will the Taoiseach commit to engaging with the HSE on the future of the Toghermore site, especially in terms of moving along the assessment process?

Deputy James Geoghegan: Time ran out with the other question I asked but I will repeat it. The Tánaiste, when asked on RTÉ radio, said he hoped a State apology could finally be given to thalidomide survivors before Christmas. I put the same question to the Taoiseach and acknowledge the good faith work he, the Tánaiste and everyone in these Houses have done in the engagement we have had with the thalidomide survivors and Finola Cassidy. We want to see a resolution and to see them get the State apology they richly deserve.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I did not get an answer to my question the first time around either, so I will half repeat it here. I said 90 people are currently in our main hospitals across the country awaiting residential placement. Forty-two of them have intellectual disabilities. I asked a parliamentary question of the HSE two weeks ago and got an answer last week. I queried the number of residential places in the HSE funded by disability service providers that are unoccupied at the moment.

I could not believe the answer I received. There are 319 placements currently unoccupied and paid for by the HSE. While we look at those 42 people with intellectual disabilities in hospitals at the moment, we have 319 paid for and budgeted for beds that are unoccupied. It is unacceptable and something needs to be done about it.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to raise the case of a young constituent from Mayo who has a disability and must make a four-hour round trip to Tuam to access a specialist driving instructor to learn how to drive. It is not right that there is no driving instructor within each county who is able to instruct people with disabilities. For this young person I am speaking about, there is no other transport in the house to enable them to get to Tuam in the first place. Despite their contacting lots of different agencies and departments, nobody could help them. Will the Government establish a one-stop information service for disabled learner drivers and

ensure specialist driving instructors and adapted vehicles are available in Mayo and in rural Ireland to make driving lessons more accessible for people with disabilities?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will reiterate the question and it is as simple as this. We all have come across a huge number of people who are in need of mental health services and who in some cases need involuntary committal. It is incredibly difficult for families, services, the council and those who become responsible for the situation, even when it falls to the Garda, to get this matter dealt with. The fact is mental health services' authorised officers do not have the same powers they have in Britain or the North. Alongside the legislative changes I believe should be made, I am not sure the guidelines have been issued properly to GPs or others. I am sure there are others in the room who could attest to that. It is causing a huge number of issues. We are talking about people who at times have made themselves homeless for weeks having created huge hassle for those who live in or around them, but we cannot get this addressed quickly enough. The issue needs to be looked at properly and it is causing a huge number of issues, particularly for the Garda. The Drogheda Department of Psychiatry, DDOP, in Crosslanes is waiting for a ten-bed extension and we really need to see movement on that.

The Taoiseach: I thank all of the Deputies for raising these issues. We began with-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Mise.

The Taoiseach: We began with Deputy Tóibín in terms of the number of applications for residential placements. We acknowledge we need, and are incrementally building up, the section 38s and section 39s, but it is also our view that local authorities and the Department of housing have a lead role in providing housing for people with disabilities. The Minister for housing has worked with the Minister for disability in respect of that issue, particularly in the context of the Before We Die campaign. We met its representatives recently to discuss and put that before them. That is work that is under way already and the Minister has engaged with local authorities in respect of that. It will not just be through the HSE alone or through the Department of disability but we will also use the record level of social housing we are now building. I take the point it is not one-size-fits-all and that we need different types of house types to accommodate different types of need and that will also be provided for.

Deputy McGreehan raised the issue of AON. Essentially, children do not require an assessment of need to access health services, including primary care and children's disability network teams, or mental health services. There has been an improvement in assessment of need reports with 5,939 reports completed in 2025. That is a 43% increase compared with 2024. Some 3,000 reports were completed in the first six months of this year. Interestingly, a further €20 million of funding was allocated in budget 2027 for the targeted wait-list initiative, which has utilised private capacity to procure more than 11,600 assessments from June 2024 to July 2026. There is a continued growth in the number of AON applications.

The reform in the Disability (Amendment) Bill is basically that we want to make it more effective and more efficient. We want to make sure resources are available from day one for children so they can avail of therapy services as opposed to having to wait for a diagnosis and then queue up for services. The Bill does not alter the existing six-month statutory timeline and is just one part of a broader approach to improve how disabled children and their families

are supported. We will continue to invest in growing the capacity of CDNT and primary care teams by: introducing new in-reach teams to provide clinical guidance and support for clinicians; performing assessments informed by the new autism assessment protocol; rolling out the HSE single point of access system to reform the referral processes for children's services; implementing the national autism assessment protocol to support the delivery of autism assessments; and then investing in private sector capacity to support AON delivery.

Deputy Dempsey raised housing needs again in terms of the section 38s, local authorities and the HSE. Yes, it is a collaborative exercise but we can no longer just leave it all to the section 38s and 39s. We need a broad-brush approach. Clearly, the wraparound services are important. Some will need more than others. We need a very proactive approach from the housing Department and local authorities to housing people with disabilities. They are as entitled to housing as anybody else and because of the nature of disability, the thresholds should be such we want to accommodate them, particularly adult children where their parents are very worried about what will happen to them when they pass. We need to take that anxiety and worry away from parents and that means greater proactivity from all of the bodies involved.

Deputy Coppinger raised the proposed commission of investigation and I am aware the organisations want a public inquiry. I have concerns about that but the Minister is continuing to engage and consult. The issue is making sure people come forward and particularly that children's and families' privacy is respected in any inquiry that takes place. I do not think it is simple. Everyone thinks just declare a public inquiry, but they can take a long time and we must try to arrive at a situation that can give people closure or satisfactory answers. That is not always the case in public inquiries, unfortunately. They can take an inordinate length of time as well and become adversarial with people taking legal representation and so on. No matter which model we use - a commission of investigation or a public inquiry - it is not an easy or straightforward path.

Deputy Paul Murphy-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Rourke had concerns about an issue.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I had the second question about special education placements and the removal of diagnosis.

The Taoiseach: I dealt with that did I not?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: No, the Taoiseach did not.

The Taoiseach: It is the assessment of need, AON, issue.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The diagnosis for special education placements and the concern teachers and parents have.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, part of that is connected to assessment of need because what is happening is the assessment of need process is simply not working for children at the moment and they are waiting too long to get services. What we are trying to do is get them services

when they need them. In many cases there is no argument about the need, so they should not have to wait for a diagnosis to get access to services, in our view. We have a call to make as to whether we just block up the entire system and have children waiting an inordinate length of time for services. A balance has to be struck between the two. We acknowledge that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Government wants teachers to take it on.

The Taoiseach: No, we do not. We did not say that. I know the Deputy just wants the next campaign-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is just what they are saying.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Move on to the next Deputy.

The Taoiseach: We need to engage with the issue. There is no point in coming in here every week and giving out about lengthy waiting lists if you do not try to understand what is going on and what is going wrong. The High Court decision some years ago made it worse so we have a duty to try to rectify it. Otherwise we could keep coming in and playing ping-pong - the waiting lists are too long and so on like that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You could employ people to do it.

The Taoiseach: We have to ask ourselves the questions, why is it not working and can we make it better? The greater priority has to be to get children access to the services. That ultimately is what we are about.

I agree 100% with Deputy Paul Murphy. I will talk to the Ministers in respect of engaging with Meta. There are no automatic cures for autism and it is outrageous and morally and ethically wrong for people to claim there are. We have been through this before on a number of fronts over the years, not just in respect of autism but of other conditions, and there has to be a very robust response to that.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae raised St. Mary of the Angels.

We raised some of the issues at the last Cabinet subcommittee meeting, particularly decongregation and the balance that must be struck between the needs of families and individuals, particularly where they now have access to very good services and facilities, and given the need to develop new facilities in terms of how we allocate resources. I do not think that balance was necessarily followed. Everything was on the decongregation side and we were not getting enough new places established.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan missed out the last time. I would agree with the Deputy. If you were in a hospital and a health service, and there was a chance to free up 45 beds or 90 overall - I think the Deputy mentioned 45 intellectual disability places - you would do that. This comes down to management too. People need to work together to sort this out, particularly if there are 319 placements currently occupied. They may not all tally. It depends on where they are

unoccupied, but where there is a will there is a way and people need to work harder to sort it out.

St. Teresa's Special School issue was raised by Deputy Daly.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I was before Deputy O'Sullivan.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry. Unfortunately, Deputy Daly was too and was before Deputy Geoghegan as well. I skipped a page in my notebook by mistake. Regarding St. Teresa's Special School, I will talk to the Minister in respect of this issue. I might talk to Deputy Daly after this session is over about this precise issue. It seems wrong that this should happen just because of a secretarial or administrative issue. I do not mean that in a bad way. The Deputy's question is about whether we can give additional supports.

Deputy O'Hara raised equine therapy. I am a strong supporter of it. It works very well and has dramatic transformational impacts on children. I will see what the HSE is doing there. It needs to hurry up and make a call.

I think Deputy Geoghegan is aware that the Government has committed to give an apology before the end of the year, but I have to say that we are frustrated at the length of time it has taken to resolve issues that should have been resolved earlier. I am not going to say anything further than that. I have made my points clear on this issue. We have had regular meetings now with the group and its legal adviser. We have been endeavouring for the past four or five years to organise mediation. There has been mediation but, for some reason, progress is very difficult.

Deputy Conway-Walsh raised a transport issue. I will speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, in respect of it. I think it concerns driver testing for disabled drivers.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I was talking about the lessons.

The Taoiseach: I know. Yes, I have it. I will speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. Deputy Ó Murchú raised mental health services in the north east.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is in relation to the ten-bed extension, but I am also concerned about trying to get mental health services for people who need involuntary committals. It is incredibly difficult and is causing a huge number of issues. It needs to be looked at properly.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Taoiseach. There is a lot more to be done, including on powers for authorised officers.

Finance (International Financial Institutions) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I welcome the opportunity to introduce this legislation. This Bill comes at a time of growing geopolitical and economic uncertainty, conflict, disruption to international trade, the rapid development of artificial intelligence and pressures facing the global economy, all of which are reshaping the world around us. Chief among the long-term challenges we face is climate change. These challenges do not respect national borders. No country, however wealthy or powerful, can address them alone.

This Government believes in international co-operation. Ireland is a small, open economy. Our jobs, investment and prosperity depend on a stable international environment but that stability does not happen in a vacuum. It requires countries to work together, support one another and recognise that our long-term interests are often shared. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, IMF, are central to that effort. They provide a framework through which countries can respond collectively to economic challenges, support financial stability and prevent difficulties in one part of the world becoming crises elsewhere.

With COP31 taking place in Türkiye, there is a particular focus on the need to match climate ambition with accessible and affordable finance. For many vulnerable countries, the question is not simply whether they want to invest in climate resilience but whether they can afford to do so without placing their economies under further strain. It can be tempting to present international support as a choice between helping people abroad and meeting needs here at home but that is a false choice. As a country, we cannot ignore risks that if left unchecked will ultimately affect us too. We cannot insulate ourselves from every shock but we can support the institutions and arrangements that make those shocks less damaging. When countries struggle with the effects of climate change, the immediate consequences may be felt thousands of miles away but the wider economic repercussions do not necessarily stay there. Supporting resilience abroad is not separate from protecting stability at home. It is part of the same responsibility. That is the context for the Bill before the House today.

The Bill has two principal objectives. First, it enables Ireland to contribute a portion of its International Monetary Fund special drawing rights, SDRs, to the IMF's resilience and sustainability trust, RST. Second, it makes technical and administrative updates to the legislation governing Ireland's membership of a number of international financial institutions. Ireland has been a member of the IMF since 1957. Through the IMF and other international institutions, we have long supported international monetary co-operation and assistance to countries experiencing economic difficulty. This Bill builds on that record.

Before turning to the details, I will outline the sections of the Bill. Sections 1 and 2 are standard commencement and definition provisions.

Section 3 repeals a number of legislative provisions that will be replaced by updated provisions in the Bill. These include section 9 of the Bretton Woods Agreements (Amendment) Act 1999, relating to a Bank for International Settlements, BIS, credit facility for Brazil, and section 3 of the Bretton Woods Agreements (Amendment) Act 2011, which contains earlier provisions of the IMF's articles of agreement.

Section 4 provides that the Minister for Finance may, on behalf of the State, enter into an agreement with the IMF for the purpose of making a grant contribution from the central fund to the reserve account of the RST. It sets the calculation and limit of such a contribution.

Section 5 provides that the Central Bank of Ireland may, on behalf of the State, enter into agreements with the IMF for the purpose of transferring special drawing rights to the RST on loan and on deposit and sets limits on the amounts that may be provided.

Section 6 provides for the Minister for Finance to issue a guarantee to the Central Bank of Ireland and sets out the parameters of such a guarantee. It also outlines the role of the Central Bank of Ireland pursuant to the provision by the State of a guarantee, including obligations on the Central Bank of Ireland in relation to the payment of money advanced by the State, obligations on the Central Bank of Ireland in relation to the recovery of sums owed, where relevant, and annual reporting obligations.

Sections 7 to 11 propose a number of technical and administrative amendments to the articles of agreement and articles of convention that govern Ireland's membership of several international financial institutions. These include the IMF, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, the International Development Association, IDA, the International Common Fund for Commodities, ICFC, and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency, MIGA. The IBRD, the IDA, the ICFC and the MIGA are four of the five institutions of the World Bank.

Section 12 proposes the removal of outdated BIS provisions as outlined in the Bretton Woods Agreements (Amendment) Act 1999 and to strengthen reporting requirements by the Central Bank of Ireland to the Minister for Finance under section 6 of this Bill.

Similar to sections 7 to 11, sections 13 to 15 propose a number of technical and administrative amendments to the articles of agreement governing Ireland's membership of the Asian Development Bank, ADA, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB, and the African Development Bank and Fund, AfDB.

Given the technical nature of the Bill, it is important to explain what is being contributed. Ireland's international reserve assets are held by the Central Bank of Ireland. They include securities, currencies, deposits, gold and SDRs.

An SDR is not an ordinary currency. It is an international reserve asset created by the IMF with a value based on a basket of major currencies. Under the IMF arrangements, it can be exchanged for usable currencies. Ireland has an allocation of approximately 4.1 billion SDRs, equivalent to roughly €5 billion. A substantial portion was allocated in 2021 when the IMF issued SDRs internationally to help countries meet liquidity needs during a period of exceptional uncertainty. The distinction is important: transferring SDRs under a loan or deposit agreement is not the same as making a grant from the Exchequer. Those assets are expected to be returned under the agreed terms.

The IMF established the resilience and sustainability trust, RST, to help low-income and vulnerable middle-income countries to address longer-term structural challenges, including climate change and pandemic preparedness. The aim is to strengthen resilience to future shocks and support lasting economic stability. The trust provides longer-term financing on more affordable terms than many eligible countries could obtain in financial markets. Loans have a

20-year maturity with no repayment of principal for the first 10.5 years. This gives countries time to carry out reforms, the benefits of which may take years to materialise.

Importantly, this is not unconditional funding. Before financing is approved, the IMF assesses a country's capacity to implement reforms and repay its borrowings. This includes examining the composition of public debt, debt sustainability over a 20-year period and repayment capacity throughout the life of the loan. Financing is also subject to limits and IMF oversight. It is the IMF rather than individual contributing countries that undertakes these assessments to ensure that lending supports sustainable reform without adding to unsustainable debt burdens. In 2022, the IMF asked economically strong member countries, including Ireland, to contribute a portion of the SDRs allocated to them in 2021. Through this Bill, Ireland will be able to contribute approximately 20% of its 2021 allocation, a total of SDR 660 million or around €800 million at the exchange rate used in the original briefing.

There are three distinct streams of support. It is important to be clear about the difference between them. First, the Central Bank of Ireland will provide SDR 550 million to the RST loan account. These are resources that support the trust's lending to eligible countries. They are provided under a loan agreement and are to be repaid to the Central Bank by the IMF. Second, the Central Bank will place SDR 110 million in the RST deposit account. This supports the trust's financing arrangements. It too is provided under an agreement with the IMF and is expected to be returned. Neither the loan nor deposit should be confused with a permanent grant of that amount. Third, the State will provide a separate grant from Exchequer resources to the trust's reserve account. This contribution helps to cover the trust's overheads so that those costs are not passed on to vulnerable countries using the facility. The amount is estimated at approximately €13.5 million, depending on exchange rates. The Bill sets a maximum of €15 million. This contribution reflects the reality that a stable international financial system depends on members being prepared to support it.

As Ireland's SDRs are held by the Central Bank as part of the State's reserve assets, the bank assessed the proposal against its responsibility for managing those reserves. The Central Bank indicated it could participate subject to two requirements: a Government guarantee covering its exposure and clear legislation establishing its role in making the contribution on behalf of the State. This Bill provides for both. The guarantee is an important safeguard for the Central Bank. It does not mean that a loss is anticipated but it does mean that the State assumes the exposure covered by the guarantee. Similar arrangements have been used for Ireland's participation in the IMF's new arrangements to borrow and other European countries have provided guarantees to their central banks for RST contributions. The Bill also provides for obligations concerning recovery of sums due and annual reporting, ensuring appropriate accountability for these commitments.

The Department of Finance consulted the European Central Bank as required under the European treaties. The ECB raised a specific concern that section 6(4) could be interpreted in a manner incompatible with the prohibition on monetary financing by national central banks under Article 123(1) of the treaties. The Department has examined the ECB's opinion and considers that section 6(4) is sufficiently clear and that a further legislative amendment is not required. It has confirmed that the matters raised by the ECB will be addressed in the wording of the deed of guarantee between the State and the Central Bank. The objective is to ensure

that the arrangement operates within the relevant legal framework while providing the Central Bank with the protections it requires.

The Bill also updates the Acts governing Ireland's membership of several international financial institutions. The purpose is to allow certain changes to their governing agreements to be approved by Dáil Éireann's resolution rather than requiring a new Act on each occasion. This is a more practical process for limited technical and administrative changes without removing parliamentary scrutiny. The approach remains subject to the relevant constitutional requirements including Article 29.5.2 and the conditions set out in the Bill. Changes imposing new charges on public funds continue to require the appropriate Dáil approval. The intention is to use Oireachtas time effectively without compromising accountability or Ireland's constitutional obligations.

The Bill underwent pre-legislative scrutiny in November 2025. The committee published six recommendations in March this year. I would like to acknowledge that work. First, the committee sought an explanation from the Central Bank of Ireland as to why a State guarantee is necessary. The bank has provided a detailed explanatory note which has been shared with the committee. Second, the committee recommended annual reporting on countries receiving RST loans. This information is already published by the IMF. The Department does not propose to duplicate this reporting. Third, the committee proposed establishing criteria for when Ireland should object to lending to particular countries. The Department considers it more appropriate to assess proposals on a case-by-case basis through the IMF executive board, where Ireland is represented. It is important to highlight that RST financing is released following an IMF review and the substantive completion of the relevant reforms rather than in advance. This provides an additional safeguard around how funding is used. Fourth, the committee sought clarification on the consequences of a borrower defaulting on an IMF loan. The IMF has provided detailed information on this matter which has also been shared with the committee. Fifth, the committee emphasised the importance of maintaining constitutional safeguards under Article 29.5.2. The Bill maintains the necessary Dáil oversight, including for amendments that impose a new charge on the State. Finally, the committee recommended that SDR contributions should not be counted towards climate finance or official development assistance. I can confirm that the SDRs loaned and deposited under these arrangements will not be counted towards either.

International co-operation is not an abstract principle. It is how countries confront challenges no country can solve on its own. For Ireland, as a small open economy, international stability is central to our continued prosperity. By supporting this Bill we are helping to build a stronger and more resilient global economy that benefits us all. I look forward to Members' contributions. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an Bhille seo. Sula bpléimid an phríomhcheist, is é sin an t-aistriú de €800 milliún chuig an Chiste Airgeadaíochta Idirnáisiúnta, CAI, tá sé tábhachtach céim siar a thógail agus breathnú ar an chomhthéacs níos leithne. Fágann an cur síos sin go bhfuil cuma institiúide teicniúla neodraí ar an CAI agus gur grúpa saineolaithe é a thagann le chéile chun cobhsaíocht a athbhunú. Ní mar sin a fheiceann go leor daoine ar fud an domhain agus in Éirinn féin ar an CAI.

Le blianta fada anuas, ní hamháin gur chuir an CAI maoiniú ar fáil ach cheangail sé coinníollacha leis an mhaoiniú sin fosta. D'éiligh sé athchóirithe eacnamaíochta agus chuir sé an rud ar a dtugtar clár coigeartaithe struchtúraigh chun cinn. Rinne sé idirghabháil dhomhan i mbeartais eacnamaíochta intíre. Sháraigh sé roghanna daonlathacha, agus gach rud chun dearcadh eacnamaíochta cúinge a chur chun cinn. Mar sin, nuair a chloiseann an pobal go bhfuil reachtaíocht ag teacht os comhair an Tí seo chun €800 milliún d'acmhainní na hÉireann a aistriú chuig an CAI, tá sé de cheart ag daoine ceisteanna a chur.

Tá sé de cheart acu fosta fios a bheith acu faoin áit a bhfuil an t-airgead sin ag dul. Tá sé de cheart acu fios a bheith acu faoin dóigh a mbainfear úsáid as an airgead sin. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil gá le mionscrúdú cuí ar an chinneadh seo mar ní suim bheag airgid é €800 milliún. Is ionann é sin agus an buiséad bliana iomlána atá ag an chúnamh oifigiúil forbartha thar lear. Is ionann é sin agus thart ar 20% de na cearta tarraingthe speisialta a leithdháileadh ar Éirinn in 2021, ócáidneamhghnácha bhí sa leithdháileadh sin féin. Mar fhreagra ar an phandéim Covid-19, cheadaigh an CAI leithdháileadh domhanda de thart ar €550 billiún i gcearta tarraingthe speisialta. Ba é an leithdháileadh ba mhó i stair na hinstitiúide é agus bhí sé i bhfad níos mó ná an leithdháileadh a rinneadh tar éis na géarchéime airgid dhomhanda in 2009. Toisc go ndearnadh an leithdháileadh ar bhonn ginearálta, fuair gach ball den CAI cearta tarraingthe speisialta. Airítear leis sin tíortha nach bhfuil rochtain acu ar an mhaoiniú. Dá bharr sin, leithdháileadh thart ar €4 billiún i gcearta tarraingthe speisialta ar Éirinn.

Is fiú a chinntiú go dtacaíonn acmhainní nár úsáideadh le tíortha atá ag tabhairt aghaidh ar dhúshláin shuntasacha eacnamaíochta, aeráide agus forbartha. Tá imní dlisteanacha ann fosta. Tá imní faoi chuntasacht daonlathaithe, faoi choinníollacha a ghabhann leis an mhaoiniú, faoi ról leanúnach an CAI i múnlú an bheartais eacnamaíochta agus faoi thrédhearcacht.

Before dealing with the core issues before us today, namely, the transfer of €800 million of Ireland's special drawing rights to the International Monetary Fund, it is important to step back and look at the wider context. This legislation touches on fundamental questions about democratic accountability, the role of the IMF and how decisions involving hundreds of millions of euro are made. The Minister of State has outlined some of that context in his contribution but there is a great deal he did not mention.

The International Monetary Fund is the lender of last resort to countries facing economic distress. In theory, its purpose is straightforward. When a country can no longer access hard currencies such as the US dollar or the euro, meaning it cannot finance debt repayments or pay for essential imports, the IMF steps in. Most countries can print their own currencies but if debts are denominated in dollar or if a country needs foreign currency to purchase fuel or other critical importance, they need access to hard currencies. When a severe balance of payments crisis emerges, the IMF arrives as the emergency lender.

That description could make the IMF sound like a neutral, technical institution - a body of experts who are stepping in to restore stability. That is how many people around the world and, indeed, many people in Ireland see the IMF. However, there are many more who see it in a very different light. For decades, the IMF has not merely provided financing; it has attached conditions to that financing. It has demanded economic reforms. It has promoted what it called structural adjustment programmes. It has interfered in domestic economic policy. It has overwritten democratic processes and choices and pushed a failed economic agenda. Countries seeking help often find themselves required to privatise public assets, reduce their public

spending and cut social supports. Critics have long argued these policies serve the interests of international finance and multinational corporations rather than the interests of ordinary people. These criticisms are not just academic debates. They are backed by the experience of hundreds of millions of people right around the world.

After the global financial crash of 2008, of which Fianna Fáil was the main actor in this State, the same policies came to Europe. Ireland knows the story all too well. When the banking system collapsed and the Troika arrived, austerity followed. That experience remains front and centre of Irish people's minds. When the public hears that legislation is before this House this evening that will transfer €800 million of Ireland's assets to the IMF, people are entitled to ask questions. They are entitled to know where the money is going. They are entitled to know how it will be used. They are entitled to know whether the IMF of today is different from the IMF of the past. Some argue it is. Some argue the IMF has been reformed, has recognised the failures and adopted a new approach. Others argue it is the same old, same old. It is the same interests being served at the expense of ordinary people. The only change is softer language but the same hard edges. It is the same failed economic outlook that is holding the global economy down. That is why the decision here this evening deserves proper scrutiny because €800 million is a significant amount of money. It is roughly equivalent to an entire year's overseas development aid budget. It is approximately 20% of the special drawing rates allocated to Ireland by the IMF in 2021.

That allocation in itself was an extraordinary moment. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the IMF approved a global allocation of approximately €550 billion in special drawing rates. It created €550 billion as an emergency response. It was the largest allocation in the institution's history and far exceeded the allocation made following the global financial crash of 2009. In principle, I believe the decision was the right one. The pandemic created an unprecedented global emergency. Countries faced collapsing revenues, rising health costs and severe economic disruption. The allocation gave those countries access to funding on favourable terms at a time when it was desperately needed. It was not a perfect solution and it was not debt forgiveness but, for countries that converted their SDR allocation into usable currency, it functioned as a lifeline. Perhaps most significantly, there were no policy conditions attached: no demands to privatise public services, no requirement to reduce public service employment and no instructions on how Governments should organise their economies. Countries were left to made those decisions themselves, as it should be.

However, because the allocation was made on a general basis, every IMF member received SDRs. That included countries like Ireland that did not need access to the finance. As a result, Ireland was allocated approximately €4 billion worth of SDRs. Most people in the country are entirely unaware of this fact. Most people have never heard about Ireland receiving what amounted to €4 billion in international reserve assets just a number of years ago, and the reason is revealing. Unlike many countries elsewhere in the world, Ireland could not simply convert those SDRs into currencies or on-lend the assets. Under the European Union rules, that is prohibited. The use of SDRs in that manner would be considered monetary financing and, under Article 123 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, that is not allowed. In simple terms, EU governments cannot use money created through the central banking system to finance public expenditure. What were the consequences of that? Ireland's allocation could never enter the State's coffers. For legal reasons, it still had to sit on the balance sheet of the Central Bank as part of our reserve assets.

Countries across Europe continue to face significant debt burdens, as we know. Some have borrowed at comparatively high interest rates. Others continue to refinance historical debts accumulated over many decades and yet, at the same time, billions of euro in reserve assets remain locked away on central banks' assets sheets. They are assets that cannot be deployed through the normal democratic process and cannot be used directly by governments, not even when public needs are pressing. The reality is that EU member states cannot use SDRs in the same way that many non-EU countries can. They simply cannot convert them into currency and spend them on infrastructure, housing, healthcare or public services. Those decisions are constrained by treaty rules.

Even if all we wanted to do was to provide the same kind of financing to poor nations in the exact same way but bypassing the IMF, we would not be allowed to do so under the European rules. This fact alone provides a fascinating insight into the world of international central banking. It is a world that remains largely invisible to the public, where decisions involving billions of euro are often made far from democratic scrutiny and far from elected representatives. Opportunities to debate this are rare but these questions matter.

The IMF allocated resources intended to support the global economic crisis during that time that it occurred. However, because of how the IMF general allocation worked, and because of EU law, substantial portions of those resources ended up sitting on central banks' balance sheets unused. Within the euro area almost €200 billion ended up in this position. This was money that could not enter the real economy and instead could only be held as reserve assets. That immediately raised a question. If countries needed these resources, why were they stuck on the balance sheets of central banks in Europe and across the West? Why not redirect them elsewhere?

The original objective of the allocation was to support the countries that needed the help the most. The mechanism used to distribute the SDRs was blunt. As a result, a significant share ended up with countries that had less need for them and no legal ability to use them. It is, therefore, reasonable to ask whether some of these resources should be redirected. I agree with this in principle. Resources intended to support global recovery should reach the countries where they can have the greatest impact. However, agreeing with this in principle does not mean agreeing with how it is being done. Initially, there were discussions about whether SDRs could support multilateral development banks and other international institutions. However, concerns were raised by the European Central Bank. It was Christine Lagarde, the former managing director of the IMF and later president of the ECB, who argued that certain alternative arrangements could conflict with the prohibition on monetary financing. As a result, the decision was made to transfer the money back to the IMF for redistribution.

This brings us to the resilience and sustainability trust. This trust was established in response to calls for countries to redirect unused SDRs. In theory, this sounds entirely reasonable. Resources sitting idle would be sent to countries facing challenges such as climate change and pandemic preparedness. However, we have to look beyond the nice-sounding headlines. The trust was created without meaningful public debate or genuine democratic consultation. Despite calls for debt-free financing without policy conditionality, this is not what has emerged. Access to the trust comes with significant requirements. Countries must already have, or secure, a traditional IMF programme and they must maintain policy frameworks that satisfy IMF standards.

The financing provided is ultimately more debt for countries already drowning in debt. They receive this debt on condition that they operate within an IMF-approved policy framework. This raises important concerns, particularly when we examine how these programmes have been implemented. In Costa Rica, reforms linked to IMF programmes included measures affecting public sector pay. In Barbados, reforms focused on reducing public debt through changes involving state-owned enterprises. In Bangladesh, IMF-backed reforms included measures aimed at lowering protections and reducing trade barriers. In Morocco, reforms involved liberalisation in the electricity sector. These are not neutral technical decisions; they are part of the same failed economic agenda of the IMF which it has been pushing for years.

This is why many observers remain concerned about the design of the trust and the conditions the IMF is attaching to this money. I acknowledge that the trust represents better terms compared with the traditional IMF facilities. It offers significantly longer repayment periods, loans can be extended over 20 years and there is a grace period of more than ten years before principal payments begin. These terms are considerably more favourable than traditional IMF lending. However, even supporters of this initiative acknowledge it falls far short of what many countries had hoped for.

The scale of lending remains limited and demand has been lower than projected. The IMF itself has reduced expectations regarding future lending activity under the trust. As of this year, only a relatively small proportion of the available lending capacity has been utilised. Projections suggest that billions of euro in lending capacity could remain unused for years. This raises another question. If the trust is as transformative and beneficial as claimed, why has the take-up been so low and far lower than expected? Why has lending been revised downwards? Why are we only dealing with this legislation now, years after the trust became operational? The Minister has spoken about Ireland participating. If participation is so important, why all the delay?

We will deal with this in more detail on Committee Stage but since August 2021 the value of Ireland's SDR holdings and reserve position at the IMF has continued to increase. The combined figure has risen substantially. I hope the Minister of State will have an opportunity to clarify what is driving this increase. Is it solely due to interest and valuation effects or is Ireland purchasing SDRs from other countries seeking to convert them into usable currency?

There is another aspect of the prospect before us that requires explanation. Alongside the transfer of SDRs, the legislation provides for an additional €15 million payment from the Central Fund. We are told that this is to cover administrative costs and operational overheads within the trust but many people will reasonably ask why. If Ireland is already transferring €800 million in reserve assets, why is an additional contribution required? What precisely will this money fund and how was the figure calculated?

There are also the issues of risk and accountability. The Central Bank of Ireland supported the transfer of up to 20% of Ireland's SDRs but only on specific conditions. Among these conditions was a requirement for a Government guarantee. The Central Bank has sought legislative clarity regarding its role in these transactions. Other European central banks, including those in France and Italy, sought similar protections but it seems that many other countries have not provided their central banks with the same guarantee.

Let us be clear about what is happening and the question before us. We are not simply transferring money from one account to another; we are participating in a broader international effort to redirect resources created during the pandemic. This objective has merit, and there is merit in ensuring unused resources support countries facing economic, climate and development challenges. However, there are also legitimate concerns about democratic accountability, conditionality, the continuing role of the IMF in shaping economic policy and transparency. I look forward to dealing with all of these and much more on Committee Stage of the Bill.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Bill does two things. It lends one fifth of Ireland's IMF special drawing rights to developing countries and it adds a grant of approximately €13.5 million to the resilience and sustainability trust. The money is intended to help low-income and vulnerable middle-income countries cope with climate shocks and pandemics. These drawing rights are sitting in the Central Bank.

The Bill comes at a time when the developing world is more indebted than at any other time in history, and this is very important. If we are serious about global poverty, we have to talk about debt. Tá an plé atá ar bun againn thar a bheith tábhachtach.

Earlier this month, the World Bank published its international debt report. The external debt of developing countries rose by 5.5% last year to a record $9.4 trillion. This is the fastest increase since the pandemic and the poorest countries are paying the most for it. Many governments issue new bonds simply to pay off old ones. This is often what happens. The World Bank states they have done this without significantly reducing their debt and often at higher interest rates. That is what a debt trap looks like. A country borrows to repay, pays more each time and the debt grows bigger and bigger. We can see this in poorer countries where in some cases their entire tax take goes simply on debt repayments, which starves them of the resources they need for their public services and infrastructure.

Between 2022 and 2025, developing countries paid $436 billion more in debt service than they received in new financing. Money flowed out of the poorest countries in the world and into the hands of their creditors. The UN's trade and development body has put this in human terms. Today, 3.7 billion people live in developing countries where governments spend more on interest than they spend on health or education. That is how serious this is and it has a detrimental impact on the lives of poorer people around the world.

Think about what that means. Governments are paying more to bondholders in London and New York than they spend on their hospitals. That is the reality. They are paying more in interest than they spend teaching their children, treating their sick or building infrastructure. These are countries that desperately need investment in education, healthcare and infrastructure. In 2010, about a quarter of Africa's population lived in such countries. By 2023, it was nearly two thirds of Africa's population. This is clearly a predatory system where the rich profit off desperation. Most of these countries did not choose this. They borrowed through a pandemic and were then hit by interest rate rises in Washington and Frankfurt to fight inflation in developed countries. These countries borrow in dollars and so, when the dollar rises, their debt rises with it. Some of these countries are facing very hard decisions about devaluing their currencies, which creates more problems.

The rules of the system then make it worse. Let us take for example the special drawing rights that are at the centre of this Bill. In 2021, the IMF created $650 billion of new reserves to help the world through the Covid pandemic. That was the right decision but SDRs are shared out according to IMF quotas, which track the size of a country's economy. This means that most of the money went to the countries that needed it least. The entire continent of Africa, home to 1.4 billion people and more than 60% of the world's extremely poor, received just 5.2% of the allocation. Developed countries were handed reserves that, for the most part, were not needed to the same degree. Poor countries got a fraction of what they potentially needed. The same quotas decide who runs the IMF. The United States alone holds about 16.5% of the votes, which is effectively enough to veto any major decision. The whole of Africa, which comprises 54 countries, holds about 6.5% of the voting rights. This is a deeply unequal institution in terms of where decision-making lies.

When those countries get into trouble, help always comes with conditions. In Ireland, we know this experience all too well. We lived under a troika programme. We know what it is like when the terms are written by creditors. For much of the global south, that has been the normal state of affairs for 40 years. Spending cuts, pay freezes and privatisation, which means the extraction of a country's natural resources, are then more extreme, which means its ability to lift itself out of poverty is curtailed.

The IMF says those days are over but the evidence says otherwise. In June, ActionAid published a review of IMF advice to 11 countries. It found that advice has barely changed since the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s. The disparity between the developed world and the developing world is stark. For example, the advice to the United Kingdom encouraged it to invest more in its public services, while countries like Nigeria, Nepal and Brazil were told to cut theirs to keep paying creditors. There is one set of rules and advice for the developed world and another for everyone else.

The resilience and sustainability trust is one of the ways the IMF has tried to correct the unfairness of the 2021 allocation. Developed countries lend their unused SDRs to the trust and the trust lends them on to vulnerable countries for climate and pandemic resilience. In principle, that is a very welcome idea. It is worth saying that the terms are genuinely better than those in the market. Loans run for 20 years with a grace period of ten and a half years. The poorest borrowers pay very low interest rates, which is genuinely welcome. However, I still have serious concerns about the system they operate in. First, these are loans and not grants, so the €800 million will be paid back with interest. Only the separate measure of about €13.5 million is a grant. Cheaper debt is still debt. You do not get a country out of debt by lending it more money.

My second serious concern has regard to the conditions attached to the resilience and sustainability trust. I am very concerned about these. Countries can only borrow from this trust if they also have a standard IMF programme running at the same time. That comes with a lot of problems. These are the very programmes that have driven austerity across the global south for decades. This austerity is not abstract. Civil society groups have warned that the trust now carries a growing number of conditions regarding electricity tariffs. This could have a detrimental impact on poorer households.

Ireland should be ambitious about the next steps and what needs to be done. We should back the calls from the UN and from African governments to establish a fair and independent

process for the restructuring of sovereign debt to get countries out of the spiralling debt traps they are in so they can genuinely lift themselves out of poverty, remembering that many of these debt traps go back to colonialist and imperialist days. There has also been a huge amount of extraction from these countries and the more developed world has profited off that extraction.

We should meet our commitment to spend 0.7% of our national income on overseas development assistance by 2030. Many of the world's largest donors are now cutting aid. That is being driven by the US and the Trump Administration but it is also being done by European countries, which are now moving their aid budgets into military spending. This makes Ireland's contribution to aid more important than ever. I acknowledge the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond, and the leadership he has shown in this area. It is important to acknowledge that and to recognise that it is acknowledged outside of this House, at a European level and by others working in this area.

As aid budgets shrink, monetary loans are not enough. Ireland has rarely questioned the role the IMF plays in the global south. We should be doing that. We should use our voice to push for reform of how the fund is run and the advice it gives. Irish people have suffered under austerity. We know that debt is not just a number on a balance sheet. It is a nurse who is not hired, a school that is not built and a family who are forced to emigrate. Simply lending more money to over-indebted countries that are in IMF programmes that push austerity is not the same as taking meaningful action to end the debt crisis. We need to end the debt traps that are holding back developing countries. We must think about those societies where all of the taxation people are contributing, or the vast bulk of it, is simply going to make debt interest payments rather than being spent on the infrastructure, public services, education and health services they desperately need. Ireland needs to take a leading role in pushing for this reform.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Finance (International Financial Institutions) Bill 2026. It is a short and largely technical Bill that facilitates Ireland’s continued participation in multilateral efforts to support vulnerable countries to prepare for social and economic crises.

These multilateral efforts began at Bretton Woods in 1944, where the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were founded. Ireland joined 13 years later. In 1957, the Fianna Fáil Government applied for membership and this House passed the Bretton Woods Agreements Act. Ireland became a member on 8 August 1957. We joined the International Finance Corporation in 1958 and the International Development Association in 1960.

In 1969, the IMF created a new reserve asset, the special drawing right, SDR, which was adopted by the Oireachtas. During the Covid pandemic, the SDR facilitated the IMF's allocation of about $650 billion to help countries deal with the economic shock the pandemic brought with it. Advanced economies received about $375 billion of this funding. Low-income countries received about $21 billion, or roughly 3% of the allocation. This was not sufficient for countries that were already struggling, so the IMF asked members with strong finances to consider changes to the arrangements. In 2022, it established the resilience and sustainability trust with this objective. In April 2024, the then Minister for Finance, Michael McGrath, committed Ireland to channelling 20% of our 2021 allocation into the trust. That is about €800 million. This Bill gives effect to that decision.

The Bill does several things. It allows the Central Bank to lend or deposit those SDRs with the trust. It allows the Minister to give the Central Bank a State guarantee. It provides an Exchequer grant of €13.5 million to the trust's reserve account. It also modernises how we approach and approve technical changes to the rules of the international financial institutions we belong to. It is important to be clear about the costs involved. The €800 million is not spent but simply lent.

It stays part of our reserves. It earns interest and the Central Bank can call on it if Ireland ever needs it. The direct cost to the taxpayer is the €13.5 million grant, which is not insignificant, but, as we have seen, assisting countries dealing with an economic shock has benefits to the multilateral system. It can help alleviate humanitarian crises, suffering and avoid large movements of people, which can have knock-on impacts on neighbouring countries or even further afield, as we have seen.

So, what does this trust do? It provides long-term, low-cost loans to poorer and vulnerable middle-income countries. Repayments of principal start after ten years and run to 20 years. The poorest countries pay the lowest interest, and every loan comes with reforms and structural adjustments that leave a country better able to cope with the next shock. By June of last year, 26 programmes had been approved, worth about €13 billion at today's rates.

I will cite two examples in the time I have available. Rwanda was the first African country to benefit. In December 2022, it agreed a programme worth $319 million. It committed to ensuring future public investment in climate resilience and strengthening disaster risk management. It completed every reform six months ahead of schedule, and that record has drawn in further finance from other partners.

Jamaica is the second example. It shares Ireland's seat on the IMF executive board together with Canada and our Caribbean partners. In March 2023, Jamaica agreed a programme worth $764 million. One of its reforms was a natural disaster reserve fund. In October last year, Hurricane Melissa struck. The IMF put the damage at $8.8 billion. However, because Jamaica had prepared, the disaster funds and insurance paid out quickly. The IMF said Jamaica's record of reform had built buffers that proved invaluable. The same approach now supports Kenya, Tanzania and Liberia, where Irish Aid also works, as well as Bangladesh, Barbados, Costa Rica and Pakistan.

In my constituency of Dún Laoghaire where GOAL has its head office, we have a direct link to the work it does. Its teams see every day what a flood or a failed harvest does to a community or families, and how these natural disasters, alongside international conflicts, can cause movements of people. This Bill helps governments prepare before disaster strikes, so that agencies like GOAL are not left to pick up the pieces alone.

I have two asks of the Minister. The IMF has projected that the demand on this trust will outstrip its resources by the end of the year. Will the Minister sign Ireland's contribution agreement with the IMF as soon as this Bill is enacted? Second, the finance committee asked for a note from the Central Bank explaining why a State guarantee is needed. Will the Minister publish that note, so the House can see the reasoning in full?

In 1957, Ireland joined these institutions hoping to draw on them for our own development and, of course, we were supported in our time of need. Today, we are in a position to do our bit and to help others build their economies too. This Bill is a modest but practical step.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I am glad to support this Bill. It is a sensible and timely measure, and it says a good deal about how far Ireland has come and the place we want to hold in the world.

Ireland came late to these institutions. A Fianna Fáil Government applied to join the IMF and the World Bank in April 1957. When this House debated the Bill that July, Deputies were told that we were almost at the end of the queue for membership. We joined as a poor country at the edge of Europe. Within a little over a decade, we were borrowing from the World Bank to build out our energy infrastructure. Our first World Bank loan in 1969 helped the ESB build the pump storage station at Turlough Hill in Wicklow. Two more helped finance new generating capacity at Tarbert on the Shannon Estuary and the transmission lines to carry it. Later loans helped build secondary schools and colleges, financed Irish industry through the Industrial Credit Company, ICC, and supported beef and pig production. Everyone one of those loans were repaid. Turlough Hill is still running half a century later and today it stores surplus wind power for the grid. That is what far-sighted long-term finance can do.

Decades later during the global financial crisis, the IMF was part of the international support that saw Ireland through, and we repaid that loan ahead of schedule clearing the last of it in December 2017. Every stage of our modern economic story has run through the IMF and the World Bank. We joined them when we were starting out. We drew on their support when times were hard, and we repaid them when we recovered. This Bill is the next step with Ireland lending through the IMF to countries in the position that we were once in.

It comes at a difficult moment for the multilateral system. Support for this kind of lending is not as broad as it was, and there are voices among the fund's largest shareholders questioning whether it belongs in the IMF at all. At the same time, aid budgets are being pulled back to deal with problems closer to home. If the countries that still believe in this work do not step forward, the system that small countries depend on will start to fray. For a small open economy such as Ireland, that represents a genuine risk. We do not have the size to write the rules of the global economy. We rely on institutions that apply those rules evenly to large and small alike. To varying degrees, we trade with almost every country, and we host many of the world's largest companies, and like others, we know from experience what it is like to need a lender of last resort. Ireland has more reason than most to keep these institutions strong, and we are in good company with Belgium, Luxemburg, Malta and the Netherlands already contributing to this trust.

There are then the countries this trust exists to help. The UN's Trade and Development Agency reported this year that 3.7 billion people now live in countries that spend more on interest payments than on health or education. Many of those countries face droughts, floods and storms they did little to cause, and they cannot borrow long term at a price they can afford. This trust lends to them over ten to 20 years on terms no commercial lender would ever offer them. Some of those countries sit beside us at the IMF. Ireland shares a seat on the fund's executive board with Canada and a group of Caribbean states, and two of them, Barbados and Jamaica, were among the first to borrow from the trust. Last year, Hurricane Melissa caused damage in Jamaica equal to 41% of its GDP. That is the kind of shock this trust is there to help countries prepare for. There is an Irish interest here too. Kenya, Morocco, Bangladesh and Costa Rica have all drawn on this trust. These are growing economies and the kind of markets Irish exporters will need if we are serious about depending less on a handful of large ones.

Stable trading partners are good for Irish jobs, and countries remember who stood with them when it counted.

This Bill also builds on what Ireland is already doing. In 2022, this House provided for grants of up to €50 million to the IMF's catastrophe, containment and relief trust which give debt relief to the poorest countries after a disaster. Since 2019, Ireland has funded its own trust with the Asian Development Bank to help small island states build resilience to climate change and disasters. The resilience and sustainability trust is a natural extension of that work.

The finance committee raised fair questions at pre-legislative scrutiny about the State guarantee and what happens if a borrower defaults. I ask the Minister of State to address both of these when replying and to report to this House each year on how Ireland's contribution is performing. That kind of transparency will give the public confidence that the money is being well used and will be repaid.

The Government that took Ireland into these institutions in 1957 understood that a small country does better inside the room than outside it. That was true then and it is true now. We have been the country that needs help in its early days, and we were glad to get it. We are now in a position to help others, and this Bill lets us do it in a way that is prudent, measured and secure. I commend it to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Deputies for their contributions to the debate and their consideration of the Bill. As I outlined in my opening remarks, we are living through a period of considerable global uncertainty from geopolitical tensions and economic instability to the growing challenges posed by climate change. The need for international co-operation has rarely been greater. I recognise that there will always be questions about the resources we commit internationally, particularly when we face challenges at home, but I firmly believe these are not competing priorities. Ireland has benefited enormously from international co-operation, as many speakers acknowledged, and we have a responsibility and a national interest in ensuring the institutions which underpin global economic stability remain strong.

The consequences of economic instability, climate change and financial crisis do not stop at national borders. Supporting vulnerable countries and building stronger and more resilient economies is not simply an act of solidarity; it is an investment in our shared stability and prosperity. This Bill is a practical demonstration of Ireland's commitment to international co-operation and our willingness to play our part in addressing the challenges we collectively face.

In response to some of the criticisms of the IMF, I will say it is not just a lender of last resort. A key pillar of the IMF and the membership of countries is the provision of additional financing, technical assistance and policy advice to help countries to proactively tackle challenges where they lack the appropriate resources, and the knowledge to do this. Over the period 2020 to 2022, the fund provided a comprehensive response to the Covid-19 crisis, with financing totalling $173 billion provided to 93 members to support their pandemic response and recovery, as well as vital debt relief made available to 29 vulnerable low-income members. This unprecedented intervention, which was subsequently criticised by some commentators as the fund acting outside of its own swim lane, has been generally recognised as making a significant impact on those low-income countries facing the perfect storm of Covid-related

pressures on their health systems, combined with severe declines in their economies, falls in taxation yields and a sharp rise in debt levels and higher interest rates on the borrowing.

The IMF also continues to play a fundamental and crucial role in the ongoing illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Ukraine, and by extension Europe, would be in a significantly worse scenario without the emergency financing the IMF can provide. To reinforce the positive role of the RST, this is another facility the IMF has made available to help low-income and vulnerable middle-income countries to build resilience to external shocks and ensure sustainable growth. Borrowing countries can receive long-term, extremely low-cost loans to address longer term structural challenges. These include climate change and pandemic preparedness at very low interest rates, lower than many qualifying countries could otherwise access from international capital markets. This gives them the physical headroom, through the reduced interest payments on the debt, to invest in areas of policy to benefit their people.

Furthermore, the funding provided by the IMF under the RST is used for key areas and aims to help these countries improve their policy areas, including climate and natural disaster resilience and preparedness, health and social protection systems, water and education. As I noted, the World Bank International Debt Report 2026 highlighted that low-income countries typically face annual rates of between 8% to 10% when borrowing on the capital markets. The interest rate applied to RST financing for the past 12 months has typically been between 3.3% and 4.3%, with the lowest income countries capped at 2.5%. This is longer term financing on significantly more affordable terms than would be generally available to eligible borrower countries. However, the IMF needs RST donor countries such as Ireland to make this happen. It is a crucial, targeted and cheap means of helping those in need to face the growing range of serious challenges. It is an investment in their countries, their people and their futures. It is also an investment for our future, through having a more liveable world for as many people as possible to attain a reasonable life for themselves and their families. It is an investment Ireland thankfully has the resources to make. Through this Bill, we will have the legislative means to make the investment with the support of this Chamber and, in time, the Seanad.

To reiterate, the intention of the Bill is to allow Ireland to play our part in fortifying the ability of the fund to help those countries that request its help in this area. It also provides another avenue for Ireland to fulfil its obligation as a strong economy, allowing us to channel critical support to these countries that need it most. It is the right thing to do and we are doing it for the right reasons. Once enacted, the Bill will allow the Central Bank to enter into a loan and deposit agreement with the IMF for contributions of €660 million. SDR rights to the RST allow the Minister for Finance to enter into an agreement for a stand-alone grant contribution for approximately €13.5 million. It is important to remember the Central Bank will enter into a loan agreement and any special drawing rights contributed to the RST will be repaid in full.

In response to some of the questions, I understand the rationale behind that was shared with the committee, which Deputy Brennan will be aware of and, no doubt, he has received that correspondence and considered it. Deputy Devlin specifically asked if there could be greater clarity on this. I will certainly check with the committee and the Central Bank on the publication of that report and revert to him directly. Deputy Devlin also asked a question about whether the Minister will sign a contribution agreement on the passing of the Bill. My understanding is that contribution will be signed on this Bill's passing.

Several Deputies also made the point that we will have the opportunity to tease this Bill out further on Committee Stage, which we look forward to. However, I strongly believe we must play our part in helping those less fortunate around the world and this legislation enables us to do that. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Finance (International Financial Institutions) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform, Digitalisation and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Defending Irish Neutrality: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Is the Minister of State taking this?

Deputy Robert Troy: No, I am not taking it. I do not know who is.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Who is taking it on the Opposition side?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I am, but I think we should wait.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: For what?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: For the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have a Minister to take this item.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister will be down to speak to it, but I am here now.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: To be honest, I would prefer to wait for the Minister. Do we know if either the Minister for Defence or foreign affairs is attending the debate?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I presume so, but Minister of State, Deputy Troy, is here to take the debate while we wait for the Minister. I ask the Deputy to make his opening remarks.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: From speaking to constituents in my own area over the course of the weekend, it is only in the last couple of weeks that people have begun to absorb the weight of what is meant in terms of the triple lock. For a period, it seemed quite abstract. However, when you get talking to people, they have a deep gut understanding of what neutrality

means and the fact it has been a strength for Ireland, as well as the pride we have in our peacekeepers. The question came up in conversation many times with an awful lot of people of why we could not have a referendum and have our say on this legislation, and why it could not be put to the people. The reason is people ultimately have a strong recollection of the Lisbon and Nice treaties. Both were rejected on the first occasion by the Irish people for a variety of concerns, but right up there was the concern about the agenda of some in the European Union on common defence and militarisation, more of which we have heard in recent years. Commitments were sought and commitments were given by the Irish Government during that period. They were not idle or abstract and they were not loose.

I will quote Brian Cowen, who was the then Minister for Foreign Affairs during the Nice treaty, on the meeting relating to the so-called Seville declarations.

It states that this national declaration confirms that Ireland is not party to any mutual defence commitment, that we are not party to any plans for a so-called European army and that we will continue to take our sovereign decision - this is the crucial part - on a case-by-case basis on whether the Defence Forces will participate in humanitarian or crisis management tasks undertaken by the EU based on the triple lock guarantee of UN endorsement, Government decision and Dáil approval. The Government has said that there will be no change to that decision unless the people give their assent first in a referendum. I repeat that the Government has said that there would be no change to that situation unless the people first give their assent in a referendum, so the commitments given are very clear. Similar commitments were given in the context of the Lisbon treaty.

A lot of myths are put out about the triple lock from the Government's point of view. I will be clear about what it does not prevent the Irish Defence Forces or an Irish Government from doing. We had a very significant discussion on this and it was very clear from the Department of Defence side and from many of the experts for and against the change that, ultimately, there was a great deal of scope for the Irish Defence Forces to do what they need to do and what they should do without any inference with the triple lock. It is the case that the Irish Defence Forces can participate in humanitarian evacuation without changing the triple lock. It is the case that the Irish Defence Forces can ensure that Irish citizens in distress are rescued without any interference with the triple lock. It is the case that Irish Defence Forces personnel can participate in training without any changes to the triple lock. It is absolutely the case that an Irish Government can invest in the Defence Forces and can ensure they have the equipment and the personnel they need without any changes to the triple lock.

All of these things are put forward as arguments that the world is changing and that there needs to be some change to the triple lock. I agree that the world is changing. We have had genocide in Gaza, the most appalling slaughter in Sudan and the illegal war of aggression in Ukraine. That is all the more reason that we should not dip our toes into the tides of uncertainty and conflict and put ourselves in the place to be tossed between one power and another. Ultimately, what the UN mandate ensures is that where we do peacekeeping, we do it with a UN mandate. It has nothing to do with any decision. People talk about a veto. These are in the defence Acts. These are the tests that we in these Houses have set that where we do peacekeeping, we do so with a UN mandate.

During the referenda in 2002 and 2009, commitments were clearly given to the Irish people that we will continue on that path, we are proud of our peacekeeping record and we will do so

with a UN mandate. This Government is proposing to get rid of that. This potentially undermines our neutrality. We have seen before where EU missions have been put in place and there has been one mandate at the start, another mandate in the middle and a further mandate towards the end. Could we potentially see a situation where, as the mandate of an EU deployment changes, Irish personnel are at the front line in relation to situations of conflict? I am concerned about that and, ultimately, I do not believe the Government has a mandate, so it should put it to the people. It talks a lot about sovereignty. If it is so concerned about sovereignty, it should put it to the people, who are, first and foremost, sovereign.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am assuming the motion has been moved.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— Ireland's policy of military neutrality is a cornerstone of our independent foreign policy and has enabled Ireland to make a distinctive and internationally respected contribution to peacekeeping, conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance and international law;

— the Triple Lock is a fundamental safeguard governing the deployment of Irish Defence Forces personnel overseas;

— Ireland's proud record of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, particularly in Lebanon, demonstrates the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between impartial international peacekeeping and military interventions undertaken in pursuit of the strategic interests of individual states or military alliances;

— during the Nice and Lisbon Treaty referendum campaigns, solemn assurances were given to the Irish people that European defence cooperation would not undermine Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality;

— the commitments made in the context of the Nice Treaty explicitly referenced the requirement for UN authorisation, Government agreement and Dáil approval for overseas deployments; and

— the protection of Ireland's military neutrality, and the maintaining of an independent foreign policy, remain matters of fundamental national importance;

notes that:

— the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government is proceeding with the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026, which seeks to remove the requirement for UN authorisation for certain overseas deployments of Irish Defence Forces personnel as part of an International Force;

— the proposed removal of the Triple Lock represents a significant departure from the safeguards repeatedly presented to the Irish people during the Nice and Lisbon Treaty referendum campaigns;

— Sinn Féin considers that dismantling these safeguards is contrary to the spirit and the letter of the solemn political commitments given to the Irish people regarding the protection of military neutrality;

— the Government is seeking to make this fundamental change without securing the explicit consent of the Irish people;

— there remain deep public reservations about these changes, with multiple demonstrations across the State in recent months, and a major rally due to take place in Dublin on Saturday, 21st November, 2026;

— there is a fundamental distinction between Ireland's longstanding participation in UN-mandated peacekeeping operations in Lebanon and participation in a military operation without equivalent UN authorisation, and that the precise nature, mandate, command arrangements, rules of engagement and operational responsibilities of any proposed European Union military mission in Lebanon remain unanswered; and

— the Government has not adequately demonstrated why the UN framework should be set aside, rather than examining alternative mechanisms for securing international legitimacy;

reaffirms that:

— Ireland's Defence Forces must never be deployed in support of the military or strategic objectives of another state or military alliance, in a manner inconsistent with Ireland's independent foreign policy;

— the commitments made to the Irish people during the Nice and Lisbon Treaty referendum campaigns must be respected; and

— under the UN Resolution entitled "Uniting for Peace", it is entirely possible that UN General Assembly authorisation or endorsement can apply as an alternative to Security Council authorisation, and that Ireland should be to the fore in pursuing Uniting for Peace deployments; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately halt the proposed removal of the Triple Lock, and withdraw the provisions of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 that would remove the requirement for UN authorisation;

— retain the Triple Lock as a fundamental safeguard, protecting Ireland's independent foreign policy and governing overseas military deployments;

— reaffirm the solemn political commitments made to the Irish people during the Nice and Lisbon Treaty referendum campaigns, regarding the protection of Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality;

— recognise that the UN General Assembly can provide an alternative route to UN endorsement or authorisation of international operations;

— ensure that any future Irish military contribution in Lebanon remains consistent with international law, impartial peacekeeping principles and Ireland's longstanding commitment to the UN;

— prioritise investment in the Defence Forces, including recruitment, retention, pay, conditions, equipment and the capabilities necessary to protect Ireland's sovereignty, and fulfil our international peacekeeping responsibilities;

— reaffirm Ireland's commitment to an independent foreign policy based on peace, international solidarity, respect for international law and the peaceful resolution of conflict; and

— accept that the Triple Lock is a core component of Ireland's independent foreign policy, and call a referendum on any proposal to dismantle the Triple Lock and thereby undermine Ireland's Neutrality.

This motion puts a simple question to the Government. Who decides the future of Irish neutrality - the Irish people or a Government determined to strip away one of its central protections? The Government wants to dismantle the triple lock - to remove the requirement for UN authorisation and strip away a central safeguard governing the deployment of Irish troops. It is trying to minimise the significance of this change dressing up the dismantling of a central safeguard as mere modest reform but the Irish people can see plainly what this is - a major change to the neutrality safeguards governing the deployment of our Defence Forces.

The Government insists that our neutrality will remain untouched but that claim does not survive contact with the facts. A safeguard that Micheál Martin himself once said was at the core of our neutrality is now to be dismantled by that same man. In 2013, he told this House that efforts to weaken the triple lock were in attempt to erode neutrality. He said the triple lock was at the core of our neutrality. He went further and said "My party and I completely reject this". Does the Taoiseach still mean those words or were they just useful when he was in opposition? He denounced this very assault on neutrality when he was in opposition but now as Taoiseach, he carries it out and asks the Irish people to forget the promises that he made.

In 2002 ahead of the second Nice referendum, Brian Cowen told the Dáil "there will be no change to that situation unless the people first give their assent in a referendum". During the second Lisbon referendum campaign, the Government again gave a solemn commitment that a referendum would be held on any decision involving a departure from Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality. The declaration accompanying the treaty reaffirmed the triple lock for overseas deployments. Those commitments were made to secure the confidence of the Irish people and the Government cannot now pretend that they meant nothing. It cannot ask people to trust its words in a referendum and then discourage those words when it becomes inconvenient. If this is a minor technical change, then let the people decide. If the triple lock has nothing to do with neutrality, let the people decide. Why is the Government so determined to deny that choice?

The danger in the Government's attempt to dismantle the triple up is brought into sharp focus by the EU's new mission in Lebanon. It is not a peacekeeping mission. It is an EU mission without UN authorisation. Given Israel's military presence in Lebanon, its repeated attacks on the Lebanese people and the sensitivity of this work, the Government must answer some direct questions. Has Israel been consulted by the EU or the mission's planners about the mission's objectives, operations or areas of activity? Has the mission shared or does it intend to share intelligence, surveillance, information or operational assessments with Israel? Has Israel supplied or offered to supply intelligence, surveillance information or operational advice

to the mission? Has the EU, its planners or its personnel sought any such information or advice from Israel? Has Israel sought any role in the mission, including access to its information, co-ordination with its personnel or influence over its activities? If information has been requested or exchanged, what was involved and what, if any, safeguards apply? These are direct and important questions and Government must give direct answers.

The Government wants to remove the UN requirement and give itself greater freedom to decide where Irish forces go. That is a profound change in how Ireland acts in the world. It is not the Government's choice alone to make, particularly after the promises made to the people. Neutrality is a choice made by the Irish people and it belongs to them. The Government has no right to break its word and shut them out of a decision of this importance. Sinn Féin is demanding a referendum. Let the people have their say. I urge this House to support this motion.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: One would swear from listening to this Government that the biggest threat to Ireland's national security is the triple lock and not the shortage of 1,700 personnel, the gaps in our defence capabilities and the fact that the national security strategy, which was due five years ago, still has not seen the light of day despite the Government's own assessment warning of an incoherent defence of the State. We have heard a lot about vetoes and Security Council vetoes over the past while but what we do not hear is that the US actually used its veto to block ceasefire resolutions in Gaza. The UN needs reform but removing an Irish safeguard will not fix a broken Security Council.

With our Defence Forces already stretched, is this Government actually planning on building our own capabilities or is it its plan to become increasingly dependent on somebody else's?

Let us not forget the Nice and Lisbon treaties. Sinn Féin and others warned of the risks to our neutrality and we were told that we were scaremongering. When the Government needed those "Yes" votes, it gave guarantees to get them, which it is now preparing to rip up. It is funny how promises given to the Irish people become inconvenient once the votes are counted.

The Government has not delivered on that strategy or the promised personnel but it wants more discretion over military deployments handed to it, with the political equivalent of, "Trust me, bro". I do not trust this Government with a sharp pair of scissors. Ireland's neutrality is not the Government's to bargain away. It belongs to the Irish people. Let them have the final say. Put it to a referendum.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Irish neutrality belongs to the people and any decision to dismantle it must be put to the people. The Government's plan to scrap the triple lock is a betrayal of our neutrality and it would have profound consequences for our country and future generations. Our mission is clear. There must be a referendum and the Government must let the Irish people decide. The Government has badly misread the depth of feeling among all of the Irish people. This Government is looking at shredding this nation's commitment to neutrality. It is treating this as some sort of master stroke to ingratiate itself to the hawkish wing in the EU Parliament who want to ramp up military spending rather than spend on programmes for the public good.

Since the Government's proposal to remove the triple lock was announced, neutrality campaigns around the country have been re-energised in their commitment to protect our neutrality. New groups, such as the Louth Neutrality Network, which was launched last year on the 80th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, have sprung up around this country to defend our neutrality. The Government is underestimating how people view this and the depth of betrayal felt by people who remember the supposedly earnest promises given by the Government during the campaigns of the Nice and Lisbon treaties. Solemn assurances were given to the Irish people that European defence co-operation would not undermine Ireland's traditional policy of military neutrality but the Government is intent on breaking those promises.

As the Minister for Foreign Affairs during Ireland's Lisbon treaty referendums in 2008 and 2009, Micheál Martin led the Government's campaign advocating for the treaties' adoption. He continually assured us that we would remain neutral. The Government is telling the Irish people not to believe their own eyes but, rather, to believe what it is saying when we know damn well where this rush to militarisation will lead us, that is, to the eastern front.

The Government can end this by reaffirming Ireland's commitment to an independent foreign policy based on peace, international solidarity and respect for international law and a peaceful resolution of conflict. It must accept that the triple lock is a core component of Ireland's independent foreign policy and call a referendum on any proposal to dismantle the triple lock, which undermines Ireland's neutrality. The Government's words are meaningless unless it does this.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The triple lock is not a technicality; it is an important safeguard that ensures decisions to send Irish troops overseas are subject to international authorisation, Government approval and Dáil scrutiny. For generations, Irish neutrality has been an expression of our independence and commitment to peacekeeping, diplomacy and international co-operation.

The Government says that removing the UN authorisation requirement is about preventing the five permanent members of the UN Security Council from exercising a veto over Irish deployments. It argues that Ireland can remain neutral while changing the rules governing overseas missions. Sinn Féin and many others dispute that approach. The concern is that removing one of the central safeguards of the triple lock weakens an important, practical protection for our independent foreign policy. This is not an argument against supporting peacekeeping or defending the Defence Forces. Rather, it is about ensuring that Irish soldiers are deployed overseas under clear, accountable and internationally recognised safeguards.

There are legitimate questions about the effectiveness of the UN Security Council but changing the rules is a significant decision with long-term consequences for Ireland's foreign policy and neutrality. The Government has a responsibility to explain why this change is necessary and address the very real concerns of the public. Ultimately, the question is whether such a fundamental change to Ireland's neutrality safeguards should be made without directly consulting the people. Sinn Féin and many others believe the public should have the opportunity to have that say through a referendum. Irish neutrality belongs to the people. They should have a say in its future. Hold a referendum now.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: As the Minister of State looks around this Chamber and building, he will see the heroes of the 1916 Easter Rising. The Proclamation is in the front hall of Leinster House. One of the great memories I have leading into that whole period was the declaration that, "We serve neither King nor Kaiser but Ireland". A bust of James Connolly is located behind the benches in the Chamber. It is supposed to influence and inspire us in this Chamber as an independent nation.

The Irish people cherish our tradition of neutrality. They cherish our independence from military alliances that have ignored and shunned international law again and again. That gives us the credibility to defend human rights around the globe and be honest brokers who work towards conflict resolution. Indeed, the lessons of our conflict resolution have given us that credibility, too.

We are proud of our peacekeepers who have served under the banner of the United Nations around the world. That is our proud tradition, not to sit on the sidelines but to have the moral credibility to challenge those who oppress others, shun international law and remove the human rights of the people they subjugate. We have the credibility to stand up against that because we are non-aligned. That is the proud tradition. That is why the Irish people rejected the Nice treaty the first time. It is why the Government of the day brought through the Seville declarations to get the Irish people to vote in favour of the Nice treaty the second time around. It is why the Government gave solemn declarations again and again in this regard, as my party leader, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, reminded the Taoiseach today. There were commitments from the former Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, as well as the current Taoiseach.

If the Government is determined to get rid of the triple lock, it must go to the Irish people in a referendum because a solemn commitment was given in order to get the Irish people to vote in favour of the Nice and Lisbon treaties. The Government knows this. If the Government believes in the conviction of its arguments, then put them to the Irish people. I know the reason it will not do so. It is because it knows it is breaking the commitment given. The Government knows it is aligning itself to those forces in Europe and NATO that have shunned international law again and again. Those are the same people who abandoned the people in Gaza-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: -----to slaughter and genocide. They abandoned them and defended the people who did it. They have no credibility but we do as a result of our proud tradition. Do not give up our proud and cherished tradition of neutrality that gives us the standing internationally to truly confront those who will oppress others. I ask the Government not go through with this but if it insists on it, then it must let the Irish people decide. Let them decide who is right and wrong.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I move amendment No.1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"recognises that:

— Ireland's longstanding policy of military neutrality remains a fundamental component of the State's independent foreign policy and is characterised by non-membership of military alliances and non-participation in common or mutual defence arrangements, and further recognises that Article 29.4.9° of Bunreacht na hÉireann provides a constitutional safeguard relating to participation by the State in a European Union (EU) common defence arrangement;

— Ireland has earned international respect through decades of distinguished service by members of the Defence Forces in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and peace support operations, including in Lebanon and other theatres of conflict;

— successive Governments have maintained a strong commitment to the UN, international law, multilateral cooperation, humanitarian principles and the peaceful resolution of disputes;

— the members of the Defence Forces who serve overseas do so with professionalism, courage and distinction, and continue to uphold Ireland's reputation throughout the world; and

— Ireland's policy of military neutrality and Ireland's statutory arrangements governing overseas military deployments are distinct matters, and reform of one does not alter the other;

notes that:

— the policy of military neutrality exists independently of the Triple Lock arrangements, and does not depend upon the approval of any external state or international body;

— Article 29.4.9° of Bunreacht na hÉireann provides a constitutional safeguard relating to participation by the State in an EU common defence arrangement, demonstrating that Ireland's policy of military neutrality is distinct from the statutory provisions governing overseas deployments of Defence Forces personnel;

— the existing Triple Lock arrangements provide each permanent member of the UN Security Council with an effective veto over certain overseas deployments of Irish Defence Forces personnel, regardless of the wishes of the Government and Dáil Éireann;

— no other militarily neutral Member State of the European Union subjects decisions regarding overseas deployments to such a veto;

— the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 maintains the requirements for Government approval and Dáil approval for overseas deployments, while reforming the statutory requirement relating to UN Security Council mandates;

— reform of the Triple Lock does not authorise unrestricted overseas deployments, does not provide for membership of any military alliance, and does not commit Ireland to participation in any collective defence arrangement;

— the Government remains committed to ensuring that any overseas deployment of members of the Defence Forces is consistent with international law, the principles of the UN Charter, and Ireland's foreign policy principles; and

— while mechanisms such as the UN General Assembly's 'Uniting for Peace' process may, in some circumstances, provide international political support for collective action, they are not binding and cannot be regarded as a comprehensive or permanent substitute for sovereign decision-making by Ireland's democratic institutions;

reaffirms that:

— Ireland's military neutrality remains Government policy, and is reflected in the State's continued non membership of military alliances and non-participation in common or mutual defence arrangements, consistent with Article 29.4.9° of Bunreacht na hÉireann;

— Ireland's commitment to the UN, multilateralism, and international peacekeeping, remains unchanged;

— the democratic institutions of the Irish State should retain responsibility for determining whether Ireland participates in overseas peace support and crisis-management operations;

— Ireland will not participate in military alliances, mutual defence commitments, or military operations inconsistent with international law; and

— strengthening the Defence Forces and maintaining military neutrality are complementary objectives, which together support Ireland's sovereignty and resilience; and

calls on the Government to:

— continue the passage of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 through the Houses of the Oireachtas;

— ensure that decisions concerning overseas deployments of Defence Forces personnel remain subject to Government and Dáil approval;

— continue to support UN peacekeeping operations and Ireland's long-established role as a contributor to international peace and security;

— continue ongoing investment in Defence Forces recruitment, retention, remuneration, conditions of service, equipment, infrastructure and operational capabilities;

— strengthen Ireland's capacity to protect its airspace, maritime domain, cyber environment and critical national infrastructure;

— maintain Ireland's independent foreign policy based upon respect for international law, multilateral cooperation, humanitarian principles, and the peaceful resolution of disputes; and

— reject the contention that reform of the Triple Lock necessitates a constitutional referendum, recognising that Ireland's policy of military neutrality is separate from, and will remain unchanged by, the Defence Amendment Bill 2026, noting that Bunreacht na hÉireann already contains a specific safeguard relating to participation by the State in an EU common defence arrangement through Article 29.4.9°, and that decisions regarding the statutory framework governing overseas deployments are properly matters for the Oireachtas.".

I thank the Opposition for tabling this motion. It is important that we continue to debate these issues. We can disagree where disagreement is necessary but let us always endeavour to do it in an agreeable manner. Crucially, like Deputy Ó Laoghaire, I wish to acknowledge the service of the women and men of the Defence Forces, both at home and overseas. For generations, Irish soldiers have served with distinction in some of the most difficult and dangerous environments in the world. Their service has reflected the best of Ireland's values, namely, peace, international solidarity, respect for international law and support for vulnerable communities affected by conflict. Their record in Lebanon in particular forms a proud chapter in Ireland's history. It is precisely because we value that tradition and want to preserve Ireland's ability to continue contributing to international peace and security that this Government is pursuing reform of the triple lock.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is absolute rubbish.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Respectfully-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Minister of State have the opportunity-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is no "respectfully". I find it very difficult to listen to something that is utterly disingenuous.

Deputy Neale Richmond: As I literally said, an agreeable-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Everyone has had their say on the Deputy's side of the House. Can we listen to the Minister of State and hear what he has to say?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am going to engage for the full debate with full openness and transparency. If the Deputies wish to stay for the full two hours, we will have the debate.

If this is just going to be a heckling match, however I wonder is it for social media or is it for the Oireachtas?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This is rubbish.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please proceed. Let us try to keep this going now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Shame on you.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I expect a lot more from Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I expect a whole lot more from the Minister of State. Shame on him.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I expect a lot more from her. We can inspect legislation but if the Deputy just wants to personalise this and heckle-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Depouty should stand back from making comments.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The motion before the House advances a simple proposition. It argues that the triple lock and military neutrality are effectively one and the same, and that any reform of the triple lock represents an attack on Ireland's neutrality. The Government does not accept that proposition.

Ireland's policy of military neutrality is long-standing and clear. It is characterised by non-membership of military alliances and non-participation in common or mutual defence arrangements. That policy remains unchanged. This Government has no intention of joining a military alliance. This Government has no intention of entering any mutual defence arrangement. This Government remains fully committed to military neutrality. Indeed, Ireland's policy of military neutrality is reflected not only in long-standing government policy but also in Bunreacht na hÉireann. Article 29.4.9° provides 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. This constitutional provision safeguards one of the core principles of Irish military neutrality by ensuring that Ireland cannot become part of a European Union common defence arrangement. It reflects the long-standing position of the Irish people and successive Governments that Ireland should remain outside common or mutual defence arrangements. That constitutional safeguard remains fully intact. Nothing in the Defence (Amendment) Bill changes it, commits Ireland to a military alliance or commits Ireland to a common or mutual defence arrangement. The triple lock is something different altogether. The triple lock is a statutory mechanism governing certain overseas deployments of Defence Forces personnel. It requires a United Nations Security Council mandate, Government approval and Dáil approval. It is contained in legislation. It is not contained in Bunreacht na hÉireann. It did not create the policy of Irish military neutrality-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, but it guarantees it.

Deputy Neale Richmond: -----and reforming it does not abolish Irish neutrality.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It underwrites it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald

Deputy Neale Richmond: We were militarily neutral before the triple lock existed and we will remain militarily neutral after it is reformed. The reality is that the world has changed significantly since these arrangements were introduced. The Security Council increasingly finds itself unable to act because of geopolitical divisions among its permanent members. As a consequence, international peace support operations are becoming more difficult to establish and sustain. The result is that countries like Ireland increasingly find their ability to contribute to peacekeeping constrained not by decisions made in Dublin, but by decisions made elsewhere.

Under the existing arrangements, any one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council can effectively prevent Ireland from participating in an overseas mission. Russia, China, the United States, the United Kingdom and France can do so. The Government does not believe that decisions regarding the deployment of Irish Defence Forces personnel should be dependent on the approval of any external power. These decisions should rest with Ireland's democratic institutions. That is not a rejection of multilateralism; it is an assertion of sovereignty.

The motion also suggests that removing the Security Council requirement will somehow create an unrestricted power to deploy troops overseas. That is simply incorrect. Government approval, Dáil approval, parliamentary oversight, international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter all remain.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: But no mandate.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The legislation removes neither democratic accountability nor legal safeguards. Indeed, the opposite is true. It ensures that decisions concerning overseas deployments continue to be taken by institutions directly accountable to the Irish people.

The motion further argues that commitments given during the Nice and Lisbon Treaty campaigns prohibit reform of the triple lock. Again, the Government does not accept that interpretation. The guarantees secured during those processes related to Ireland's sovereign right to determine its own defence and security policy and to remain outside military alliances and common defence structures.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And they specifically specify the triple lock, if the Minister of State bothered to read them, which he clearly has not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Those principles are reflected in Article 29.4.9° of Bunreacht na hÉireann, which expressly prevents the State from participating in a European Union common defence arrangement.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It was not limited to that, though.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister of State has not read the declarations.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He clearly has not.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The constitutional safeguard put in place to protect Ireland's position on common defence arrangements remains unchanged and untouched by the legislation before the House today. Nothing in the Defence (Amendment) Bill changes that. Nothing in this legislation alters Ireland's neutrality. Nothing in this legislation commits

Ireland to military alliances. Nothing in this legislation affects Ireland's sovereign right to choose its own foreign and security policy.

We have also heard arguments that the United Nations General Assembly's uniting for peace mechanism should replace Security Council authorisation. Let us be clear on this. Security Council resolutions can be binding under the United Nations Charter. General Assembly resolutions are recommendations. They are not legally binding. While the General Assembly may provide important political support in certain circumstances, it cannot be regarded as a direct substitute for either Security Council authorisation or for sovereign decision-making by Ireland's democratic institutions.

The motion also raises concerns about Lebanon. I share the desire of every Member of this House to ensure that Ireland can continue its proud contribution in Lebanon. Deputy McDonald raised the issue of EUSM Lebanon. That is mandated to provide training and advisory support to the Lebanese Armed Forces and internal security forces north of the Litani River in the first instance, and not in the UNIFIL area of operations.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So can the Minister of State clarify the Israeli influence in its design?

Deputy Neale Richmond: Deputy McDonald’s decision to insert that into her remarks and then continue to heckle shows that she is not actually interested in the answers. She is just trying to make points for the media.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, I am very interested in the answers and I will raise it with the Taoiseach tomorrow.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will take a couple more minutes if that is okay with an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Indeed, preserving Ireland's ability to continue making meaningful contributions to peace support operations is one of the key reasons that reform of the triple lock is necessary. The Government is determined that Ireland will continue to play a meaningful role in international peace and security. We will continue to support the United Nations, peacekeeping and international law but we must also ensure that we have a legal framework capable of operating effectively in the circumstances we face today.

The motion correctly points to the importance of investing in our Defence Forces. On that point, to Deputy Clarke’s intervention, there is considerable agreement. That is why this Government is making record investments in defence. Defence expenditure has increased by 43% since 2020. Budget 2026 provided €1.49 billion for the defence sector. We are investing in radar capability, maritime security, cyber resilience, air surveillance and critical infrastructure protection. We have improved pay and conditions significantly and are seeing positive outcomes in recruitment and retention. These investments are not separate from neutrality. They are essential to it. Neutrality requires capability, resilience and the ability to make sovereign decisions. The Government's countermotion reflects these realities. It reaffirms Ireland's military neutrality.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Disgraceful.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It reaffirms our commitment to the United Nations and multilateralism, our support for international law and peacekeeping, and democratic oversight of overseas deployments. It recognises that decisions affecting Irish Defence Forces personnel should ultimately be made by Ireland's democratic institutions and not determined by the veto of external powers.

The fundamental question before the House is straightforward: should decisions concerning the deployment of Irish Defence Forces personnel be made by Ireland's elected representatives or should they remain subject to the effective veto of other States? The Government's answer is clear: Ireland's neutrality will remain. The constitutional safeguards underpinning that neutrality will remain. Ireland's commitment to peacekeeping will remain. Ireland's commitment to international law will remain. Decisions concerning Irish personnel, however, should ultimately be made in Ireland.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Well then let the Irish people decide.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I intend to stay here for the duration of the debate. I hope all Deputies will do so. I look forward to fulsome, real engagement and response at the end. I will not be speaking over any Deputies because I believe their democratic right to put down motions and debate them is sacrosanct. I am a democrat.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I do not believe in the Minister of State's democratic right to wreck our neutrality without a referendum.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I believe in real debate. I recognise the mandate of every Deputy in this House. I recognise the 47 seconds remaining to me. I look forward to listening to other Deputies. Most importantly, I commend the Government countermotion to the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Shame on you.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: That is absolutely shameful. It is a disgrace to come into this House and present that speech. It is so disingenuous. It is ludicrous. I do not think anyone can take it seriously but this is an exceptionally serious matter which will have implications for this country, our Defence Forces and generations of Irish men and women to come.

The Government wants to dismantle the triple lock precisely at a time when Europe is marching to the beat of a militarist drum, when deeper defence integration is taking place and is being forced. We are seeing ever greater alignment between the European Union and NATO at a time when the values of those supposedly leading Europe have never been more out of step with our values as a people. We see that with Ursula von der Leyen greenlighting the genocide in Gaza and we see it with Kaja Kallas very explicitly saying that her proposed EU mission in Lebanon will include disarmament of Hezbollah. Let us be clear about the implications of that for a moment because the Minister of State did not touch on that or acknowledge it in his speech. For all the words in it, he said very little. Disarming an armed organisation in a country reeling from conflict is not a neutral undertaking. That will put Irish Defence Forces personnel at risk. Kaja Kallas's words have put Irish Defence Forces at risk, as have Israel's actions. In

fact, the same European Union that is pushing for this mission is the one which turned a blind eye when Irish and other European Union diplomats were fired on by the IDF in the West Bank and when Irish soldiers and other UN troops wearing the blue helmets of the United Nations, with a UN mandate, came under attack.

That is whose interests are being pushed here at the heart of the EU. Tá saighdiúirí na hÉireann ag fónamh sa Liobáin le blianta fada. Tá siad tar éis a mbeatha a chur i mbaol ar son na síochána agus ar son na sibhialtachta. Anois, tá an tAontas Eorpach ag moladh misean a bheadh baint aige le dí-armáil Hezbollah. Tá baol ann go mbeadh saighdiúirí na hÉireann páirteach i ngníomhaíocht míleata. Ní féidir glacadh leis sin. If the Government, including Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and its Independent backers, are so confident that this enjoys the support of the Irish people, it should put it to them. It should put it to a referendum and seek their views. I know, and I think we all here in this Chamber know, given that there are not many present on the Government benches, what that answer will be. It will be a resounding "No" to the Government's attempts to dismantle our triple lock.

Deputy Mark Ward: The triple lock is the core of Irish neutrality. The Minister of State does not have to believe me, because this is what the Taoiseach said himself. Any decision to erode neutrality must go to a referendum. Let the people decide. The Minister of State spoke about the democratic right. What about the democratic right of the Irish people to make a decision about neutrality and the future of the Defence Forces in this country?

My father served for 27 years in the Irish Army. He served at home and abroad. We are hugely proud of him. He is 72 years of age now and he still attends parades up and down the country in his UN blue beret, particularly around Wexford. He was proud to serve as a peacekeeper in Lebanon. However, I am going to be very honest with the Minister of State. Let us be real here. My father, as much as he was proud to serve overseas, did not serve overseas for the love of his country, or at least that was not his first priority. His first priority was to put food on our table and clothes on our backs. This goes back to the 1980s. Growing up in the 1980s in a Defence Forces family meant being among the working poor. Fast-forward now to 2026. A constituent of mine who, after serving his country abroad for six months, has to sign on for the working family payment when he returns. That is no way to respect our armed forces, especially our peacekeepers, when they are going abroad. The Minister of State spoke about increasing wages for Army personnel. He needs to double down on that and make sure that, if he really wants to respect our peacekeepers, they are properly paid.

I got a couple of emails from sixth-year students in a school in my area, Collinstown Park Community College. They are pleading for the Government to reconsider. They are among the generation that is going to be affected. They are the generation that could be sent abroad further down the line. The Minister of State can shake his head all he wants but this is what this class sent to me today.

Deputy Réada Cronin: We are at a critical juncture in the history of this State. Since its foundation, it has been neutral and non-aligned and has kept itself independent of military alliances and organisations. Neutrality has remained steadfast throughout periods of uncertainty and chaos, including through the Second World War and, indeed, the Cold War. It is a tradition that we are proud of in this country, with our triple lock at the very core of

neutrality and a recognised contribution towards peace on earth; yet Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael say our neutrality is currently outdated and that it needs to keep up with the times.

Let us be clear about what the Government plans to do with the triple lock. It wants to scrap it. It calls this reform but it is a complete tearing asunder of our neutrality, support for which has been so powerfully expressed in poll after poll.

The Government wants to remove the third part of the lock, the important lock, the real lock, that being the UN approval element. It is important that people understand that if we do not have UN approval for a peacekeeping mission, it is no longer peacekeeping. Peacekeeping can only come through authorisation of the UN, which sets the standard applying to warring factions. This authorisation gives special status to the men and women of the Defence Forces. The abolition of UN-approval element of the triple lock means we are no longer peacekeepers but peace enforcers. If our troops align themselves with other military forces, such as those on EU missions or with the Lebanese army, as the Minister of State has suggested, we are no longer neutral. In Lebanon, which Israel is levelling, the Government wants the men and women of the Defence Forces to line up with EU armies from countries that have armed Israel, destroyed Gaza and are also levelling Lebanon now. It wants to destroy the history and the reputation proudly fought for by the men and women of our Defence Forces. It is an absolute disgrace. I cannot believe the number of people who have contacted me about this. They are upset about it. Put it to the people.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Hear, hear.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Dismantling the triple lock carries profound implications for Ireland for generations to come. We cannot leave decisions around the deployment of our troops solely in the hands of a Government that struggles to stand up to international pressure. The triple lock is a vital safeguard between Irish neutrality and an increasingly militarised EU. For decades, wearing the blue helmet under the Irish flag has protected our troops in the face of sustained hostility. Now the Government wants to throw away generations of honourable work.

The Irish passport is respected all around the world. It sits in the top three globally on the Henley Passport Index and ranks third on the Passport Index. Without our neutrality, the Irish passport will not carry the same weight.

When you look at Fianna Fáil's past record, you will see that Willie O'Dea opposed abolition. Brian Cowen said there would be no change without a referendum. Bertie Ahern put the triple lock into the second Nice treaty. In 2013, Micheál Martin called the triple lock the core of Irish neutrality, though today he says he is fed up with being reminded of his own words. Up to 20 Fianna Fáil backbenchers signed a letter this year arguing that the plan to scrap the triple lock represents a fundamental change in Fianna Fáil policy, yet they voted with their Government colleagues to scrap the triple lock. The one question the Taoiseach will not answer honestly, even when asked by his own backbenchers, is this: what has changed?

Over several decades, neutrality has formed a central part of our foreign policy, a foreign policy that has allowed Ireland to punch significantly above its weight. Ireland will always be a small country. We will never be a major military power but for the size of the country, we

have been able to exercise influence way beyond our weight. All that will change. People are concerned that our Irish troops will be at risk when the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Helen McEntee, talks about "peace enforcement", a change from the word "peacekeeping".

Ending the protection afforded to neutrality by the triple lock is reckless and it will be vigorously opposed by Sinn Féin. It looks to me that the Government is more worried about looking for big jobs in Europe than it is about protecting Irish neutrality. If the Government is that confident that the public wants the triple lock scrapped, it should put it to the people.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ireland should always stand tall in the world, proud of who we are and the choices we make as a nation. Military neutrality is one of those choices. It is not a relic to be discarded when powerful states find it inconvenient. It is a deliberate policy rooted in our history and the conviction that Ireland should act for peace, guided by its own judgment and interests.

Ireland knows what colonial rule means. For generations, decisions about our country were made elsewhere in the interests of an empire. That experience gave us a particular understanding of the struggles of people fighting for freedom and self-determination. It helped Ireland gain a positive reputation among nations seeking independence and gave weight to our support for the rights of people to determine their own future. We should be proud of that tradition. That history helped shape Ireland's decision to stay outside military blocs. The triple lock gives our neutrality practical force. It requires UN authorisation. The Government wants to remove it. It calls it modernisation. I call it doffing your cap to the powers in Europe.

I say to the Government very clearly that it is time for it to grow a backbone, show a little pride and put Ireland first. It has no mandate to make a fundamental change without the people's consent. Sinn Féin is calling on the Government to hold a referendum. Let the Irish people decide whether Ireland will preserve the triple lock and remain true to its tradition of military neutrality.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. It is crucial to maintain this discussion about the triple lock as the Government ploughs ahead with its plans to abolish it.

I am a pacifist. I seek to achieve peace through peaceful means and I am so deeply proud of our tradition of neutrality in this country, as I believe many of the constituents of the Minister of State and myself in Dublin Rathdown are also. For me, neutrality is an active position. It is not something that is passive, nor is it something we just have as a fail-safe.

It is an assertion of our values, which say that we seek peace through peaceful means and that we reject war and killing and persecution. That is where I am coming from when I make my remarks today. The Social Democrats will be proud to support this motion. I urge the Government to reconsider its amendment, because once again, despite what the Minister of State is saying, and I appreciate he is here for the debate and to listen, he is once again not actually engaging with the material of the motion. The amendment just says that "Dáil Éireann notes" and then scraps everything that Sinn Féin has tabled, then puts forward the Government's own self-congratulating positions around what it does in this space. That is what it does in

response to every single Private Members' business motion tabled by the Opposition, but it is important to name it every time. This makes it hard for us to then engage in these debates. The other reason that it is so difficult is that the Government is so disingenuous in its language. The entire Government, including all the spokespeople and the Ministers who are speaking on this, are entirely disingenuous.

I have been a TD for two years now and this is the issue I have given most of my time to. I am deep in it. I am passionate about it. I have been talking in public about the Government's spin on this and the four myths that it has put forward, which we must tackle if we are to have a genuine conversation. The main myth is that this Government continues to support Irish neutrality. That is a myth and until the Government accepts that that is a myth and that it is false, none of these debates can be held in good faith. The Government is not starting from the same reality that I am starting from. Another myth that is really important to call out is that the Government is only reforming the triple lock, because all members of the Government continue to say that despite the clear evidence in front of us in its proposed Defence (Amendment) Bill, which abolishes the triple lock. There is no other way around it. Another myth is that the triple lock is not central to our neutrality anyway. We have heard *ad infinitum* now the repeat of the Taoiseach's quote from 2013 citing the triple lock as core to Irish neutrality, a quote that has aged just about as well as a Trump tweet.

There is the myth that the EU is not on a path towards militarisation. This is one the Minister of State in particular is quite passionate about. He is obviously a strong advocate of the European Union and membership of it. Government Members all take the opportunity, when I call this out, to say that we are anti-European. The Social Democrats are proud Europeans. Deputy Gannon, seated next to me, and I have both run for a European position. We are proud European Union members but our version of European Union membership is not going along with whatever the big boys in the class want. It is not thinking about how our neighbours see us in terms of our adherence to their values. It is about our assertion of our values within a group. We are one of 27. How powerful is it that we can influence European Union decision-making as one of 27, yet the Government chooses not to do that? It chooses to instead go along with this vision of militarisation.

I do not understand how the Government can try to deny that when €800 billion in European Union money, taxpayers' money, has been pledged to rearm Europe, when Ursula von der Leyen peppers every single speech with her priorities of defence, when it is listed as the number one priority, when the multi-annual financial framework has been pivoted away from social cohesion and away from the Government's favourite, competitiveness, towards defence. How can the Government still say that Europe is not on a path towards militarisation? It is disingenuous, so it makes this debate so difficult and so frustrating.

On that first myth, the Government says it still supports neutrality, but it has been chipping away at neutrality on and on for years. It is fitting that the Minister of State is here tonight because he has publicly asserted that he does not believe in Irish neutrality. I believe that the description he gave it was morally degenerate.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: No? Okay. I look forward to the Minister of State's clarification on that when he speaks again. He has stated publicly that he does not support Irish neutrality.

I genuinely believe that is the shared view of all his colleagues in Fine Gael, but they know they cannot say it because it would undermine all of their arguments. I will offer up some of the evidence that I have that the Government does not support Irish neutrality, because right now it is proposing to remove the triple lock through the Defence (Amendment) Bill. That is a big one. It has also proposed an increase in the cap that can be deployed without any scrutiny beyond the Government of the day from 12 to 50. That means that we can see more and more large groups of troops going away without it even coming under Dáil oversight at all. The 12 to 50 matter is not getting enough attention, by the way, in this debate. We will see more use of Shannon and Irish airspace for military purposes. The Government has supported Ursula von der Leyen, who has clearly prioritised defence within the European Union. There has been engagement with NATO and EU battlegroups. The last one is exemplified by pulling troops out of a peacekeeping mission in the Golan Heights to then deploy them to an EU battlegroup. That is an actual thing that happened. The Government deployed those troops to an EU battlegroup.

For all of those reasons, I cannot accept those positions that the Minister of State and his Government put forward, which makes it impossible for us to engage in good faith with their debate. What we see is that the Government is undoing Irish neutrality, and I believe that it is doing it to access some of that €800 billion. I believe that the Government wishes to pivot us towards being a more defence-minded country, enterprise sector and a more defence-minded and war-minded military. It is that simple. The Government wants a piece of the pie. We had innocuous legislation in the Dáil two months ago, the Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026, that allows Enterprise Ireland and the IDA to offer support for companies that want to engage in the development of dual-use goods and military equipment.

We know it. The Government is saying it. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, spoke about it in Vienna or Strasbourg recently, where he was talking about the fact that we should be looking for some of that money. The Government is not making any bones about it, yet it continues to put forward these absolute myths. When you kick out those pillars from underneath the Government's argument, it exposes the spin, and it exposes the schism in the Government because Fianna Fáil is clearly not in full agreement on this. We know that from public statements from some senior Fianna Fáil figures, but I believe that there is a lot more unsettled feeling in the Fianna Fáil Party about what the Government is trying to do. This is sacred to the Irish people and we are not going to stand by and watch the Government dismantle Irish neutrality. This is the very last part of the Government taking away the triple lock. It has carved away at it and made it as meaningless as it possibly can, and is now trying to take away the last thread that we have of it.

Deputy Máire Devine: Hear, hear. Well said.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I listened to the Minister of State's speech earlier with some interest. He finished by saying there is a fundamental question before the House and that the question is straightforward. I am not sure if we are asking the same questions. The Minister of State has passionately said he believes in the European Union and is a proud member of it. What is his understanding of the Seville Declarations of 21 June 2002, when the then Taoiseach went to Seville and gave a solemn commitment to the Irish people? He stated:

> Ireland reiterates that the participation of contingents of the Irish Defence Forces in overseas operations, including those carried out under the European security and defence policy, requires (a) the authorisation of the operation by the Security Council or the General Assembly of the United Nations, (b) the agreement of the Irish Government and (c) the approval of Dáil Éireann, in accordance with Irish law.

As Deputy Gibney said, we too believe in the European Union as a project. Is this now the Chamber where the Minister of State says an Irish Taoiseach went and effectively lied to the Irish people? Is he okay with that? I have the declaration here. There are seven covenants in it. None of them says it comes with a time limit. Will the Minister of State accept that we gave a solemn declaration using an EU Council meeting in Seville with the then Taoiseach present? When you take away that third component of the a triple lock, the Government has just used that pulpit to lie and has become a custodian of a lie that was given to the Irish people.

The Minister of State called himself a democrat in his contribution. Does he agree that both the Lisbon and the Nice referendums were passed because of the commitment given by the triple lock? He will accept that Irish people went to the polls in a democratic forum and were given a commitment that should they vote to pass the second Nice referendum and the Lisbon referendum, this commitment of the triple lock would give the guarantees that the Irish people needed. They were feeling insecure about an increase in militarisation post 2001. He will accept that a commitment was given in the European Parliament, which he says he is passionate about, and to the Irish people, for whom he says he is a democrat, though in opposition to what, I am not sure.

The fundamental tenet for me is this. There is potential for a great national question here, if the Government actually trusted the Irish people to have that conversation. I know what side I would fall on. I would make the arguments, I would knock on doors and I would hang posters. I would do all the things you do when I self-describe as a democrat.

What I would not do is stand here and say I am a proud European and member of the EU Parliament and then say we used that pulpit to lie. Can the Minister of State show me where in that declaration the time limit is saying that after 24 years a government might come in and change it without the people having any say and will force a majority in, some of whom in Fianna Fáil do not want to vote for it? It is further testament to the fact we need a triple lock because the whip system in this country requires courage and we are seeing none from Fianna Fáil, who have a position but do not have the courage to vote for it. That is exactly what will happen at some undefined point in the future when somebody else will say we need to join an EU army because something else has changed. That is what the Government is doing. A promise was given. It has broken the promise and is now being self-righteous and saying things have changed. Did things not change after 2001? Was the world not very different after the 9-11 attacks? Were people not marching then? Absolutely. The world will consistently change but what does not change is a promise. A promise does not come with a time limit.

The most shady aspect of this is the self-righteousness and self-importance of saying we are weak on defence. It was not us who undermined and underpaid our Defence Forces and did not invest in undersea security. That was the Government parties. I would not allow a Taoiseach to give a promise and declaration at an EU Parliament meeting and then say it does not matter any more. The Government parties have made liars of us all. That is what they are doing.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank and commend Sinn Féin on tabling this extremely important motion. The Labour Party will be fully supporting it. We need to reaffirm Ireland's military neutrality and ensure we remain entirely independent of military alliances and foreign conflicts. Our neutrality is a fundamental expression of our sovereignty, our values and the role we have chosen to play in the international community. War crimes and serious violations of international law have taken place in Iran, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. We cannot allow Ireland to become complicit in conflicts of this nature. We cannot have weapons transported through Shannon Airport or Irish airspace to be used in these conflicts. Other European countries have demonstrated that it is possible to take a firm position. Spain, despite being a NATO member, and Switzerland have restricted US military aircraft from using their airspace. Ireland should not be afraid to consider similar measures and make clear we will not facilitate military actions contrary to international law or our commitment to peace.

Public support for neutrality remains extremely strong with four out of five people indicating that they wish to retain it. This is an issue of profound national importance. We must not allow Ireland to become entangled in conflicts our people neither support nor wish to be associated with.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: We have to reject misinformation on this issue from all quarters and ensure debate on a matter so important to the Irish people is carried out in good faith.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's crusade to remove the triple lock represents a significant weakening of safeguards governing the deployment of our Defence Forces personnel overseas. I strongly believe the triple lock must be protected. The United Nations Security Council is undoubtedly imperfect. In particular, the veto power held by the five permanent members is outdated and undemocratic. The council has become increasingly paralysed by competing geopolitical interests and has struggled to respond effectively to international conflicts. That said, the UN remains the most important multilateral institution available for promoting international peace and co-operation.

The programme for Government commits to reforming the triple lock, not abolishing it. The triple lock is not the entirety of Irish neutrality but it is a significant expression of our commitment to the United Nations and the principles of collective peacekeeping. For 25 years, it has formalised our relationship with the principal international institution responsible for maintaining peace and security. This has been a source of considerable pride and has helped distinguish Ireland's approach to international affairs. The Government has absolutely no mandate from the electorate to remove the triple lock. It deserves a proper national debate and meaningful public consultation, rather than being rushed through this House. A referendum to enshrine military neutrality in the Constitution should take place.

Ireland has a reputation as a trusted, impartial and constructive contributor to peacekeeping. Since 1958, members of Óglaigh na hÉireann have served with distinction in some of the world's most challenging and dangerous environments. Our Defence Forces have represented a distinctive approach based on restraint, impartiality, diplomacy and a genuine commitment to protecting civilians. Their contribution has been widely respected and we should take

enormous pride in the reputation they have established. Ireland has never been an imperial power or an occupying force. Our history as a colonised nation has shaped our understanding of sovereignty, aggression and the devastating consequences of military domination. We should never lose sight of that history.

Neutrality is about actively supporting peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention, diplomacy, international justice and the prosecution of war crimes. Being non-aligned means opting into international co-operation and peacebuilding. We have to continue to speak out about injustice regardless of who is responsible. Europe's inconsistent response to Israel's actions in Palestine has seriously undermined its moral credibility. International law and human rights must be applied consistently without exception for powerful states. Ireland has an important role to play in challenging these double standards and ensuring international law remains the foundation of our approach to global affairs.

There is a clear move towards greater militarisation across Europe. Defence expenditure is increasing, military co-operation is expanding and proposals for a common European defence structure are increasing. There will inevitably be demands for Ireland to contribute more directly to collective European defence. We need a clear, considered and principled response. That response should be based on maintaining our military neutrality, strengthening our independence on defence capacity and continuing to contribute positively to international peace and security. I do not believe Ireland should join NATO, a common EU defence army or any military arrangement. That would compromise our independent decision-making on the deployment of our Defence Forces.

Successive Governments have failed to invest adequately in our Defence Forces and national security infrastructure. This underinvestment has left Ireland dangerously dependent on other European countries for essential security functions. Our military personnel are stretched well beyond capacity. Recruitment and retention remain significant challenges and the Defence Forces have called for better pay, allowances, equipment, accommodation and working conditions. These are long-standing issues that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

We have serious deficiencies in our ability to monitor and protect our airspace and territorial waters. Our reliance on the British Royal Air Force to monitor Irish airspace is particularly concerning. We lack the necessary radar infrastructure and surveillance capabilities to independently identify, track and respond to potential threats. Our naval capabilities are similarly inadequate for the extensive maritime area we are responsible for protecting. We need modern vessels, appropriate sonar systems and sufficient personnel to monitor our territory. We need to be capable of dealing with cyberattacks, interference with critical infrastructure and threats to undersea communications cables. We need a modern defence strategy built around intelligence, surveillance, cybersecurity, maritime protection and the ability to monitor our territory.

Investing in these capabilities is entirely consistent with neutrality. Indeed, genuine neutrality requires a country to be capable of protecting its own sovereignty and security without depending on military alliances or the armed forces of other states. Countries such as Switzerland and Austria demonstrate it is possible to maintain military non-alignment while developing credible national defence capabilities. Ireland should learn from these examples.

We have to ensure that the development of our defence policy takes account of the future constitutional and political arrangements of this island. As discussions around reunification progress, we will need to consider how a unified Ireland would approach defence and security, particularly given the different international positions currently occupied by the South and by the North. Ireland fought hard for its independence and its sovereignty. Our neutrality is an important expression of that achievement and must not be diluted. There is a clear difference between working with international partners to address security threats and surrendering our independent capacity to make decisions about military involvement. We can co-operate with our European neighbours, strengthen our national security and contribute to international peacekeeping without joining NATO or a common European military alliance. We should continue to support the United Nations despite its imperfections and work towards strengthening its ability to prevent conflict and protect vulnerable people. The contribution of Irish peacekeepers must remain central to this vision. Their service over five decades has shown that a small, militarily neutral country can have an influence far greater than its size.

Ireland needs a positive and active policy of neutrality, one that is supported by properly resourced Defence Forces, strong independent security capabilities, respect for international law and a commitment to humanitarian principles.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I fully support the proposals being put forward. The Government is being less than honest about the purpose of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026. This is the biggest change in foreign policy and military alignment in the last 70 years. The Government is completely upending the position taken at the League of Nations and consistently down through the decades at the United Nations, as well as our relationship with the UN and our policy of multilateralism.

Instead of the UN-approved peacekeeping missions, we will have undefined missions with "relevant international forces", writ large right through the Bill, which our Defence Forces will be part of and commanded by. Instead of Irish peacekeepers carrying out their duties impartially, we are now to have "peace enforcers", again writ large right throughout the draft legislation the Government will try to ram through the Dáil next week and the week after. The Taoiseach and the Minister for foreign affairs should explain to this Dáil and the Irish people what exactly peace enforcement is. What does that mean? I know what it means, as does the Government, but it should come in here and state it clearly to the people. It knows it is active military engagement with one side or the other involved in international conflicts. It means active combat, and the Government should clearly state that.

We are still awaiting an explanation of what a relevant international force is, who that is and who will put that together. Judging by the various meetings the Government has been involved in recently and the alliances it has formed, it looks as though it will be a combination of NATO countries, former imperialists and current imperialists.

The removal of the triple lock is the most cynical move by the Government, and particularly by Fianna Fáil, in modern times and it is worth noting that not one Fianna Fáil Deputy is in the Chamber. To do so without a referendum is a betrayal of the Irish people. The Government is proposing to tear into pieces and shred the solemn national declarations a Fianna Fáil Government made, not once but twice, in the Nice and Lisbon treaties. In the annexe to the Nice treaty 2002, the Fianna Fáil Government stated:

> Ireland reiterates that the participation of contingents of the Irish Defence Forces in overseas operations, including those carried out under the European common security and defence policy requires (a) the authorisation of the operation by the Security Council or the General Assembly of the United Nations, (b) the agreement of the Irish Government, and (c) the approval of Dáil Éireann, in accordance with Irish law.

That is stated clearly in respect of the Lisbon treaty, too. The triple lock and our neutrality are clearly set out and writ large front and centre in those two solemn national declarations, and now the Government proposes to tear them up. To do so without a referendum is a clear betrayal of the Irish people. Those annexes and those documents are quite clear.

The policy of neutrality has been backed by the Irish people. The Minister of State and the Government know that the majority of the Irish people have no appetite for this and the Government should go back to the drawing board on this. It is time for the Government to be honest with people, and stop trying to hoodwink them and ram this dodgy legislation through the Dáil and the Oireachtas.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Deputies Boyd Barrett and Healy have four minutes each.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Irish Government is selling out Irish neutrality for a piece of the arms industry, for the profits it thinks it can get out of it and because it wants to be part of the big boys' militarist club in Europe and NATO. If you want proof of that, look at the summit that happened last week. That was not an EU meeting. It was a NATO meeting, along with a few war criminals from the Trump Administration, like Witkoff and Kushner. Those guys should be in jail for starting a war, along with Israel, for bombing Iran, for bombing Lebanon in Israel's case as part of it and for killing people, and they were invited to the national art gallery. If you want a definition of obscenity, it is a load of people who should be before the International Criminal Court for war crimes, along with people who want to double the arms budget to make more profits for arms producers, and a Irish Government that is selling our precious tradition of neutrality down the line and wants to join the arms industry in making drones that have killed tens of thousands of people in the Russia-Ukraine war and slaughtered huge numbers in Gaza. Courtesy of the taxpayer, the Government wined and dined them on the red carpet in a place of art owned by the people. That, to me, is obscenity, but it says everything about what is going on in this country.

Europe has hundreds of billions of euro for weapons, war and militarisation but does not have money to deal with the housing and homelessness crisis. It does not have money to give a decent pay increase to workers or to put the necessary money into special needs, education or the public transport we need. No, but we have money to make by co-producing drones to kill people, or to remove the triple lock and join a mission that, as Kaja Kallas pointed out, will mean moving towards the disarmament of Hezbollah.

What protects our soldiers abroad? Indeed, what protects this country? The Government often talks about the dangers and threats. It exaggerates them and so on. The biggest protection we have is our reputation as a country that is neutral, that opposed colonialism and war and that is not lined up with the empires. The Government, however, wants to get involved in a

mission to disarm Hezbollah but not disarm Israel, the people who are committing war crimes and genocide, not that I am suggesting we should do so but it shows the double standards.

The Government is okay with disarming Hezbollah but allows Israeli mouthpieces, warmongers and genociders to walk in and out of this country, to speak in our media and justify the genocide of the Palestinian people. It appears that is okay but we will sanction the guy who speaks for Russian television, a mouthpiece for Putin's warmongering by the way, but impose no sanction on people who justify Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people. I ask people to join the march this Saturday at 2 p.m. if they want to fight to defend our neutrality.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I support the motion. Irish neutrality and the triple lock are the property of the Irish people. The Taoiseach himself has said that it is at the core of our neutrality. Irish neutrality and the triple lock have been endorsed by the Irish people in two sovereign referendums, in Nice two and in Lisbon two, and acknowledged in the EU Seville Declarations. They were specifically referenced in the explanatory booklets delivered to every household for those referendums, any change to the triple lock and Irish neutrality must be put to the people in a referendum.

The National Declaration and those two referendums on neutrality and the triple lock have no time limit. All future Governments were committed to ensuring that Irish soldiers would not be sent on military missions abroad without a UN mandate. That National Declaration made in 2002 at the European Council meeting in Seville was formally responded to by the other EU member states in the Seville Declarations. The National Declaration's provision on the triple lock was cited by the statutory Referendum Commission in the documentation it produced for voters in the Nice two referendum explaining what it was about. The National Declaration was deposited in Rome along with the Nice treaty when it was ratified and it was registered with that treaty at the United Nations. Ireland's National Declaration has thereby been endowed with a constitutional character such that its key provisions may only be altered by a referendum of the people.

On 27 June 2002, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen, speaking in the Dáil, said: "The National Declaration confirms that Ireland is not party to any mutual defence commitment, that we are not party to any plans for a so-called European army and that we will continue to take our sovereign decision, on a case-by-case basis, on whether the Defence Forces will participate in humanitarian or crisis management tasks undertaken by the EU, based on the triple lock guarantee of UN endorsement, Government decision and Dáil approval." In a final sentence, he said: "The Government has said that there will be no change to that situation unless the people first give their assent in a referendum." Without doubt, then, a referendum will have to be called if there are to be any changes to the triple lock.

As I have said before in the House, the abolition of the triple lock can be stopped. It is not too late. It can be stopped by Fianna Fáil TDs. Irish neutrality and the triple lock are Fianna Fáil. They are Fianna Fáil history and Fianna Fáil culture. Éamon de Valera, the founder of Fianna Fáil, put the peaceful settlement of international disputes by international arbitration into the Constitution. He declared neutrality in 1939. Bertie Ahern put the triple lock into Nice two. Brian Cowen, as Taoiseach, put the triple lock into Lisbon. Bertie Ahern has said he is opposed to the abolition of the triple lock, as has former Fianna Fáil Minister and deputy leader, Éamon Ó Cuív. Deputy Willie O'Dea and about 20 others also say they are opposed to it. The

abolition of the triple lock can be stopped. It can be stopped by Fianna Fáil standing up for its history. This is what needs to be done. We need Fianna Fáil TDs to come out and say "No" to this.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Before we move to the next group, I welcome the Raheny All Stars to the Public Gallery. I understand the organisation is celebrating ten years in existence. Congratulations on the milestone. They are very welcome and I hope Deputy Heneghan is treating them well. We move on to the Independent Technical Group. I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: Here we are debating an issue that Fianna Fáil would at one time have stood on a different side of the fence on but it has now jumped ship. We would like to know why and get to the real reason.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I do not think I have ever stood on that side of the fence.

Deputy Michael Collins: Fianna Fáil certainly has but I know the Minister of State is in Fine Gael and might take a different stand on a lot of things.

We reaffirm our opposition to the Government's attempt to dismantle the triple lock, a move that strikes at the heart of Irish neutrality, democratic accountability and our independent foreign policy. The triple lock has served Ireland well. It ensures that Irish troops are deployed overseas only where there is Government approval, Dáil approval and a UN mandate. These are not obstacles; they are safeguards. They are protections put in place to ensure decisions involving Irish soldiers are taken with the highest degree of democratic and international legitimacy.

What is most alarming is not simply the Government's desire to remove the triple lock but its refusal to allow the Irish people to have a say. If Ministers are so confident that this is the right course for Ireland, why are they afraid to put the question before the people in a referendum? It is very simple. In recent weeks, we have seen growing concern not only from Opposition parties but from within Government ranks. Even Fianna Fáil TDs have expressed reservations about these changes. Yet those concerns have been brushed aside.

The Government argues that this is about efficiency and flexibility. I believe it is about weakening an important safeguard that has underpinned Ireland's proud tradition of peacekeeping and military neutrality for decades. The Irish people are perfectly capable of deciding major questions about their country's future. They deserve to be consulted before any Government alters a cornerstone of our neutrality. The people have repeatedly shown that neutrality matters to them. They do not want decisions of this magnitude forced through without their consent. Independent Ireland has consistently opposed the removal of the triple lock, and I voted accordingly because I believe sovereignty ultimately rests with the people. The Government should stop avoiding the public verdict, halt this reckless course and let the Irish people decide. The Government should not be afraid. The Irish people are the people who elected the Minister of State and me. By God, on such an important issue, surely this is what the Irish people want.

Independent Ireland, to put a straight question to the people, carried out a poll about three weeks ago. We had 45,000 respondents answering on this triple lock question. A total of 96.7% said there should be a referendum before the Government makes a change. That is almost 100% of 45,000 people. Some 54% said the EU is the driving force behind this change, and 87.1% said they would not vote for the Independents in government who voted to remove the triple lock. Those are the figures. These were the results of a selected online poll, not a representative national poll, but they demonstrate the strength of feeling among those who took part.

We must stop this process from progressing any further without the public having its say. The triple lock is an important safeguard in our approach to military neutrality. A change of this significance should not be made without a clear democratic mandate. In regard to this poll, we were very fair. We asked a straight question and left it to the public. If people did not agree with us, we had to accept that too. For a poll of that type to have 45,000 people take part meant there was great anger, worry and concern out there. The Government is ignoring that anger, worry and concern. Why?

We are asking a very simple question here. Put it to a referendum. Let the people make up their minds. If we are wrong, we will have to accept it and move on. I can assure the Minister of State, though, that the result of the referendum would show that more than 90% of people reject the proposal. The Government knows that. That is why it is terrified out of its mind to put the question to the people, because they will blow the Government out of the water on the issue. The Government is totally out of order and totally wrong. The Minister of State is not listening to what I am saying.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am taking notes. The Deputy thought I was in Fianna Fáil two minutes ago.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The Minister of State will have his chance.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is not possible to be doing one thing and doing another. It is necessary to make up one's mind and do one thing or the other. The Minister of State will have his chance to respond and he can tell me he is interested if he is, but I am very interested in this. As I said, Independent Ireland was honest and fair to everybody and gave 45,000 people that opportunity, and they responded in dramatic style.

The Government cannot ignore that 96.7% but it is choosing to do so. The Minister of State's colleagues in Fine Gael are choosing to ignore it. His colleagues in Fianna Fáil are spitting and spluttering behind his back but they are not doing anything about it. It is time for them to speak up now. Do they want this change or not? If they do not want it, they should stand with the people. If they do stand with the people, they will reject it wholeheartedly like the people have.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will start my contribution with a quote from Micheál Martin on the issue of the triple lock. In 2013, when debating with Alan Shatter, he said the following:

> Earlier this year, the Minister [Alan Shatter] ... signalled he would try to water down Ireland's commitment to the triple lock, which is a core of our neutrality. He presented the idea that it was contradictory and that we were giving unsavoury countries a veto over our actions. This argument has been behind the efforts of a wing of Fine Gael to erode neutrality over the years ... My party and I completely reject this. The United Nations is not working as it should but we must not abandon it as an essential part of the international system.

Here we have Micheál Martin completely flipping and another example of Micheál Martin gutting the core values of Fianna Fáil. Some 17 TDs and Seanadóirí have written a letter stating that the triple lock should be defended. I appeal to all of those Fianna Fáil Members of the Oireachtas today to make sure they vote against the repeal of the triple lock. I ask citizens to respectfully engage with each one of those TDs and Senators to try to persuade them to stand up for their values in this particular vote when it comes to the fore.

It is not just Fianna Fáil values Micheál Martin is gutting. The triple lock was introduced in 2001 as a result of the defeat of the Nice referendum. When that defeat happened, the Government realised neutrality was a key worry of the Irish people so it inserted the triple lock into the process. It was agreed in the Seville Declarations and delivered to every single letter box in the country. The people made a decision on the second Nice referendum on that basis. If you are looking to change it, you need to have a referendum. Anything else is a betrayal of the democratic rights of the Irish people. It is an unjust and undemocratic sleight of hand in terms of the democracy of this country.

I will speak briefly about the Defence Forces. When Fine Gael came to power in 2011, the Irish Defence Forces had 9,500 personnel; now, they have 7,500. In 2011, there were eight operational ships patrolling our seas; now, there are fewer than four. In truth, Fine Gael is the biggest threat to the Defence Forces. In an image reminiscent of Comical Ali, we saw Helen McEntee in Wicklow at a meeting of EU defence ministers talking tough about Irish defence while in the background a British Navy ship was patrolling our coast and a British Army helicopter was in the skies. The damage that has been done to this country by Fine Gael since it came into power is incredible.

Irish neutrality means non-alignment. This is the key issue the Government does not seem to get. When the large military blocs, Russia, the US and China, are in opposition on the Security Council, aligning with any of them means this country would be aligning with a military bloc. That is the whole purpose of the triple lock. The key issue that is not understood by the Government is that this Bill would allow for any amount of Irish troops to be sent anywhere for practically any reason.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That is absolutely wrong. It is not down to a double lock;-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----it is a single lock. This Government will make the decisions.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I support this motion - not every aspect of it but the large spirit of it. I have to be honest; I am a bit confused about whether the triple lock argument itself should be the sole issue for a referendum. That is because the root of the requirement for UN authorisation goes back to the Defence (Amendment) Act 1960 which governs the deployment of troops abroad. While this was not enshrined in the Nice and Lisbon treaties, it was used as a political and legal selling point. As Deputy Tóibín mentioned, the 2002 Seville Declarations during the Nice treaty process were basically to reassure voters that our neutrality and sovereign decision-making would be protected. Our neutrality has evolved, however.

The triple lock was largely a legislative procedure. Article 29.1 of the Constitution in states, "Ireland affirms its devotion to the ideal of peace and friendly co-operation amongst nations founded on international justice and morality." Article 29.2 states, "Ireland affirms its adherence to the principle of the pacific settlement of international disputes by international arbitration or judicial determination". After the Lisbon treaty, we also stated we would not adopt a decision in relation to a common European defence. That is very clear but unfortunately with the Government intending to unilaterally remove the triple lock, people are scared because they see it as a stealth process towards closer military co-operation with NATO member states. While there may be a time at some stage down the line when we have to stand up, defend and help other European states were they to be attacked by an aggressor, as of now, we are and continue to be militarily neutral but the triple lock, as I have said in previous contributions, is not fit for purpose.

If people really want this reassurance, whether the triple lock or something else. I have suggested a Dáil supermajority might be one option. I am open to other suggestions in that regard. What would really work in a situation like this is to put it to the people. Ideally I would like to see something like a preferendum with multiple options. People could then give their decision and there would a process of elimination and, like the de Borda Institute has done in international conflicts around the world, we could come up with a solution everyone is relatively happy with. Our Constitution precludes preferendums. However, the absence of a constitutional requirement to hold a referendum on the triple lock does not mean it should not be put to the people in some shape or form. I support a preferendum-type process or, if needs be to give people reassurance, a further referendum at some stage.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I will begin by making something absolutely clear: Ireland's military neutrality is not changing. We are not joining NATO, we are not joining any type of military alliance and we are not signing up to fight somebody else's war, yet Sinn Féin continues to tell people our neutrality is under threat. Frankly, the Irish people deserve a much more honest debate.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: They do.

Deputy Réada Cronin: A debate and a referendum.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: The triple lock and neutrality are not the same thing. The triple lock is a mechanism in our domestic legislation governing certain overseas deployments and our neutrality is a long-standing policy of the State. It is not proposed to change our

position of neutrality. It is proposed to change the domestic law that governs our triple lock and who ultimately decides where our peacekeepers go in the service of peace.

I am a member of the committee on defence and national security, as well as a former member of the Defence Forces and somebody who served with the UN under that blue flag. I challenge Sinn Féin to show the House where in this Bill it says we are getting rid of our neutrality. They will not find it because it is not in that Bill. What they will find under section 21 is an express declaration that there is nothing in this piece of legislation that should signify or give any authority for us to join any type of grouping we are not already currently a member of. We are not joining NATO and we are not joining a military alliance. Our position of military neutrality is not changing.

Sinn Féin wants to call for a referendum but we do not hold referendum every time we want to change domestic legislation. That is why we have normal elections and why we elect TDs to represent us in the Dáil - to examine, debate and amend our laws as they need to be. Why are we are changing this law? We are doing so because the UN Security Council is not functioning in the way it should. Surely Ireland as a sovereign state should be able to make its own decisions as to participating in lawful missions. This is important. The future missions we will participate in will be lawful, fully in accordance with international law and the principles of the UN Charter and will take full heed of our traditional policy of being militarily neutrality.

We also have safeguards. There is professional military advice, legal advice from the Attorney General, Government approval and Dáil approval, where required.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: As someone who served overseas, I know the importance of our peacekeeping tradition and the professionalism of our Defence Forces.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I want to ask Sinn Féin Deputies to do one thing. Will they please be honest about what is being proposed-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Deputy, you are well over time.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: -----and stop spreading fear?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is right to put on record our thanks and gratitude to those who, over many decades, have represented this country so well on peacekeeping missions. They were highly respected and highly regarded. Unfortunately, many gave their lives on those very important peacekeeping missions.

On the motion, to keep the triple lock in place as it stands is certainly not the right thing to do. It is wrong that since 2014, our peacekeeping missions have been interfered with because we are beholden to others and have to ask the Security Council for permission to allow more

than 12 of our peacekeepers to go on missions abroad. I hope people read a very interesting article in *The Irish Times*. I am sure some of the Sinn Féin Deputies will have read it. It was about a speech Gerry Adams made, which seems to be completely at odds with what is being proposed here. It is a very interesting article.

Having listened extensively and very closely to people in County Kerry and throughout the country who were involved in our Defence Forces, including people who are retired and have engaged in peacekeeping missions, they have a perfect understanding of what is required and not required. They certainly do not want to see us continuing with the triple lock in place. That is why I have absolutely no problem in the world with it, based on the people I am listening to and my own understanding of it.

There is so much misinformation out there. When I hear the debates and arguments an awful lot of people are putting forward, it seems to be from social media they are getting their information. If everybody follows social media, we will have a very funny state of law and order because it seems to be full of absolutely nothing but misinformation. There is an awful lot of wrong and untruthful information being put out there. Trying to give people the impression this is sending our people to war and being part of greater armies is a load of nonsense.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Jesus Christ.

Deputy Carol Nolan: As I have stated in this Chamber previously, the issue of the triple lock should be put before the people in a referendum. Only two years ago, a referendum was held on carers that nobody wanted, apart of the NGOs that seem to have a lot of sway in this country. Nobody asked for it. Not one constituent knocked on my office doors and asked for a referendum on carers to change the wording of the Constitution. Now, however, when people are asking for a referendum, the Government will not listen to the people or engage with them. I have had so much correspondence on the issue of the triple lock. People are pleading to have their say, for fairness and justice and for the matter to be put before them in a referendum. Yet, the Government could squander €23.5 million on a referendum nobody wanted, apart from NGOs which seem to call the shots in here.

I will support this motion, not because I share in its entirety the rationale being put forward by Sinn Féin, but because I genuinely believe there is unseemly and indecent haste in what the Government is doing in bypassing certain stages of the legislative scrutiny of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026. I share the concerns set out in the motion that Ireland's Defence Forces must never be deployed in a manner inconsistent with Ireland's independent foreign policy. I particularly support the view that the commitments made to the Irish people during the Nice and Lisbon treaty referendum campaigns must be respected.

I take this opportunity to highlight the hypocritical position of Sinn Féin on the issue of respecting referendums. How is Sinn Féin respecting the referendum on the eighth amendment by insisting we remove one of the core commitments provided to the people in 2018, namely, the implementation of a three-day waiting period. I have not had any constituents looking for that to be scrapped and I am from a big constituency.

There is double talk here that is almost despicable. Yes, we must protect our neutrality at all costs. We saw Fianna Fáil leaders of the past do just that. It is shameful to have this proposal before us and to see that an Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, is not listening to Irish people. Nothing should ever undermine our neutrality but if we are arguing that we should do so on the basis of respecting the views that people expressed in a referendum vote, at the very least, there should be consistency with respect to referendums and viewpoints.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to say a few words on this very important topic. The motion is on our neutrality and I support the neutral stance that Ireland has taken over the years. My father was very strong on that and he used to always praise Dev for the neutral stance he took during the Second World War. He succeeded in keeping us out of that terrible war. If we had joined it, many parts of Ireland would have been blown to pieces.

On the triple lock, we listened to the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, and different Taoisigh going back in time express support for it. If the Government wants to change it, and the Deputies on the Government side are entitled to their opinion, it should at least give the people a chance. I know a lot of Fianna Fáil backbenchers who do not support the idea of getting rid of the triple lock or interfering with our neutrality, which the Government is doing.

The Government seems to be proceeding at haste to get involved in a European army. While we gave money for humanitarian reasons to the Ukrainian people who came here, I and many others do not think it is right to give money to Ukraine to keep the war going. We are on one side then. We should remain neutral. A lot of money was given to Zelenskyy again in the past week, and he was smiling at the Taoiseach on the television, which is no wonder when he was given €25 million. While we are glad to hear today that construction is getting €20 million for green diesel, the industry paid a lot of money into that already because it has paid a lot of tax toward that €20 million. People have been waiting for it since last April or May.

To go back to the money that is being given, we need to have more discussions in the House about the amount of money that is being given to this European fund to keep Ukraine fighting. We need to have a proper debate on this among the Members who are elected to talk about the funding that is going out of this country to keep a war going.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I apologise for being late; I was stuck in traffic. I am delighted to be here to speak on this motion. I speak as a former member of Fianna Fáil - my late father was a founding member - on the principles it stood for. Now, we see it has further sold out its policies. That is all it is; a total sell-out, as far as I am concerned. We had the big show here last weekend. There was a great parade and it was a great event for an Taoiseach, Deputy Martin. I will not begrudge him that and he handled it well but a lot of ordinary people were bemused by it. They have seen for some time now that the Taoiseach wants to be part of a bigger global organisation. He wants the job there anyway, as he knows himself, and he will sign up to anything his EU masters want. That is the way it has gone, unfortunately.

I appeal to the members of Fianna Fáil, Senators and TDs, who wrote a letter on this to exercise their franchise and try to keep some semblance of the party that I was once a member of and my late father was a founding member of. It is sad to see the situation at the moment. It is power at any price and jobs in Europe at any price.

I want a solution that serves our soldiers who have served gallantly all over the years. I remember when one of those who fought at Jadotville was laid to rest. He was one of the last members of the Jadotville team. Micheál Martin promised he would recognise those soldiers when he got into power but he has ignored them completely. They fought gallantly out there as part of the UN. Those who are left are very elderly.

They are not getting recognition or acknowledgement from the Taoiseach, who promised them the sun, moon and stars when he was in opposition. It would fit him better, and I salute the gallant former soldier from Tipperary whose name eludes me now. We have to have a reasonable debate here.

Why is the Government so afraid of the people? The vast majority of people in Ireland are decent and they will not hit the Government with sticks or throw stones. Put it to the people and ask them. The Government got such a wallop in the last referendum and other referendums that it is afraid of the people. It will have to meet the people very soon, is luath, and they will be waiting on the doorsteps and with their peann luaidhe at the ballot box. I ask the Government to please rethink what it is doing.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank all Members for their contributions, particularly those with whom I disagree. That is the basis of a democratic Chamber in which we can debate all matters. I particularly thank those who have stayed and who will listen to the replies to the questions raised. I look forward to the concluding contributions by Deputy Ó Laoghaire and his colleagues.

The matters discussed are important and deserve extremely serious consideration. However, throughout the debate and for weeks on end, one central claim has been repeated time and again, which is that reform of the triple lock somehow amounts to an attack on Irish military neutrality. It does not matter how many times it is said, and saying it does not somehow make it true. The claim is simply wrong. It rests on the mistaken assumption that the triple lock and military neutrality are one and the same. They are not. Ireland's military neutrality is characterised by non-membership of military alliances and non-participation in common or mutual defence arrangements. This policy has not changed. The Government has no intention of changing it.

More importantly, military neutrality is not merely a matter of Government policy. It is reflected in Bunreacht na hÉireann. Article 29.4.9° provides:

> 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.

I beg Deputies, either now or in future campaigns, to stop this canard of previous campaigns that somehow an EU army is around the corner and that we will be conscripting young Irish women and men into it, particularly when our Constitution clearly states that is not on the cards. The Constitution already contains an explicit safeguard in relation to participation in common defence arrangements. That safeguard remains exactly as it is today.

Let us be clear that the constitutional protection reflecting Ireland's position outside common defence arrangements remains fully intact. Ireland remains outside military alliances.

Ireland remains outside common and mutual defence arrangements. Ireland's policy of military neutrality remains unchanged. None of that will change as a result of the legislation the Dáil has been debating for quite some time. By contrast, the triple lock is a statutory mechanism governing certain overseas deployments of Defence Forces personnel. Reforming a statutory mechanism does not alter the State's policy of neutrality. The statutory mechanism was born of legislation and can be reformed by legislation voted on by TDs sovereignly elected by the people.

We have heard repeated claims that the Government is dismantling safeguards. That is not correct. Government approval remains, Dáil approval remains, parliamentary oversight remains, compliance with international law remains and consistency with the principles of the United Nations Charter remains. What changes is whether another state, through its position on the UN Security Council, can exercise an effective veto over Ireland's participation in an overseas mission. The Government's position is straightforward. Decisions concerning Irish Defence Forces personnel should be made by Ireland's democratic institutions, not by foreign governments exercising a veto at the UN Security Council.

This is not a rejection of multilateralism. We have heard a lot about multilateralism and the role of the United Nations. I invite all Members present to spend some time studying the United Nations. I have had the honour of representing the country twice at the United Nations General Assembly. I have attended United Nations meetings around the world, including at the United Nations office in Nairobi and at various times in Geneva. Ireland will take its place on the United Nations Human Rights Council in January. It is quite clear that we are doubling down on our involvement in multilateralism while other member states are turning back. We are fully engaged with the United Nations reform process, but we acknowledge that the United Nations can and should work better.

I have listened carefully to arguments concerning the commitments given during the Nice and Lisbon treaty processes. We have heard repeated assertions that the Defence (Amendment) Bill somehow breaches these commitments. Again, that claim does not stand up to scrutiny. To respond directly to Deputy Gannon's point, the Seville Declaration contains an annex which clarifies that Ireland's participation in the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy does not undermine its traditional policy of military neutrality or commit it to a mutual defence pact or an EU army.

We heard questions from Deputies Guirke and Stanley about the difference between peacekeeping and peace enforcement. United Nations peace operations exist along a spectrum, and it is important to distinguish clearly between the two. At one end, peacekeeping operations are traditionally associated with Chapter VI of the United Nations Charter, which emphasises the peaceful settlement of disputes. Chapter VII of the Charter enables the Security Council to take coercive action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression through peace enforcement or, more recently, in the form of stabilisation missions. Peacekeeping forces are normally deployed with the consent of the parties to a conflict and in support of a ceasefire or other agreed peace measures. Peacekeeping forces are, therefore, usually unarmed or lightly armed and use the minimum force necessary, and then only in exceptional circumstances such as, for example, UNIFIL, where the UN acts as a monitoring, patrolling and observing force.

Peace enforcement refers to the use of military assets to enforce peace against the will of the parties to a conflict when, for instance, a ceasefire has failed. Peace enforcement involves applying a range of coercive measures, including the use of military force, as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Ireland has already participated in peace enforcement missions, including MINUSMA in Mali and in Liberia, Chad and East Timor. These missions operated under robust United Nations mandates and involved more demanding operational conditions.

I will now address some of the points raised by individual Deputies. I acknowledge the service of Deputy Ward's father and, crucially, the service of my colleague and friend Deputy Callaghan to our nation in uniform and wearing the blue beret and blue helmet of the United Nations.

Deputy Mark Ward, along with Deputies Eoghan Kenny and Tóibín, spoke about pay, conditions and investment in the Defence Forces. I detailed in my opening remarks the enhanced investment over recent years. It is also important to look at starting salaries and opportunities. The salary is €42,000 per annum on completion of training, rising to €45,000 within three years. Graduate cadets start on €52,265 and school-leaver cadets earn €46,823 on commissioning. All of that is before military service allowance, special allowance, duty payments and the overseas tax-free allowance of €50,000 for a six-month posting.

Deputies Cronin, Eoghan Kenny and Stanley spoke about UN reform and the centrality of ensuring that Ireland remains absolutely committed to the United Nations and to multilateralism in general. I have addressed that in some detail.

My constituency colleague Deputy Gibney simply does not accept my bona fides and portrays the Government's line as disingenuous. I accept her bona fides. I know her passion for this issue and have listened to all her interventions. She says that I have referred to neutrality as morally degenerate. I would like to think that in this Chamber our research abilities go a bit beyond Wikipedia and X. When someone retweets an article written by somebody else, it does not necessarily mean it is an endorsement. Let us test ourselves. We are democratically elected Members. However, I simply flat out disagree with the charges the Deputy makes. As I have laid out, this is not an abandonment of our traditional policy of military neutrality. Reform is renewal and it ensures that the centrality of our military neutrality is directed towards our role in peacekeeping.

There is great disagreement between me Deputies Gibney, Deputy Boyd Barrett and others in relation to the role of security versus militarism. I am sorry, but I fundamentally believe and acknowledge that Europe and Ireland face new and ever-evolving threats. Unfortunately, this requires the level of investment in security that we have the ambition to provide. If there is a spate of burglaries in my community, I am absolutely going to improve my house alarm and locks and get a monitoring system. That is what Ireland is seeking to do, as is the EU. There is war on the continent of Europe which, regardless of what state-sponsored propagandist people think they are, is devastating for every household in Ireland and not just the people of Ukraine. I stand in the Chamber as somebody who has been sanctioned by a military power that has a veto over where we deploy our peacekeepers.

There was a lot of discussion by Deputies Gannon, Tóibín and Gogarty in relation to the results of EU referendums. I acknowledge Deputy Gogarty's proposition for a preferendum

but simply do not agree with it. This is something that can perhaps be teased out and looked at, but we live in a constitutional republic in which the Dáil and the Seanad are sovereign, and that is how we reflect it. I campaigned vigorously in both referendums on the Lisbon treaty I campaigned in the second referendum on the Nice treaty. I sat my leaving certificate during the first Nice treaty referendum but left maths paper 2 to vote in favour of it. The point is that the results of those referendums and the responses the Government and the EU took were not on a single issue; they were in relation to our then legislation on abortion.

They related to our then legislation on climate commitments, budgetary commitments and the number of members of the EU's College of Commissioners. What was declared in Seville and the undertaking given by Ministers at that point is quite clear. Ireland's neutrality will remain. The constitutional safeguards underpinning that neutrality will remain. Ireland's commitment to peacekeeping will remain. Ireland's commitment to international law will remain. However, decisions concerning Irish personnel should ultimately be made in Ireland. For those reasons, I commend the Government's countermotion to the House.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The triple lock neutrality protection is the bedrock of Ireland's military neutrality and a core component of our independent foreign policy. For decades, this essential safeguard has served this State exceptionally well. It has ensured our Defence Forces are deployed strictly in the cause of peace, earning Ireland a proud global reputation as peace builders and giving us the moral credibility to defend human rights and challenge oppression worldwide. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's reckless moves to dismantle the triple lock will undo that proud tradition and carry profound long-term consequences. Scrapping this protection weakens the practical safeguards surrounding our independent foreign policy, a policy independent of foreign military alliances that have repeatedly broken international law. It exposes Ireland to immense pressure from the EU's rising drumbeat of militarisation and increased military spending, opening the door to deeper involvement in foreign military operations that are not in our national interest. Ireland's neutrality matters now more than ever as global conflicts grow.

Ireland's neutrality does not belong to the Minister of State or to me; it belongs to the Irish people. That is why this decision must be put to the people in a referendum. The triple lock is not merely a policy. It was a solemn promise made to the Irish people during the Nice and Lisbon treaty referendum campaigns. In 2002, ahead of the second Nice treaty referendum, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, the former Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, assured the Dáil that there would be no change to the triple lock unless the people first gave their assent in a referendum. The current Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, said in 2013 that the triple lock was at the core of our neutrality. The Government cannot conveniently forget these explicit assurances that our neutrality would be protected. Stripping away this safeguard without consulting the public is a betrayal of those promises and an attack on our democratic process. The Government is gravely underestimating the depth of feeling across Ireland on this issue. Put it to the people. Hold a referendum.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Why does this Government fear the will of the people? Why does it fear putting this decision on Ireland's military neutrality to the Irish people by way of referendum? As the Minister of State is looking across at me, he can see the statue of James Connolly behind me. His were those famous words: "We Serve Neither King Nor Kaiser But

Ireland!" We all know who the king is and, similarly, we all know who the modern-day kaiser is. To fall in behind Ursula "I stand with Israel" von der Leyen on a NATO-led EU support mission in south Lebanon to advance Israeli interests is not a neutral act. It puts the lives of Irish soldiers at risk with the goal of disarming Hezbollah. This puts us on one side while allowing the genocidal Israeli army, probably the most immoral army in the world, to ethnically cleanse the villages of south Lebanon, as it has been doing. Irish people want no hand, act or part in any of this. When our citizens carry the Irish passport, we are very respected around the world. One of the reasons for this is that we are not and have never been part of any big aggressive military alliance or power bloc. The Irish people do not trust the Government on these issues. We have seen 2 million US troops facilitated through Shannon Airport on their way to unleash death and destruction on the people of the Middle East. We all know how this Government has reduced us to the level of a vassal state in how we kowtow to Ursula von der Leyen.

Three weeks ago, following the vote here on the triple lock, my office conducted a survey across Wicklow and Wexford. It might not be scientific but it was a pretty extensive survey. Of those surveyed, 89% opposed the outcome of the vote on the triple lock. They believed the issue should be put to the Irish people. The Government's plans may please our masters in Brussels but it has misread the room as regards the depth of feeling on this. It is also very significant that, in our survey, 87% of people said that this issue would affect how they will vote in future elections. The Government has no mandate on this. People deserve a voice on an issue of such national importance. Respect the Irish people. Let them decide the matter or the Government will pay a heavy price.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: What is very interesting is that the vast majority of people just do not believe the Government. They do not believe it because of the number of U-turns both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have made over the years, particularly in relation to this matter. We have their words. We have the words of the Taoiseach and a previous Fianna Fáil Taoiseach. The triple lock is at the core of our neutrality. How can the Minister of State deny that? How can he stand there and say that is no longer the case? It is absolutely shocking. That is why those on this side of the Chamber do not believe the Government and why the people outside show in poll after poll that they do not either. They believe in neutrality and in the triple lock. There has been a real coming together of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael since 2016 but it is now clear that they are merging into one party. It is no wonder that people's confidence in the political system is shattered when the Taoiseach was so clear on this issue a few years ago and when Brian Cowen declared that removing the triple lock would affect our neutrality. We need more respect for this position.

The Taoiseach and the Government should be honest and upfront with the people of Ireland that they wish to remove the triple lock and to allow any future government missions to engage in missions, whether for peacekeeping or peace enforcement. Stand up and be honest with the people. We do not believe the Government is being honest in this debate or that it was honest in the debate a couple of weeks ago.

Fianna Fáil TDs and Senators have expressed their concerns about the absolutely huge U-turn Fianna Fáil has made on this issue without consultation. There was no consultation on this issue within the Fianna Fáil Party. It is up to us tomorrow. Those Fianna Fáil TDs have

an opportunity tomorrow. At the very least, the people of Ireland deserve a say in what is potentially the most serious legislation to affect our well-respected position in the world.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The motion put before the Minister of State tonight is on a question of national interest. Over many centuries, Ireland has defended itself against many invasions and the tyranny of enslavement and imperialism. Ireland has always remained neutral. At times, this has meant standing as a lone voice in a world at war. Many of these wars were caused by expanding empires.

This stance of neutrality has stood to the Irish people and created a special place for Irish troops as true peacekeepers. Across divides and conflicts around the world, Irish troops have been accepted as honest brokers even by the most belligerent nations. Removing the triple lock weakens neutrality by leaving the decision to participate in so-called "peace enforcement missions" entirely to the Government. Only the consent of 15 Cabinet members will be required to immediately send up to 50 armed troops and equipment to a conflict without a UN mandate. The definition of "peace enforcement" is to use coercive measures, including heavy military force, against the will of some or all parties involved. In anyone's terms, this means taking a definite side and is contrary to the definition of neutrality.

We now have the military language of the "coalition of the willing". This is ironic given that the founder of Fianna Fáil, Éamon de Valera, said "no small nation adjoining a Great Power could ever hope to be permitted to go its own way in peace". This decision to remove the triple lock goes against the will of the Irish people and the wisdom of the crowd. This is a decision that will affect the very nature of the children and grandchildren of our nation. It must therefore be placed squarely in the hands of the sovereign citizens of Ireland. Give the people their rightful say. It is their judgment to make and no one else's. No one else should make that choice. Let the people decide by referendum.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: When I think of neutrality, I always think of those who served and whose who made the ultimate sacrifice. I think of Michael McNeela and Seán Rooney. We are all aware of the ongoing inquest into Seán Rooney's death. I think of his family, including Natasha, who spoke about their lives being absolutely destroyed. She said:

> I am here to ensure that his memory lives on, justice is done, and lessons are learned. But, most importantly, I am here in Seán’s name to ensure that no other Irish mummy has to take up the very seat that I sit, in this court, ever again.

We understand the danger of peacekeeping. We must ensure we have the correct resources from a protocol and military point of view and that those in the Defence Forces still carry those ideas that are sacrosanct to the Irish people: neutrality, independent foreign policy, and military non-alignment with those big powers that have committed so many sins across the world. Ireland has a long history of anti-colonial struggle. We know what colonialism did here. We know about plantation, partition, famine, repression and pestilence.

That is why we can be the honest broker that many of my colleagues have spoken about. We are in a different world, but that Ireland and the Ireland of the peace process is needed more now than it ever was. This is about us continuing in support of multilateralism and international

law. I ask that the Government put it to the people. If it is happy enough with its arguments, make them out there in the world. It is a referendum that is required by the Irish people.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome our visitors to the Gallery and thank them for being here for the debate, which is more than Fianna Fáil did tonight. Not a single Fianna Fáil representative participated in this debate and that is not surprising because they know in their hearts that what is happening here is that the legacy of Frank Aiken is being thrown in the bin at the behest of the political ambitions of Micheál Martin. The vigour and passion that Fine Gael is bringing to this debate is not surprising. There was a time when it was more honest, though. It was in 2003 that Fine Gael produced a policy document advocating for the removal of the triple lock. Does the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach want to know what the name of that document was? It was called "Beyond Neutrality". Back then, Fine Gael was honest that the triple lock was a core component of Irish independent foreign policy and our neutrality, and it was honest about its intention to scrap it. It then had to go quiet on that. Why? It was because the triple lock became the vehicle by which it could convince the Irish people to endorse, first, the Nice treaty and then the Lisbon treaty, both at the second attempt at trying. Anybody who suggests that the triple lock was not a key component in changing our Constitution on two occasions to hand over sovereignty to the EU is an absolute, blatant liar. Let us be very clear - despite all of the gloss that the Minister of State is trying to put on this tonight, what the Government is proposing to do is allow it or any future Government to send Irish troops to anywhere in the world and potentially to any conflict in the world without a UN resolution. That is a significant and potentially catastrophic change to Irish foreign policy and to our long and proud tradition of neutrality.

Those are my opinions. We heard the Minister of State's opinions. The difference between me and the Minister of State is that I am willing to let the people decide. He should stop his cowardly backtracking to try to spin and bluster his way through this debate. Let the Irish people have their say. What is he afraid of?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Neale Richmond: A Chathaoirligh Gníomhach, he used the term "liar". It is not allowed under Standing Orders.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No, he did not.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I do not think he called the Minister of State a liar.

Deputy Neale Richmond: He blatantly-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No, he did not.

Deputy Neale Richmond: He literally just called me a liar.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I am open to going back through the record once it is published.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I would appreciate that. I expect more from the Deputy. He is a good debater and knows his rules.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He did not. Stop making accusations that you cannot stand over.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I was talking to the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The division is deferred until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimates for public services for the year ending 31 December 2025: Vote 20 - An Garda Síochána; Vote 21 - Prisons; and Vote 24 - Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Child Safety

79. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to outline the work currently under way within his Department on vetting workshops with sporting organisations and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. [81398/26]

Deputy Joanna Byrne: To ask the Minister for sport to outline the work currently under way within the Department on vetting workshops with sporting organisations and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration that was alluded to at the sports committee last week.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank Deputy Byrne for her question. I know that she agrees with me on the importance of safeguarding. Everyone involved in sport needs to be able to enjoy an experience that is free from any form of abuse, and this must be central to the operations of our national governing bodies, NGBs, of sport.

At the core of child safeguarding across the country, whether within a sporting context or not, is a suite of legislation and guidance, in particular the Children First Act 2015 and the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012. This is supported by a range of dedicated structures, including enforcement and compliance through Tusla and An Garda Síochána. Under the Sport Ireland Act 2015, Sport Ireland's role is to share best practice

and guidance about safeguarding. To do this, it works with over 60 independent national governing bodies of sport, as well as with local sports partnerships and with Tusla on an ongoing basis. It is important to stress that Sport Ireland is not the competent authority to investigate complaints in this context. As the Deputy knows, if a person believes that a child is at risk of harm or a body is not meeting its safeguarding obligations, they should contact Tusla without delay. Additionally, if there is potentially a criminal aspect to a complaint, it should be reported to An Garda Síochána.

Regarding Garda vetting, I have asked officials from the Department to liaise with the Department of justice to organise a vetting workshop with sporting organisations to seek their views and provide clarity regarding the administration of vetting. I fully support the implementation of effective safeguarding across the sports sector while acknowledging that NGBs are independent organisations responsible for their own governance, including safeguarding.

I am sure that Deputy Byrne, like me, has met many sports organisations across the country, and the issue does come up in relation to the administration and the time that can be associated with it, as well as the fact that organisations have to make multiple applications. As the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, I want to hold a workshop to engage with sporting organisations and the Department of justice to see if there are ways we can reduce that administrative challenge.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I wholeheartedly agree with the Minister of State on the importance of safeguarding, but as he well knows, we heard at the Oireachtas committee on sport last week that the Football Association of Ireland, FAI, had stood down 6,000 people from coaching. Sport Ireland also confirmed that 6,000 people had been deactivated from the IT system. We know that not all of these were related to Garda vetting issues, but the Garda confirmed to the committee that over 1,000 applications for Garda vetting had been received in the last six weeks. The last time that the FAI showed up to the committee in September, it said that it had 61 reports of safeguarding allegations in 2024, 94 in 2025 and 39 so far this year. This is one of our sporting organisations with a state-of-the-art tracking system that has now been found to be deficient.

As the Minister of State said, Sport Ireland engages with more than 60 independent NGBs of sport as well as 29 local sports partnerships across Ireland, but there are other sports that do not have an NGB. Parents and guardians deserve to know that, regardless of the sport, their children are safe and secure and that everyone coming into contact with them as a coach, mentor, club volunteer or referee needs to be properly Garda vetted.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We all agree on the absolute importance of proper vetting and safeguarding at all levels of sport. I know that this is something that the committee has taken a particular interest in. For example, it has held two sessions so far with the FAI on this topic as well as one last week with Sport Ireland and officials from my Department. I know it is the committee's intention to organise a third meeting with the FAI, which I expect and trust will happen shortly.

It is my objective as Minister of State to make sure that everything is being done and that the framework that is in place is appropriate. In terms of engaging with other sporting

organisations, I want to assess if there are ways that we can collaborate to ensure that the system is as efficient and robust as it possibly can be. To that end, I am going to facilitate a workshop with some sports organisations and the Department of justice to assess if there are any steps that we can take in that regards.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: After last week's meeting, Sport Ireland has ordered a review of child protection practices across all sporting NGBs, and that is to be welcomed, but in 2022, Sport Ireland facilitated a consultation between officials from the Department of justice and stakeholders from the sport sector, so it is apparent that there has been a failure in the system since then.

This is too big an issue for the Government to sit back and take a hands-off approach. I welcome these vetting workshops and I hope they are successful. The Minister of State has my support in anything needed, and I am sure he also has the committee's support in that regard. Collectively, we all need to be proactive and get to grips with this as soon as possible to ensure all our children playing in all sports are safe, and the relevant qualifications are there for anybody dealing with them.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Byrne for that. To be clear, I am not looking to reinvent the wheel in any way, or indeed assume responsibility for safeguarding legislation. That is dealt with by the Department of justice and administered by An Garda Síochána. We also have guidelines provided through Sport Ireland to provide guidance on good practice in our national governing bodies.

The sole purpose of the workshop I am putting together is simply to get feedback from organisations on how we can ensure we are as efficient as possible. In particular, it is to see if there are ways our sporting organisations can collaborate to reduce the administrative challenges that might be there. I do not know the answer to that question yet, but I want to explore it to see if there are ways this could be made more efficient. It is not in any way seeking to make the point that there are any gaps or weaknesses in our current legislation. Instead, it is about trying to make sure it operates as efficiently as possible, and to get feedback from our national sporting bodies on that.

Sports Facilities

80. **Deputy Daniel Ennis** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the steps he is taking to address the shortages of accessible sports pitches in north Dublin; and the measures he is taking to improve access for community clubs, particularly those without their own grounds. [81586/26]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Ennis for his question. I recognise his advocacy and interest in the value of sport and sporting facilities since his election to the Dáil.

I recognise the difficulty that sport and community clubs in certain areas, particularly those without grounds of their own, can face in securing regular access to pitches for training and matches. The 2026 round of the community sport facilities fund, CSFF, recognises the need for more all-weather pitches to increase the amount of playing time available throughout the

year. Under the new regional tier 2 funding category introduced on a pilot basis, local authorities and national governing bodies of sport can apply for grants of up to €750,000 for larger facilities designed for use by multiple clubs and organisations. I encourage local authorities and NGBs, particularly in Dublin, to work with community clubs on proposals for shared pitches, including setting out how clubs without their own grounds could secure regular access to such new facilities and how training and match times would be allocated.

The programme for Government commits to supporting local authorities in acquiring land for parks and playing pitches. Land acquisition is outside the scope of my Department's sports capital funding programmes. However, once suitable land has been secured, the development of pitches and associated facilities is certainly eligible for support under the CSFF and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, subject to their terms and conditions. As the Deputy will know, the community sports facilities fund will be open until the end of February 2027.

The other key thing we are specifically trying to encourage in this round is collaboration between schools, educational institutions and sports clubs, because there are potential synergies there. This is particularly important in areas such as the Deputy's locality, where land is at a premium. It is very important to make maximum use of the land available in order that there is access for as many people as possible.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: I thank the Minister of State for that. He mentioned the issue of land. As he knows, the north-east inner city is the greyest part of the whole country. Dublin 1 has given us many great sporting heroes, such as Troy Parrott, whose name we will all be screaming tonight, and we probably should be at the match now; Kellie Harrington; Keith Treacy, with whom I played; Olivia O'Toole and Wes Hoolahan. However, with one exception, there is still no full-size sports pitch in Dublin 1, where we have produced all this sporting talent. That is crazy. When I tell people there is a full-size pitch in the north-east inner city, they are shocked. However, it is Croke Park, and we have seen how hard it is to get into Croke Park, especially for other counties outside of Dublin. That is wild. The Minister of State has visited our own clubs and knows the young people we are dealing with. He has heard the stories and met the coaches, so he might think about that. I spoke to the Minister for justice last week about seeing kids as young as eight years of age being groomed into crime. We know the importance of sport, but we need dedicated facilities.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There is no doubt that sport has an immense value in people's lives, particularly for young people. From a Government and State perspective, we have to ensure we do everything we can to make sport a key part of people's lives as they grow up, and that it stays that way as they mature and age. Dublin and large urban centres are a particular challenge. We want to do all we can to try to maximise them. We obviously cannot invent or make new land, but through our policies we want to make sure we utilise the land available. That means local authorities working with national sporting organisations and educational institutions to maximise the potential of the land available. A couple of months ago, I met the CEO of Dublin City Council, Mr. Richard Shakespeare, and his team on this. Given the particular challenge in the Dublin city area, this is something they want to be very proactive about. We had a good discussion on the CSFF and the potential collaboration there. I urge everyone involved to come together to try to maximise its benefit.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: I recognise the power of the previous sports capital fund and the sports facilities fund now. It is very welcome, but I am calling for funding based on the needs of clubs and communities, not their ability to fill in a funding application. We know there is always one person who does all the applications. It is a massive hurdle for clubs if there is one person doing it all. I am calling for a dedicated, ring-fenced, meaningful grant for disadvantaged and under-served communities with pitches. Looking at north Dublin as a whole, Drumcondra AFC is based in Clonturk Park, which I know the Minister of State has visited. Clonturk Park is beside Tolka Park and is close enough to the city, just off the Richmond Road. Drumcondra AFC has to travel as far as Finglas for pitches, and then back across the city to Mount Temple school on the Malahide Road. That is a 6 km or 7 km distance to travel - 3.5 km either way from where they are from. This eats into resources for other communities. We need to look at the communities that need it most. In this case, I am speaking about the north-east inner city but the same argument applies to other pockets of north Dublin. The ring-fenced funding I am calling for would be separate from the funding the Minister of State has mentioned.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I engaged extensively across the country and in many parts of the city in advance of the opening of this round of the CSFF to ensure it can cater as much as possible for the challenges that clubs are facing and for the needs of local communities. We have taken several steps in this round to try to make sure that it serves communities as well as possible, and that we maximise the value for money from the point of view of State and community investment into facilities. There is significant emphasis on collaboration - schools and local authorities working with clubs - in how we have structured this round. We have made it as simple and straightforward as possible so that it is accessible for all clubs to apply. The Deputy is right that this work is often done by one person in a club, and it could be a small club that makes an application. I would tell everyone that it is straightforward, so I ask them to please apply. The weighting and scoring when the funding is being allocated will reflect the capacity of local communities to contribute. The percentages allocated will take into account the economic capacity of clubs and communities, which is important. Finally, we have done away with the need to match funding or to have funding available within the club at the point of application. In the past, that has militated against clubs from areas that do not have the capacity to raise funds. That is no longer a barrier.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

81. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to set out how he will implement the ComReg recommendation that the Government, public service media and industry stakeholders begin contingency planning for the way in which public service content will be delivered when traditional digital terrestrial television, such as Saorview, is scaled down and switched off in the future. [81402/26]

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Burke, to his first engagement with us here in his interim role.

Could the Minister outline how he will implement the ComReg recommendation for the Government, public service media and industry stakeholders to begin contingency planning for

the way in which public service content will be delivered when traditional digital terrestrial television, DTT, such as Saorview, is scaled down and switched off in the future?

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputy Byrne for her kind wishes and I look forward to working with everyone in this term. We will hopefully have the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, back shortly.

First, I assure the Deputy that there are no plans to switch off the Saorview platform in the foreseeable future.

Ensuring ongoing access to free-to-air television content produced by our public service media providers and other licensed broadcasters is a key objective of the Department.

Last month, ComReg published a report that it had commissioned that looks at digital terrestrial television and the long-term future use of the radio spectrum band currently used to deliver DTT. The report does not contain ComReg recommendations but rather is intended to provide information to inform ComReg's planning for the long-term management of the radio spectrum and to inform discussion with stakeholders. What is key with regard to DTT is that the Broadcasting Act 2009 provides for the delivery of services over the Saorview platform and places an obligation on RTÉ to establish, maintain and operate such a service. This has not changed and, at present, there are no plans to do so.

The Department recognises the continuing shift away from traditional TV platforms, and the report released by ComReg notes the evolution of consumers' television viewing habits and growing preference for streaming services. Broadcasters are responding to these changes by making their content available across multiple TV distribution platforms. The Department will work with relevant stakeholders to explore these changes in the context of the extremely successful roll-out of broadband provision across the country. However, Saorview remains a widely used and important platform for viewers to access free-to-air broadcast content, not least for older and more disadvantaged members of the public, and no significant changes are planned at present.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I felt I needed to resubmit this question because I tabled a parliamentary question a couple of weeks ago and felt that the substantive matter of the question was not answered with regard to the ComReg recommendations. The Minister's response failed to mention several matters such as ComReg recommending that Ireland should prepare for how public service media would be delivered if the traditional DTT service were to be switched off or reduced, that the satellite used to deliver the Saorsat service reaches end of life in 2028 and is not being replaced, that no alternative satellite is available so it will be necessary to discontinue Saorsat in early 2028, and that Saorview - the free-to-air digital service used by 13% of the population as its main source of television - could be switched off within a decade. In that response, the Minister said he has no plans for any of this but what we needed to hear is that he does have a plan for satellite withdrawal, modernisation of Saorview and protection for rural and older viewers among other things. I was happy to hear that in the Minister's response. This is not sneaking up on us. It has long been flagged and we need to put a plan in place.

Deputy Peter Burke: I referenced the availability of commercial satellite services and the ageing of the infrastructure. What was made clear is that services in this regard are a matter for the provider involved and are outside the remit of the Department. The ComReg report suggests quite clearly that satellite-based TV delivery is declining, with some existing satellite infrastructure expected to reach end of life over the coming years. However, as I said, that is a matter for the providers.

A critical thing to note is that the approximately 13% of households that say they use DTT as their primary TV service are in very marginal areas and, critically, are those in advanced years who may not have the services of others, so that is one thing the Department is firmly watching and trying to support in the years ahead. This is why I want to give that certainty that there is no planned change in the Saorview service.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: That certainty is very welcome, particularly for that marginal group. We recognise that the national broadband plan has been successful and that people have a multitude of streaming platforms to choose from. Let us be honest, many Irish people, especially older people in rural Ireland, could not care less about what is trending in streaming. It is a question of affordability and availability. Older people and those unable to afford streaming services are the most likely groups to be left behind. If there is no plan to ensure they will still have access to-free-to air TV services like Saorview over the next decade, they are going to panic. They do not want another bill during a cost-of-living crisis and they do not want to deal with companies that are notorious for making it difficult for people to leave subscription services. We need to see this plan and, if not, I feel it is something we will have to take up in the media committee's work plan.

Deputy Peter Burke: We can see that the landscape is changing. There is no doubt about that. It was very clearly laid out in the report by ComReg, an independent actor doing its job by profiling the landscape in terms of what the private sector has in terms of the offering, particularly in relation to a technology that is evolving and also in relation to the take-up of broadband, which obviously brings additional services to the household. We can see that the profile of customers is changing drastically in that regard. It is important that I as Minister give certainty in relation to the future. As the Deputy rightly pointed out, the Saorview service is very important. I would encourage the media committee's perspective to look at the future. That is essentially what ComReg has challenged us to do as a society. That would be a welcome piece of work.

Arts Policy

82. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the remaining applicants under the basic income for the arts scheme who have not yet been notified following the initial tranche of 780 applicants on 15 October 2026 can expect to receive confirmation of whether their applications have been successful and when the remaining assessment process will be completed. [81307/26]

83. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will explain the timeline for rolling out the basic income for the arts, including application

deadlines, informing applicants of success or otherwise, conducting eligibility checks and commencing and backdating payments, and to outline the way in which and when this timeline was decided upon. [81643/26]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I wish the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, a speedy recovery. A number of TDs have been sick in the past couple of years and it is good to see how Opposition and Government come together and wish them well. Their health is their wealth. Since I submitted this question, the answer came through last week that another 450 applicants for the basic income for the arts scheme have been deemed eligible and notified while over 700 are still waiting to hear. When can they expect to receive confirmation of whether their applications will be successful and the remaining assessment process?

Deputy Peter Burke: I propose to take Questions Nos. 82 and 83 together.

The establishment of the basic income for the arts scheme on a permanent basis earlier this year was a major milestone for the arts in Ireland. Research conducted by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport on the pilot scheme provided Government with a clear evidence base upon which to make that decision. An external cost-benefit analysis of the pilot found that for every €1 invested in the pilot, society received €1.39 in return.

The Department's allocation in budget 2027 provides for the scheme's full year cost of €34.4 million to ensure that all commitments under scheme to fund 2,000 artists can be met. Guidelines outlining the detail of criteria and parameters for the scheme were published on 1 April. Just over 10,000 applications were received by the deadline of Tuesday, 12 May.

The process to identify 2,000 eligible artists from the 10,000 applications received began with a random selection process. This was considered the fairest method where there is not enough funding for all eligible applicants. The anonymous random selection process took place in May with independent oversight by EY. Eligibility checks then started from the first 2,000 selected and continued throughout the summer.

The Department commenced communication to 780 applicants deemed eligible to participate in the scheme on 15 October and to a further 467 applicants on 12 November. As of 13 November, 862 applicants have accepted their offer to participate and eight have declined. More eligible applicants will be notified in the coming weeks as the next tranches of eligibility checks are completed, as will those deemed ineligible as a result of those checks. Eligibility checks will continue until 2,000 eligible candidates have been identified. An appeals process is available for those deemed ineligible. Therefore, the full cohort of 2,000 cannot be finalised until all appeals are concluded. It will be at this point that remaining applicants, whose applications were not reached, will also be informed.

Payments will be made monthly at a rate of €1,413. All participants in the scheme will be paid for the three-year period but commencement dates will vary. Participants who receive their first payment in 2026 will receive payments backdated to September 2026. Participants who receive their first payments in 2027 will receive payments from or backdated to January 2027.

Research from the pilot scheme provided clear proof of concept to underpin the case for making the scheme permanent. Based on the learnings from the pilot, in particular the need to

strengthen the focus on professional practice, the parameters and delivery model for this first iteration of the permanent scheme are different from the pilot. Consequently, the delivery process for this second iteration of the scheme is being deployed for the first time and has taken longer to implement than originally planned. As is best practice for ongoing scheme development, a review will be undertaken.

The Department is processing applications as quickly as possible. As I pointed out, significant progress is being made in moving through the applications, which is critically important to sustain. Hopefully, towards the end of the year, we will have everyone selected and, by the first quarter of 2027, when the appeals process has concluded, everyone will be in a better position. A total of 2,000 eligible candidates will have clarity and we will continue on for the three years, which everyone will have the advantage of.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Growing frustration and uncertainty is being experienced by thousands of artists who have applied for the next round of the artist's scheme. Applicants are being left in limbo with no clear communication as to whether their applications have been successful. I accept that the Department is moving through them as quickly as it can. It is extremely disappointing, however, that the Department appears unable to provide a clear and co-ordinated notification process for this scheme involving approximately 10,000 applicants, of whom, as the Minister said, 2,000 will be selected. I ask him to urgently engage with the Department to provide clarity as to when all applications will be notified, whether successful or unsuccessful, and when payments will commence.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister – I am not referring to the Minister, Deputy Burke, who did not hold this Ministry previously and whom I welcome to the role – has made a dog's dinner of this. The only logic to follow from what the Minister said is that 400 applicants will be chosen out of tranches of 2,000 rather than, first, finding out the number of eligible applicants out of the total of 10,000 and then doing the random selection out of the remaining number. The Department is leaving applicants, who know themselves that they are eligible, without a clue as to whether they are going to be selected. There were five months after the closing date during which to make this random selection. The Department will know from the first iteration of this how long it takes and what steps need to be taken. It is shameful at this stage that we still do not know the number of applicants who will be offered the payment before Christmas and the number who will be dependent on it next year.

Deputy Peter Burke: I robustly push back on any assertion that the Department has not managed this correctly. Critically, if we were to assess the eligibility of every one of the 10,000 applications, it would take a lot longer. The process the Department has embarked upon is to randomly and anonymously select 2,000 applications, according to the terms of the scheme, and then check the eligibility of those 2,000 applicants. If they are ineligible, they will be referred to the appeals process. That, to be fair, is expedient from a time perspective.

In budget 2027, we have put together €34.4 million to cover 2,000 artists. Those artists will have certainty for the three years of the scheme, which is significant, and receive a rate of €1,413.21 per month. That, hopefully, will support sustained progress in the sector, which is important and key to the Department, the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, and myself.

We are going through the process and I expect it to be concluded by early 2027. We are clear on that timeframe. We have moved through applications significantly. As I pointed out, the Department contacted 780 eligible applicants in October and a further 467 applicants on 12 November. That is a total of 1,247 applicants. We will make significant progress towards the end of the year, which will be important. Those appeals will have to be concluded in early 2027.

The common sense approach is to select 2,000 applications, determine their eligibility and process the payments rather than checking every single application. That does not make any sense and would lengthen the process out further. The way the Department is doing it makes common sense. This is a good news story for the arts. It is the first scheme that provides a sustained payment and certainty for three years. Hopefully, it will provide the opportunity to work to expand the scheme in the future.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I agree with the Minister that it is a good news story. The scheme is welcome and he is to be commended on introducing it. The cost-benefit analysis he mentioned shows this. I accept that the Department is moving as quick as it can in carrying out the checks and appeals. I also accept that evaluating 10,000 individual applications would take significant time, but people need to plan their lives. They need to make decisions about their careers, finances, employment and future. They cannot be expected to put their lives on hold while waiting indefinitely for an answer.

There are kinks in the system that need to be ironed out. I urge the Department to take learnings from this tranche of applications and apply them both to the next tranche of applications and the next scheme in three years, as well as the scheme after that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It was never indicated that this bizarre, randomised approach would be taken where different batches of applicants would be selected and those successful would be announced in this haphazard way. It was definitely not the understanding of the Department of Finance when it granted the money for this year in the budget because the funding for 2026 will not be spent in its entirety. What is going to happen to the remaining funding? It will be interesting to find that out, given the huge amount in question. Some €4 million or €5 million will be left unspent this year because not all applicants will not be announced before the end of the year. If they are announced in January 2027, they will only get the payment from that stage. It will come from next year's Estimate. It is bizarre that, ten or 11 months after it was first announced, we still have not reached the stage where 2,000 out of 10,000 people can be selected and enjoy the benefits of this scheme.

Deputy Peter Burke: First, as rightly pointed out, there is a significant benefit for society in the cost-benefit analysis that was carried out, at €1.39. Second, there will be no money left unspent. Everyone will get their full three years of the scheme. The budget of €34.4 million in connection with the 2,000 artists will be delivered. That is important from the perspectives of the Department and the sector.

As I said, EY is managing and overseeing the process in conjunction with the Department to ensure that there is probity, that autonomous random selection is under way and that the process is robust. Critically, where there are criteria, we must ensure applications are eligible.

As of 13 November, 862 applicants know where they stand. We are saying that, in the next few weeks, the rest will know. We are not asking people to put their lives on hold for a long time.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: They applied in May.

Deputy Peter Burke: It is a big challenge when there are 10,000 applications for a particular scheme, but it sends a wider signal to the sector and shows the demand that is there, which is significant. This is a Government being proactive, taking the lead and providing a sustainable income for an important sector that needs that support in order that those involved in the sector can realise their potential in terms of the opportunities in other areas. It will be a significant support and improvement. I am happy that, as we progress into next year, we will be able to close it off. Everyone will get three years. It is a significant scheme. I assure the House that the budget will be fully expended. I will ensure that is the case for as long as I hold this Ministry.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Have those who failed been informed?

Question No. 84 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Sports Funding

85. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when he expects the next round of the large scale sport infrastructure fund to open; and whether projects currently at planning stage in Galway will be eligible to apply. [81252/26]

105. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if his Department is considering any further funding rounds under the large scale sport infrastructure fund. [81149/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the significant investment the Government has made in large-scale sport infrastructure. However, many communities in Galway are advancing ambitious projects and need certainty about future funding opportunities. Will the Minister of State indicate when the next round of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, will open? Will projects currently at feasibility or planning stages be eligible to apply?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I propose to take Questions Nos. 85 and 105 together.

This is a fund in which he has a strong interest. He wants to ensure it benefits his county. The current priority from the point of view of my Department is to support the delivery of the projects funded under the 2018 and 2024 rounds of the LSSIF. The eligibility of projects currently at planning stage in Galway will depend on the terms and conditions of any future round. They did not preclude them in the previous round, but it affected their scoring and

chances of being funded. In the meantime, project promoters can consult the 2024 round guidelines and discuss their proposals with the relevant local authority or national governing body, NGB, of sport. Applications must come through either the local authority or a national governing body, NGB.

Under the 2024 round, sports clubs and other eligible organisations could apply jointly with a local authority or national governing body. Contracts entered into before formal grant confirmation, which followed assessment under the infrastructure guidelines, were ineligible for funding under that round.

Deputy Dolan will be very much aware of this but it is also worth highlighting that the 2026 round of the community sport facilities fund is open for applications through the SPRAOI portal until the end of February. Through that, regional projects can apply for grants of up to €550,000 and there is also a new pilot regional tier 2 category, which provides for grants of up to €750,000 for local authorities and national governing bodies to develop larger, shared facilities. Applications can only be done through a local authority or national sporting body. That is for multi-sport facilities and it may provide opportunities for County Galway while we wait on the next round of the LSSIF.

Significant sport capital funding has been allocated to Galway in recent years. Under the 2020 round of the community sports facilities fund, projects in Galway were allocated €11.4 million in funding. Under the most recent round, which was announced in 2024, just over €17 million was allocated to projects in the county.

Under the 2018 and 2024 rounds of the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, which are the only two rounds run under that fund so far, just over €38 million was awarded to six projects in Galway, the largest of which was a grant of €20 million to the redevelopment of Connacht Rugby's Dexcom Stadium which reopened earlier this year.

I look forward to undertaking a new round of the LSSIF. This is planned for 2028. Our national development plan capital expenditure envelope provides for one new round of the large-scale sports infrastructure fund over the course of this Government, but it will be towards the end of its term, probably in mid-2028, when it will open for applications. In the meantime, I advise potential applicants to refer to the 2024 scheme to examine the eligibility criteria. Both previous rounds were aimed primarily at the national governing bodies and local authorities, but the fund was also open to other bodies, such as sports clubs, voluntary organisations, education and training boards and third level institutions, to apply provided this was done jointly with either a local authority or a national governing body.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the clarity that there will be one round of LSSIF funding in the lifetime of this Government and that it will come in 2028. That will provide clarity to the clubs and organisations I represent in Galway. The sports capital allocated under the LSSIF and the community sport facilities fund is among the best spent Government moneys because it is spent by clubs that want to deliver in their communities.

I will make one point about the large-scale sport infrastructure fund going forward because I have seen it with clubs. The match funding obligation of 30% is quite large. For a club applying for a €5 million project, even if it has the backing of a national body or another organisation, getting 30% of that can be a large hurdle to jump. If it is €5 million project, the

club has to come up with €1.5 million, even in the case of a regional facility. I welcome the €750,000 grant. Will the Minister of State share his thoughts on what the threshold could be for clubs? Could match funding be reduced to 20% or 15%?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Whie we will consider this matter before we open the next round, I do not foresee it changing. The maximum funding last time around was 70%. It should also be borne in mind is that the fund was significantly oversubscribed. While we allocated around €200 million in grants through the last round of the large-scale infrastructure fund, the applications amounted to €600 million. While 70% was the maximum funding any application could receive, the average was 50%. We have taken a similar approach this time in the community sport facilities fund for the non-standard grants. The regional tier 1 has a maximum of €550,000 and the regional tier 2 is €750,000. Again, there is a 70% maximum level of funding that can be awarded to a project under that fund. When the projects are larger in scale the expectation is that those who are applying will be able to bring financial wherewithal to the project themselves.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I thank the Minister of State for providing clarity on that. There is one last thing I want to bring to his attention. I thank him for meeting members of the Loughrea swimming pool group last year and taking the time to hear their story and proposal. The feasibility study for a Loughrea swimming pool has been completed. It did an analysis of the full town. Outside the town of Loughrea, there is a huge hinterland with a large population that does not have a go-to swimming pool. Any large-scale sport infrastructure fund in the future needs to be adequately funded to support local authorities in delivering swimming pools where a gap has been identified. I believe any analysis would identify that Loughrea in Galway has a serious gap there. I wanted to bring that to the Minister of State's attention. I appreciate his having met the group last year.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I know the project for a pool in Loughrea to serve the wider area is one that Deputy Dolan has advocated very strongly on. It will be open for the group to make an application. It will have to come through Galway County Council or Swim Ireland, the national governing body. There is undoubtedly a need to address challenges in relation to swimming pool provision across the country. The Department of sport funded a gap analysis report to the tune of €1 million. It was carried out by Swim Ireland to identify where those gaps are. This is an issue we want to try to address. We cannot do everything at the same time but it is an issue we have to try to make progress on. It is something the local authorities will need to lead out on, however. For example, I opened Lucan swimming pool recently, which is a wonderful new pool in west Dublin. Some €20 million was invested in that facility, of which €4 million came from the large-scale infrastructure fund. As such, the local authority have stepped up very significantly to make it possible. As I said, in respect of the last LSSIF round, the average grant was 50% so there is a need for local authorities to step in and help make things happen there.

Copyright Infringement

86. **Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he plans to introduce legislation to protect the rights of Irish musicians, songwriters

and composers in the context of artificial intelligence technologies, particularly regarding the use of copyrighted music in AI training datasets without consent. [81262/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This question asks what plans the Minister has to protect the rights of Irish musicians, songwriters and composers in the context of AI companies robbing their copyrighted music to train their AI datasets.

Troy Parrott was mentioned earlier. He has just scored a penalty. I thought that would make Deputies happy.

Deputy Peter Burke: I hope the under-21s are still in front as well. I have not heard any update. The great work they are doing in Cork is very good.

The Deputy will appreciate the issue of copyright is an important matter, which is considered across the two Departments for which I now have responsibility. The protection of copyright is a key concern for the creative and cultural sector. The fundamental issue for the arts and culture sector is that any technology should serve human creativity and not undermine it.

In this regard, the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport will continue to work closely with colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment as the lead Department on the development of Ireland's copyright legislative regime. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is also leading on the implementation of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act in Ireland.

At a European level, the European Commission is currently reviewing the 2019 Copyright in the Digital Single Market Directive, including the text and data mining exception under Article 4. On foot of that, a final report will be published by the European Commission in mid-2027. A targeted consultation, which just closed, gathered views on the use of copyright protected content in generative Al, including on the issue of deepfakes or "impersonations", which extends beyond copyright law. New measures are expected to be tabled by the European Commission in mid-2027.

The European Commission has identified AI as one of six priority areas in its culture compass and has committed to developing an AI strategy for the cultural and creative sectors so that creators can better control the use of their works and enforce their rights, while supporting innovation and the development of Al technologies.

A number of Irish artists' representative organisations have contributed to the recent call for evidence. Both Departments will engage actively on these matters as they evolve.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: In many ways, it is important that we are singing from the same hymn sheet. There is an urgency with this because, by the time bureaucracy gets its act together, as it sometimes does, the damage will not just have been done, it will have been compounded. There is particular urgency given how quickly the datasets are being populated with creative output, with no remuneration for the artists, screen composers, songwriters or musicians.

I hosted an event in the audiovisual room, and there was also a motion here in the House urging much more acceleration in putting in place the protections that are or should be within our copyright legislation, both here and in the EU. Hopefully, before the end of the year, that work can be concluded at EU level at the very least.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for his comments and, critically, for the motion he tabled in July. As Minister for enterprise, I was very keen to support that motion. Bearing in mind the testimony that has been put forward by the key sectors, I know that the Deputy had members of The Script at an event here. One of them made a very strong proposition on "Morning Ireland" on the day in question, if I remember correctly. That is so important, because genuine, valuable creative work is being taken away. No one wants it to be compromised. I set out at that juncture that Ireland made a submission to the European Commission's review of the copyright in the digital Single Market directive and was actively involved in ongoing discussions on licensing and enforcement, which are key, and copyright protections in the context of generative AI.

During its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Ireland has committed to facilitating discussions on copyright and AI and has supported a dedicated Presidency conference on copyright and human creativity in the age of AI. We are very active in this sphere and will hopefully arrive at concrete proposals on which Europe will be working together shortly, because it is an area that deserves protection. We need to preserve the creativity. We need to respond and support our artists, particularly in areas where we have content that can be compromised by generative AI.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I acknowledge the work that the Minister and the Department have been doing, and also our Minister of State responsible for AI. The Minister is obviously present in his new role with the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport. There is an overlap in all of these areas in terms of ensuring that the creatives in our lives, not just musicians, are recognised as such – we do this in Ireland – but encouraged. Nobody would be encouraged if their material were being scraped or robbed and used for somebody else's profit. In a bizarre case, AI material has been produced and yet an application is being made for copyright protection for the material itself, even though it is based on other people's work.

Danny O'Donoghue of The Script said when he was here that people were basically robbing him. Intellectual property theft on an industrial scale is what he said was happening to him and others. We need to move as quickly as possible to help those who are creatives in our society.

The score was 2-2 in the under-21 play-off, so Ireland lost on aggregate.

Deputy Peter Burke: End on a bad note. My God.

I remember Danny O'Donoghue setting out the challenges in his interview on "Morning Ireland" on the day in question. I assure the Deputy that, as part of our Presidency, we are working to facilitate the copyright working party discussions. I know that the issues around copyright transparency and text and data mining were highlighted very clearly at that juncture. They are compromising the objective of fair remuneration for creators and others who are challenged by AI systems. I can absolutely assure the Deputy that we are very active in this area. We work with both Departments and European counterparts to try to frame proposals as

a matter of urgency. Time is of the essence in this regard. That was highlighted and was something I took note of. I remember going back to the Department to make sure the motion tabled by the Deputy would not be opposed. It is in that spirit that we want to come forward with proposals to protect the important sector under discussion.

Question No. 87 taken with Written Answers.

Sports Funding

89. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the assessment his Department has undertaken of sports capital projects that have not proceeded following grant approval because of construction inflation or funding shortfalls; and whether he will introduce a supplementary funding mechanism for existing approved projects at risk of non-delivery. [81302/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: If the Minister of State will indulge me just for a second, I want to wish the Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, well. As an epileptic, I know what it is like to be on the other side of a seizure and how difficult a period this is for the Minister. I wish him a full and speedy recovery. I know that it is an extremely difficult period for his family, so I wish them well.

On my question, a sports club can get a grant and raise money locally by means of fundraisers, but the tender can come in far above the original estimate. How many approved sports capital projects have stalled because of rising construction costs or funding shortfalls? Has the Department assessed what it would cost to get them moving, and will it provide a route to supplementary funding?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Kenny for his comments and good wishes to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. Everyone across the House joins with him in that regard and looks forward to seeing the Minister back in full health and back here as soon as possible. I am working with Deputy Burke, who is standing in for him in the meantime, and we both look forward to his return.

My Department, as the Deputy knows, operates two capital funding programmes for sport, namely the community sport facilities fund and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund. Sports organisations can apply directly for CSFF funding, while applications for the LSSIF must be made through either a national governing body for sport or a local authority. The vast majority of projects funded under the CSFF are successfully delivered at local level. The LSSIF provides funding support to much larger projects and, where projects experience delivery challenges due to construction cost increases or funding shortfalls, my officials engage with the project promoter and assess the circumstances on a case-by-case basis, including the impact on the cost, funding and delivery of the project.

Under the 2018 round of the LSSIF, we saw €86.5 million awarded to 33 projects. Following pandemic-related delays and subsequent increases in construction costs, an additional €37 million was allocated for 27 of those projects in December 2023, bringing the total for that round to €124 million. In November 2024, we saw €173 million provisionally allocated for 35 more projects under the 2024 round. My officials continue to engage with

project promoters and assess projects as they progress through the stages required under the infrastructure guidelines. We want to see them get into delivery. However, there is an onus on those who succeed in obtaining funding for projects to deliver them. Not all applicants are successful, but those who do get funding have an onus to move on, get their projects under way and follow through on the commitments they made. My Department is working closely with them to try to ensure that is the case.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I fully appreciate that there is an onus on whoever gets the grant to get the project moving, but the Minister of State will also appreciate that there has been a significant increase in building costs due to inflation. As a result of this, tender prices are coming in above estimate. I am specifically asking whether the Department, notwithstanding the fact that it engages with those who receive grants,can identify the number of projects that have stalled on foot of rising construction costs and funding shortfalls.

The Minister of State sees the circumstances in his constituency. He is well aware, as we all are, that volunteers who are part of sporting or community organisations spend years fundraising. When the time comes to begin construction, the funding may fall short of the estimated price, leaving the volunteers unable to proceed. The onus should not fall back on those same volunteers who tried for so long to meet the criteria. Do we have a figure for the number of projects that have stalled because of what I have described? If not, could the Minister of State provide it to the House?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: All the grants that the Department runs, whether through the CSFF, under which clubs apply for small-scale grants, or through the LSSIF, operate on the basis that while the Government gives a grant allocation, the onus for delivering the project is on the applicant. We never change the CSFF allocation between rounds. Clubs can apply for a future phase, for example, but the onus is on them to utilise what they have received. Likewise for the LSSIF, the onus is on the applicant.

Under the most recent round, in November 2024, €173 million was allocated to 35 projects. Of those, two are under construction, one is at approval gate 3, 12 projects are at tender stage, 17 projects are at approval gate 1, and the remaining three have yet to begin the approval process. That is where the projects in the most recent round are. The onus is on them to move on and the Department is working closely with them to try to make sure that is the case.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: In December 2023, the Department provided €37.6 million in additional funding for existing projects under the large-scale sports infrastructure because construction inflation had put projects on hold. The Minister of State can correct me if I am wrong. The Department has recognised before that once a grant is improved, construction inflation can go up and it has provided extra funding, which obviously is to be extremely welcomed. I would welcome it again if the Department were to provide additional funding where projects have stalled. Is the Department considering a targeted top-up process for projects that have stalled where they are engaging with the Department? Unfortunately, the funding provided to them, which is welcome, will not match the level of demand or need to pay for the project.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I hear the argument the Deputy is making. The fund was run on the basis that applicants applying for a grant would then get those projects into production and construction. The onus was on them to have their ducks in a row. Applications which were shovel ready and in a strong position were given preference when they were being considered. Our objective is to make sure they move on and get the job done. We do not want the previous situation, where top-ups were given in the first round, to become the rule. That needs to be the exception to the rule. It was exceptional because it was the first round ever and also because it happened during Covid and there were very particular circumstances.

The Deputy should bear in mind that in the last round, as I said previously, there was €600 million worth of applications and €200 million allocated. About two thirds of the projects that applied were not funded. They all put their hand up to ask for the grant and said they would get moving on it. We work with applications to try to allow them to scale and to reconsider their scale but the onus is on them to actually utilise the funds they have to deliver sporting facilities.

Question No. 90 taken with Written Answers.

Sports Organisations

91. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the key outcomes arising from Ireland's participation in the 19th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport; and the way in which these outcomes will inform the development of sports policy in Ireland. [81244/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: I ask this question on behalf of Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil. Thousands of children across Galway East participate in sports every week, supported by dedicated volunteers and local clubs. The recent Council of Europe conference highlighted the importance of concussion prevention, safeguarding and athlete welfare. I want to know how we translate those discussions into practical protections for children playing sport in communities across Ireland.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Dolan and Deputy Ó Cearúil for tabling this question, which relates to a conference held last week. The Deputies want to see that translated into an outcome. On 4 November, I participated in the 19th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport in Monaco. Following an exchange of political views and national experiences, the resolution on safer and healthier sport for all children and young people was unanimously adopted. This resolution establishes a shared political commitment to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and discrimination against children and young people in sport, while promoting their physical and mental well-being.

As I said earlier in response to Deputy Joanna Byrne, at the core of child safeguarding in Ireland is a suite of legislation and a range of enforcement and compliance structures through Tusla and an Garda Síochána. Sport Ireland shares best practice and guidance about safeguarding by working with sporting organisations and Tusla on an ongoing basis. Sport Ireland is not the competent authority to investigate safeguarding complaints, as they are matters for Tusla and An Garda Síochána. I have asked my officials to liaise with the

Department of justice, as outlined earlier, to organise a vetting workshop with sporting organisations to seek their views and provide clarity about the administration of vetting. We can all agree that sport is a positive driver in young people's lives and must never become something that risks their safety or is to the detriment of their mental health. The conference reflected on the Irish experience of pursuing this shared commitment, including through the implementation of safeguarding legislation, the sharing of best practices, and how these will form part of the development of our next national sports policy, which we expect to conclude over the course of 2027.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I appreciate the Minister of State's clarity on the meeting, which only happened last week. I raise the wider issue of young athletes' mental health and well-being. We increasingly recognise that the pressure to perform, overtraining and the expectation to specialise in a particular sport from a young age can have consequences for children's enjoyment of sport. The central objective should be to keep children participating in sport for as long as possible, rather than pushing them towards early burnout. Following the conference, will the Minister of State examine whether our existing coaching and safeguarding frameworks adequately address these pressures? I understand that they can be quite nuanced and difficult to detect at times. Sometimes the young people themselves are the drivers of that and want to pursue it. There is a safeguarding element where coaches need to ensure they are not overdoing things. I would appreciate if the Minister of State could comment on that.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Deputy's contribution is valid and assesses the challenges involved in making sure that sport contributes in a positive way to the person's development. There is no doubt that participation in sport is positive for one's well-being. Managing that balance is important when someone is taking part in sport. Safeguarding guidelines take that into account, insofar as athletes are to be placed at the centre, their needs are to be considered and they are to be supported throughout the process.

As we develop our next national sports policy over the course of the coming months, this issue can be considered as part of that. The outcome from the Council of Europe conference in Monaco can feed into that too. I will ensure there is strong consultation with everyone involved sport to make sure the overall national framework provides the best possible experience for young people and people of all ages who are participating in sport in a structured manner.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I am conscious that one of the key issues the Minister of State mentioned was the recent Council of Europe conference and the importance of safeguarding children participating in sport. Across the country, hundreds of dedicated volunteers give up their time every week to coach and support young people in local sporting clubs. Safeguarding standards are only as strong as their implementation. We need to ensure that every child, regardless of the sport they play or the size of their club, enjoys the same level of protection. My concern is that sometimes smaller clubs in particular may struggle with the growing administration and training responsibilities associated with safeguarding. Will the Minister of State commit to reviewing the consistency of safeguarding standards across all sporting organisations? Will he consider providing additional practical support and training for volunteer coaches and club safeguarding officers?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is something we monitor all the time. It is the responsibility of Sport Ireland. It has comprehensive guidelines, which it constantly keeps under review, and works with sporting organisations to make sure they are supported. The Deputy is right that it is a challenge for volunteers. It is important that we support them in every way we can to provide a safe and enjoyable experience for young people taking part in sport.

The Deputy correctly mentioned the balance between participation, enjoyment, high performance and the capacity to keep moving on and to be the best possible athlete and sportsperson one can, and the challenges and pressure that can bring too. We want to make sure people have those opportunities in this country. I point to one example in which we have invested significantly over the past 24 months, namely, the development of football academies through our League of Ireland clubs. When I was in Monaco, at the safeguarding conference, I also took the opportunity to visit the AS Monaco Academy, one of the most pre-eminent football academies in the world. It produced Mbappé, Thierry Henry, Trezeguet and Emmanuel Petit, for example. It has a wonderful legacy and is at the very top level of what happens internationally.

We are at a starting point in this country but we want to continue to invest and make sure young people do not have to go abroad for that opportunity but can do it in their home communities and home country with their families, thereby developing into the best athletes they can possibly be.

Broadband Infrastructure

88. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the organisation that will have ownership of the national broadband plan scheme once the national roll-out has been completed; and if responsibility will lie with this organisation regarding the maintenance and any additional infrastructure required to be built as part of this network. [81297/26]

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his important question on the national broadband plan and contract, which was signed on 19 November 2019. It is a 25-year agreement between the Minister and National Broadband Ireland, NBI, for the delivery of future-proofed high-speed broadband to people living and working in the intervention area. The national broadband plan network will offer premises in the intervention area a high-speed fibre broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500 Mb from the outset. The network is future-proofed to deliver up to 10 Gb speeds.

Under the contractual arrangements of the national broadband plan, NBI Infrastructure DAC, the infrastructure entity within the NBI group, has legal ownership of the network assets constructed as part of the plan. The project agreement requires NBI to maintain ownership of these assets throughout the term of the contract. Responsibility for the maintenance, repair and operation of the network rests with NBI in accordance with the terms of the contract. This includes the maintenance and replacement of network assets and the delivery of any additional infrastructure required within the scope of the plan. Where existing infrastructure, such as poles and ducts, is leased from commercial operators, NBI remains responsible for managing

those assets for the duration of the contract. The Department retains oversight of NBI's performance and compliance with its contractual obligations throughout the lifetime of the contract.

Additional premises - for example, new-build homes - are added to the intervention area through the quarterly GeoDirectory updates. As provided for in the contract signed on 19 November 2019 between the Department and NBI, there is an obligation on NBI to pass premises added to the intervention area for the duration of the contract. In addition, at the conclusion of the 25-year contract, NBI has committed to continue providing services on the network for a further ten years at no cost to the State.

Deputy Colm Burke: When the contract was signed, people were sceptical that it was extremely expensive and would not work, yet here we are nearly seven years to the day and it is almost 100% completed. In Cork 83,000 premises were targeted under the plan; 77,000 were passed and are eligible to order or preorder the service. That gives an indication of how the project has worked out, despite all the criticism at the time. The concern is that the network will be maintained in the coming years and, in rural areas where there are new builds that do not come under the remit of a commercial contract, that those new-build houses will be able to get connection and there will be adequate capacity to connect them.

This was the problem with Eircom, for example. I know of one area in Courtbrack where telephone exchange provision was coming from three different areas and we could not get landline telephones. People are concerned the same thing will happen with broadband.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for pointing out the huge implications for the State of delivering this contract. One of the big challenges at that juncture was providing equality of access. No matter how remote the part of Ireland, broadband is the lifeblood of businesses and we were going to ensure someone in a remote rural area got the same access to broadband as someone living in a city. That is a very strong statement by the Government in respect of connecting rural Ireland.

At the time the contract was signed, the State's projected cost was a maximum of €2.7 billion over 25 years with an additional €480 million for contingency costs. We have expended about €1.8 billion and are on target to deliver the homes required in the intervention area. In relation to new homes, we have the capacity to ensure NBI passed premises are added to the intervention area for the duration of the contract, which is a significant asset to ensure they get connectivity. The aspiration of 2 Gb broadband for homes in the intervention area is a significant ambition of the State and will future-proof us for the years ahead.

During the global pandemic, we saw the asset that broadband was for remote working and other areas where we could hive out opportunity from the crisis that was Covid. This gives us a key framework to continue that. It is an important contract and one which will stand to the State for many years to come. There are significant protections in the contract to ensure the management continues and there is no additional exposure for the State.

Deputy Colm Burke: I fully agree with what the Minister is saying. However, I gave the example of Eircom and the availability of connections. The big change resulting from Covid is there are more people working from home. People comment that the level of traffic on the

roads on Mondays and Fridays is far lower because there are more people working from home. The reason they are able to do so is they have broadband. We are lucky we had so much progress made when Covid affected people as regards getting to work. As a result, more and more people were able to avail of the service. In areas with a lot of new build, adequate capacity is a concern. I have heard what the Minister has said but I hope we do not have long-term problems in that area and that the review of the contract will ensure places with a high level of housing growth will get connection in a timely manner.

Deputy Peter Burke: I concur with the Deputy. That is why I pointed out the intervention area under the plan. Through the quarterly GeoDirectory updates provided for in the 2019 contract, premises are added to the intervention area. That gives connectivity for those premises. It is important that be continued through the lifetime of the 25-year contract to keep quality of access for homeowners, particularly in areas of significant growth in housing. The improvements in road-opening licences and section 254 licences have supported and streamlined the processing of activities. They underline the success of the scheme. It will go down as a significant achievement of the Government to get the project to the stage it is at.

Questions Nos. 92 to 102, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Broadband Infrastructure

103. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the number of broadband connection points in place nationally; and whether there are plans to expand this initiative which is part of the national broadband plan scheme. [81299/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: I ask the Minister to provide the number of broadband connection points that are in place nationally; and to set out whether there are plans to expand this initiative, which is part of the national broadband plan scheme.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Burke for this very important question on our national broadband plan. The Government appointed National Broadband Ireland, NBI, to deliver wholesale broadband services to premises in the intervention area, or those parts of the country not served by commercial operators. Broadband connection points are public, high-speed Wi-Fi locations in rural communities that were installed ahead of the main fibre roll-out to ensure areas within the intervention area that did not have adequate broadband services could avail of digitally enabled services such as remote work and study. As part of the national broadband plan, over 283 public sites - libraries, community centres, etc. - are connected for public use. In addition to the public sites, since 2023 all 672 primary schools in the intervention area have been provided with technical connectivity via wireless solutions ahead of the fibre roll-out to ensure no delays in access to high-speed broadband. The service transition programme is migrating schools from wireless to fibre, with approximately 84% of the 672 primary schools migrated to date.

In County Galway, 45 primary schools in the intervention area have been provided with technical connectivity via wireless solutions and 16 public sites are connected for free public use. There are no plans to expand the connection points network beyond the existing locations. The Department will continue to support the effective use of those facilities and maximise the

benefit provided to local communities. It should also be noted that Connecting Locally, the strategy for the national hub network from 2026 to 2030, which was recently published by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, provides a framework to strengthen the multifaceted digital hubs network. This strategy formally incorporates broadband connection points into the broader connected communities network, setting out targeted measures to expand and evolve their role in delivering digital services to our rural communities.

Deputy Colm Burke: Has there been an examination of the use of the 285 locations the Minister has spoken about? Is there something further that can be done to improve the facilities where these connections are? I wonder whether the Department has decided to review the locations where this has been put in place to see if they are being used effectively and to assess whether further improvements can be made on those sites. Has that review been carried out and if not, when is it likely to be carried out?

Deputy Peter Burke: Absolutely. Work and monitoring has been under way on those strategic connection points. Remote working facilities, remote ehealth consultation with Boots Ireland, pilot projects and digital skills training for children and young people are key opportunities that are being provided for. At the end of December 2023, NBI reported that all 955 sites that have been installed are now connected to high-speed broadband, providing an opportunity for the locality to expand. This is critical in terms of skills and opportunities for remote working, which we want to continue to provide to ensure people have agility in their work practices to support family living, which is very important. The broadband officers in the local authorities are consulting very closely with our locations. Our new national hubs strategy work with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is another opportunity to solidify the ambition that many services in very remote areas can collectively come together to get shared, cohesive work practices under one roof.

Deputy Colm Burke: Have we looked at other countries to see if better use is being made of these hubs compared to Ireland and to ascertain where we can make further improvements and further expansion of the use of the facilities we have put in place?

Deputy Peter Burke: Yes. Our national hubs strategy currently has 36 measures to underpin the sustainable development of the network on three pillars. A number of international comparisons have been looked at through the Department of the Minister, Deputy Calleary. We see an opportunity for improvement to support growth in the community, particularly in rural areas. That opportunity can be very significant. The measures set out as part of the work with the broadband officers supporting the network can be pretty significant. I am also working on the enterprise development pillar, a space that facilitates entrepreneurs and business growth, which can also be very significant. We are working with our LEOs and Enterprise Ireland to utilise that ambition, which is very evident in some parts of the country, such as Edgeworthstown in my constituency. The huge ambition there can be seen in the use of an old building - an old bank - to breathe new life into it and provide huge space for enterprise. Loughrea is another good example, as is Ballinasloe. There are very key areas around the country where they have taken advantage of the opportunity.

Question No. 104 taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 105 taken with Question No. 85.

Questions Nos. 106 to 110, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Sports Facilities

111. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the current approval and funding position of the proposed athletics track at Carhookeal, Mallow; the outstanding steps required before the project can proceed to tender and construction; the engagement between his Department and Cork County Council to resolve these; and whether the existing allocation is sufficient to deliver the project. [81301/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Cork County Council confirmed to me in September that the proposed new Mallow athletics track in Carhookeal had cleared gateway 1 and that it was aiming to publish the tender before the end of this year. Is this timetable still on track? What approvals will the Department need to give before a contract can be awarded? Is the funding that is in place enough to build the track?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Kenny. I know this is a project he has been advocating very strongly on. It would have a massive impact on the provision of athletics in the wider Mallow area. My Department is continuing to engage with Cork County Council on moving the project forward. As the Deputy outlined, gateway 1 approval has been provided for that. They are continuing to engage now to expedite the approval for the tender stage so that the project will be in a position to go to tender. That engagement is continuing with my Department. I assure the Deputy that I will work closely with my officials to try to ensure it is expedited as quickly as possible. I know there is a very strong appetite among all stakeholders to see the project progress. Certainly it is the same with the Department of sport, which wants to see it come to fruition as well. I thank the Deputy for raising this project again today and for his ongoing advocacy in relation to it. I will ensure officials continue to engage closely to see it move forward.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister of State for his engagement. I also thank the officials in the Department, who have been extremely engaging. Any time I have picked up the phone to the individual in the Department who has been dealing with this case, he has been extremely proactive. I also thank the officials in Cork County Council. I am thanking them all on behalf of the athletics clubs involved in this project as well. My understanding is that once the tender process is complete, the Department will have to give a further approval and sign-off on a final business case. Will the Minister of State clarify if that is the case? Once the tender process is finished, does it then go back to the Department for final sign-off of the business case? Has the Department agreed with the council what it necessarily needs for that sign-off? Is it just a general business case? How quickly can that decision be made if it is a decision that needs to be made?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will engage closely with my officials to get as clear a timeline as I can for how quickly the project can progress now. The business case is assessed

to make sure that a project of this scale, which involves significant investment, is going to be sustainable in the long term and that the processes and oversights are going to be in place to make sure it operates to the expected capacity and delivers the participation opportunities in line with its objectives. I will ask for an updated report from my officials and provide it to the Deputy. As part of that, I will make sure we are as clear as we can be about the remaining timelines so that the project can progress and be in a position to go to construction.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister of State again. On the general scheme of the large-scale sports funding available to the community of Mallow, this will potentially be an enormous contribution to the town of Mallow, to its environs and to the wider Munster area as well. I compliment the two clubs, Mallow Athletic Club and North Cork Athletic Club, which have made significant contributions financially and in terms of their own knowledge of athletics towards this development. I am conscious that there was a fear among both athletics clubs that they would be asked for further funding, which is kind of related to my first question.

I am glad that Cork County Council has made it clear to me that it will not seek further funding from either club. Once the report comes back from the Department, or if the Minister of State's officials could engage with me, could they provide me with an up-to-date or approximate cost for the project so that I can go back to the athletics clubs?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will certainly pass on the Deputy's kind words about the constructive approach taken by departmental officials, and the constructive work done by Cork County Council officials and the athletics clubs. It takes a collaborative approach from everybody to facilitate projects such as this becoming a reality and to ensure that they can operate to the best of their capacity once they are delivered. I will certainly get the Deputy the up-to-date report and as much information as possible on where matters stand and the projected timeline for moving forward. I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Great. I thank the Minister of State.

Questions Nos. 112 to 124, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Culture Policy

128. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to provide his Department's assessment of the Cork city night-time economy pilot and the plans for roll-out to smaller towns across Cork North-West; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [81193/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I want to try to get a handle on the Department's assessment of the Cork night-time economy pilot scheme and plans to roll out similar initiatives to other towns in County Cork and up into north-west Cork, including Macroom, Millstreet and beyond.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Moynihan for this important question. The night-time economy is an important component in the development of towns and cities, playing a crucial role in economic growth, cultural vibrancy, social vitality and urban regeneration.

As outlined in the programme for Government, the Government is committed to supporting the work of the night-time economy implementation group in developing Ireland's night-time economy. The night-time economy pilots have been a significant project in this policy area. The night-time economy advisers have worked closely with key stakeholders and partners in their local areas and have been effective in developing local strategies and creating a sense of common purpose and cohesion among stakeholders and groups.

In Cork, the night-time economy pilot has delivered a number of valuable and innovative initiatives. These include first Fridays, animating the city with markets and events on the first Friday of the month; coffee house lates, a series that encouraged independent cafes to extend their trading hours and offer special evening experiences; the leave a light on campaign, which encouraged city centre businesses to leave a light on until midnight or 1 a.m. during the winter months, enhancing the feeling of safety and community on the streets; and the safe and sound campaign, which offered free training to night-time economy operators and covered a range of health and safety issues at night. This reflects a commitment to making Cork's night-time economy inclusive, safe and resilient.

In 2025, my Department commissioned Communiqué International to undertake an independent review of the nine night-time economy pilots. This was to look critically at the structures involved in supporting the advisers, the visibility and impact of each pilot in its area, the future roll-out or expansion of the pilots, whether further roll-out is warranted and what needs to be put in place to make the model effective. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, examined the findings of the report from the review and met departmental officials regarding the recommendations outlined in the report. Discussions have commenced between my Department and the local government section in relation to the outcome of the review, with all partners working to map a pathway forward for this valuable initiative.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. There is no doubt that the scheme has supported cultural diversity and the local offering for people. The food and arts scene, as well as artists, has been supported by it. There is a very real and measurable benefit in places such as Cork. We should now be energising or pushing out the opportunity to other rural towns to allow them to benefit, not just the city.

The Department has previously funded venues in places such as Ballincollig and Coachford to support them in rolling out different offerings as well. I am asking that we build on that. How soon does the Minister see a roll-out happening following the review? When would places across the county, including Macroom, Millstreet and Baile Bhuirne, and right across the area, have an opportunity to avail of or access the scheme?

Deputy Peter Burke: This has been a collaborative approach between the Department and the County and City Management Association, CCMA, and through the work done by local authorities. They are best placed to understand the impact, as is the Deputy in his local area. Discussions are ongoing now. I have not been briefed on them myself. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has done a significant body of work with the Department in connection with the matter, so there will be an outcome to those discussions in the near future.

I point out that the Government has undertaken a lot of stabilisation measures for businesses operating in the night-time economy, particularly in relation to the 9% VAT rate, which has had a significant impact. We can see growth in the sector now, which is very important.

Hopefully, in the next couple of weeks, Fáilte Ireland will announce a number of capital schemes that will support businesses and attractions in the night-time economy to create ambience and build resilience, particularly regarding digitalisation, which is so important in the age we are in and in how visitors map and plan their destinations.

We will revert to the Deputy in due course. We do not have an exact timeline for the final determination being made, but when a system such as this is working well, it is important to continue it.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Separately from the scheme, we have been able to get the Briery Gap in Macroom reopened after fire damage. There was Government support, and there was insurance and support from Cork County Council. There was great support for it. It meant that it brought theatre, cinema, arts and culture back into the centre of Macroom town. That had an obvious knock-on effect for restaurants, food and music venues around the town.

Clearly, supporting the arts benefits a much wider community. There are similar cultural centres, such as Ionad Cultúrtha in Baile Bhuirne and the Glen Theatre in Banteer. A scheme such as the pilot run in Cork could greatly benefit those arts communities and the wider community across rural County Cork. It would be very important to give them access to a scheme of that kind. Would the Minister have an indication of the types of improvement that could be made following the pilot and whether venues such as the Briery Gap, Ionad Cultúrtha and the Glen Theatre could access it?

Deputy Peter Burke: It is good to hear about the progress that Macroom is making, particularly in bringing vibrancy and activity back into the centre, which is key. We currently have a scheme open until the end of February in relation to capital works for dance schools, arts centres and similar activities. It will be a significant asset to areas not covered by other grant programmes within the Department.

Regarding premises that provide music, the Department has delivered significant schemes. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, have done so in the past. That is a good way forward as well because these capital schemes can provide equipment and upgrades and fund safety works for premises that contribute so much to a town. We will also come back regarding the ongoing work in relation to additional pilots or greater permanence for any pilot, and we will be working with the CCMA on this aspect.

I think our night-time economy is getting into a good place. In particular, and wearing my other hat on the enterprise side, we are doing a lot of stabilisation work with businesses. We now have a host of grants for which we have decluttered the questions. We have taken a knife to a lot of the questions for sustainability and digitalisation grants to support business owners, reflecting that time is their most precious resource.

Sports Funding

125. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the amount drawn down under the 2024 large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, to date; the steps being taken to accelerate project delivery and address construction cost increases; and whether he will bring forward the next funding round ahead of 2028. [81165/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask about the 2024 large-scale sport infrastructure fund funding to date and any steps taken to date to accelerate the delivery of projects. I also ask about addressing the increasing cost of construction and when we can look to bring forward the next round of funding. It is vital for organisations that get an opportunity to know the timeline.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for the question. In November 2024, €173 million was provisionally allocated from the LSSIF to 35 projects, bringing the total allocations under the fund since it was first established in 2020 to just under €300 million, or €297 million to be precise. No payments have been made to date under the 2024 round. The first drawdown is expected by the end of this year or in early 2027.

My officials are working with project promoters to progress their projects through the assessments and approvals required under the infrastructure guidelines. Of the 35 projects, two are under construction, one is at approval gate 3, 12 are at tender stage, and 17 are at approval gate 1. Most of the projects at approval gate 1 are close to completing that stage. The remaining three have yet to begin the approval process.

With regard to construction costs, the outcomes of the tender processes currently under way will provide a clearer picture of the cost of delivering those projects. No date has been set.

In terms of the next round of the LSSIF, it is our objective to open it for applications during 2028. The national development plan provides for one round of the LSSIF to be run over the course of this Government's term, and it is our objective to open that for applications in 2028. In the meantime, our focus is on making sure that those projects that have been funded under the previous two rounds move forward and get into the construction and delivery stages.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.11 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 18 Samhain 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.11 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 18 November 2026.