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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters 669
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate 670
Renewable Energy Generation 670
Road Network 673
An Garda Síochána 675
Airport Policy 678
Health Budget and Recruitment Restrictions: Motion [Private Members] 681
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions 719
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions 731
Ceisteanna ar Pholasaí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation 733
Data Centre Transparency Bill 2026: First Stage 745
Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (Hardship Meters) Bill 2026: First Stage 746
Property Services (Regulation) (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage 748
Message from Select Committee 750
Childcare: Statements 750
Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee 804
Media Regulation Bill 2026: From the Seanad 805
Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2026: Motion 811
European Union Regulations: Motion 836
Estimates for Public Services 2026 849
Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil 850
Defending Irish Neutrality: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members] 850
Health Budget and Recruitment Restrictions: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members] 858

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 18 Samhain 2026

Wednesday, 18 November 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Darren O'Rourke) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Darren O'Rourke): 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 Aindrias Moynihan - To discuss local concerns in relation to a biogas plant near Macroom.

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 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 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.

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 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 the Claregalway relief road.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the delivery and staffing of the additional 15-bed area at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss endometriosis services in Galway.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the need for improvement works in schools, in Kerry in particular.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss funding allocations for capital works in schools across Carlow and Kilkenny.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss Garda vetting procedures and the need to be vetted multiple times for certain jobs and volunteer work.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss proposed changes to the assessment process to access special classes and schools for children with needs.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the reopening of the Glenderry, Ballyheogue pump house and water supply.

Deputy Cathal Crowe - To discuss the safeguarding of air navigation systems and category 2 status for Shannon Airport.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss water supply disruption and related matters in County Kildare.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the way in which local specialist music retailers can become approved suppliers to schools.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh - To discuss consistent water outages in Derrinturn and Carbery, County Kildare.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss DEIS status for a primary school in Dublin 3.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss an update on the shortage of residential accommodation for people with intellectual disabilities in Cork.

The matters raised by Deputies Aindrias Moynihan, Seán Kyne, Danny Healy-Rae and Cathal Crowe have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Renewable Energy Generation

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I raise the real very concerns of people around the Macroom area about a proposed biogas development at Kilboultragh. People are very clear that the community is not anti-biogas, that they recognise the role of renewable energy and that any

development should be in the right location, of the right scale and properly regulated if it were to go ahead. It is important that it be respectful of the people already living there. The scale of this proposal is fairly substantial at over 8 ha with some 90,000 tonnes of proposed material coming on site each year.

Over 300 locals have made submissions outlining their concerns up to yesterday. That is a huge community response that simply cannot be brushed aside. When I meet locals, they tell me they have very serious concerns about the capacity of the road network, safety, air quality and groundwater quality. Fisheries have also highlighted this and in particular a lack of meaningful consultation with developers. They highlighted safety concerns if it were to be built and anything went wrong there. They also raised reasonable questions about where this material will come from, how far it will travel and whether that is sustainable. People with private wells in the area also have very reasonable concerns.

As I mentioned, a core issue for people is that they feel this is happening around them and to them rather than with them. The community wants genuine engagement not simply a number of individual conversations. People want to be able to sit down in a group and ask questions of the developer. If the developments are to gain trust from the public, they need to earn it.

This time last year the agriculture committee looked at the question and potential of biogas. It recognised that when there is potential, there are reasonable questions and that it is important there is meaningful consultation with communities, clear national planning guidelines or regulations and an appropriate mix - not all large-scale but an appropriate mix and scale. It also recognised that if a development were to go ahead, the EPA should be properly resourced to monitor and enforce compliance in any such situation.

The central concern for locals is they are almost moving ahead of any guidelines being in place. The guidelines should not be arriving after a development wave, they need to shape it. If the industry wants the public's confidence, as I said before, it has to earn it. When I speak to locals, they do not want Ireland to turn its back on biogas. They want developments that are in the right place, properly planned, appropriate to the area and regulated. That is a reasonable expectation. I ask the Minister of State to give the Macroom community a clear reassurance that their concerns are being heard.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank Deputy Moynihan for reflecting the concerns local residents have expressed to him. It is not the first time he has raised this issue. It is a concern and issue for him. Let us be absolutely clear; communities have the right to be heard, to transparency and to confidence that any proposed development in their area will be subject to the rigours of planning, environmental assessment and regulatory scrutiny. It is important that we separate legitimate concerns and also recognise the significant role biomethane and anaerobic digestion will play in Ireland’s energy future.

We have committed to producing up to 5.7 TWh of indigenous biomethane per annum by 2030. This a key part of strengthening our energy security and reducing emissions and also supporting farmers and developing a circular economy that turns agricultural and organic waste into a valuable renewable energy source. The reality is also that anaerobic digestion is not an experimental technology. There are more than 20,000 plants operating across Europe today. They provide renewable energy safely and successfully in rural communities.

What is often lost in the debate is the strengthening of the regulatory framework already in place. Any proposed anaerobic digestion facility must navigate a number of statutory processes. Depending on the nature and scale of that development, that can include oversight from the relevant local authority planning process, the EPA, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Health and Safety Authority, Gas Networks Ireland and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. These facilities do not simply receive approval by default. They are assessed across planning, environmental, ecology, safety and community impact is also part of the consideration.

The Deputy specifically raised concerns around consultation and planning guidelines. I recognise that planning authorities and communities need greater consistency and clarity in assessing the development. That is precisely why we are looking at action 5g of the national biomethane strategy. That commits to developing dedicated planning support guidance for local authorities. Our Department is working with ARUP, State agencies, local authorities and community representatives including the biogas concern group. It is currently preparing that planning support document. That document and guidance will not weaken the planning standard; it will strengthen the transparency, public understand and consistency.

It will provide planners with a structured assessment framework while also making information more accessible to local communities.

As a Government, we support the development of biomethane. In Ballinrobe in my constituency of Mayo, a 50 MW anaerobic digestion, AD, plant is under construction and the CRU has granted planning permission for the gas pipe to connect to the Gas Networks Ireland infrastructure. We also support strong environmental standards and meaningful community engagement. Those objectives are not mutually exclusive. They need to happen hand in hand. Any decisions on individual planning applications are a matter for the local authority but also for An Coimisiún Pleanála. It would be inappropriate to comment on the specific application the Deputy mentioned but I understand the issues he has raised.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I appreciate that the individual application must go through the statutory process. I am not asking the Minister of State to intervene in an individual planning application, but there is a wider national framework here. The guidelines should come first. Significant proposals are moving ahead in advance of guidelines. It is the exact issue we highlighted at the agriculture committee. Communities and developers both need certainty. The rules should be shaping development and not following it. A grant was previously made available for the development of biogas plants but very little of it was drawn down. It is clear it was not drawn down because projects were not ready to advance. There was not certainty around planning or regulations, yet there is now a burst of these and a movement of a large number of these plants across the country.

People in Macroom are asking very reasonable questions. Where will 90,000 tonnes of material come from and is that sustainable? What impact will that have on the road network, their own local community and wells and water supplies in the area? How safe will it be afterwards? Is there a risk to water quality and so on? The Minister of State mentioned Ballinrobe. It is significant because there were very few submissions from the public in relation to Ballinrobe, simply because the developer went out and engaged with the community. It is very much in contrast with what we are seeing in so many other places. People are asking very

reasonable questions and they want to be heard and to be able to engage on it. They want there to be proper consultation first and not as a reaction afterwards. People are not anti-biogas. They want a plant that will be put in the proper place, properly planned and at the right scale, and the EPA should have the resources and capacity to monitor and control any non-compliance.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Deputy for raising these important points. To bring some balance to the discussion, as I said in my opening remarks, communities must have confidence that their concerns are being listened to. There must be engagement and that is the starting point for any of these large-scale infrastructure projects. They should not be just imposed on communities. There should be a structured way for them to be scrutinised, they should be transparent and there should be effective consultation.

Notwithstanding the wider national interest, as I said, biomethane will be and is a key part of Ireland's energy future. It creates enormous opportunities for farmers and supports rural jobs. The Deputy talked about the feedstock that is required to support this plant. There will be huge opportunities in Macroom and the wider area in terms of additional income for farmers who will be engaged with the operators of the plant. I see it in Mayo myself and it presents opportunities. These facilities operate under a tight regulatory framework. There are extensive environmental and planning frameworks that have to be achieved before any initial proposals can be brought forward.

In regard to the planning guidelines, that is a fair point. It is why we are bringing forward, through the national biomethane strategy, a dedicated planning support document. We do not want another situation where there are inconsistencies with local authorities. We want greater transparency for communities and community representatives so they can look at what the development will be. We are very much determined to expand our footprint of biomethane and AD plants around the country, which will benefit our energy transition.

Road Network

Deputy Seán Kyne: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit anseo ar maidin. I raised this project in the Seanad on 23 May 2024, seeking a progress update on the Claregalway or Baile Chláir relief road. I am seeking an update from the Minister of State today on behalf of Transport Infrastructure Ireland. I understand from my colleague Councillor David Collins, a local councillor in the area who has been pushing this project for many years, that Galway County Council is inviting tenders to progress this project and seeking technical advisers. I am seeking an update from TII on the progress of that.

The plan for this project is to have a road from Kiniska on the Tuam side of the village to Cregboy on the Galway side, with a bridge crossing over the River Clare. Along the main road, some 20,000 vehicles such as cars, buses and trucks pass through the village every day on this national route. It includes a number of housing estates, such as An Mhainistir, Lakeview, River Oaks and Gort An Ghabhann. There is the Claregalway Hotel, The Arches Hotel, pubs, garages, supermarkets, commercial units and a church. It is a busy village and it badly needs a relief road project. It has been talked about for 20-plus years and there is an element of frustration or perhaps even disbelief that anything will actually happen in Claregalway. I

welcome the fact that the council is engaging with TII and that money has been sanctioned to be prepare tenders for advisers to progress this, but I need confirmation from TII that all is running smoothly on this project and that advisers and consultants will be appointed to progress this road project.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy. Supporting road safety, as well as the quality of life of the Deputy's constituents who use the N83, is really important for both the Government and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who has the overall policy remit and the control of Exchequer funding for the national roads programme. The national roads programme funding will be announced in the coming weeks. In line with that, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015 and in line with the national development plan, is working on the projects to proceed under Project Ireland 2040.

It is important to point out in the context of this response that a number of major national roads projects have been delivered under the national development plan, including the N59 Moycullen bypass, which the Deputy knows very well, the N5 Westport to Turlough and the N22 Ballyvourney to Macroom projects. Approximately €659 million of Exchequer capital funding was provided for national roads through TII to local authorities in 2026. This is used for the construction of major new roads projects as well as the protection and renewal of the existing network. The Government is committed to reducing road deaths and creating safer roads for everyone right across Ireland. In 2026, approximately €6 million in capital funding was allocated for the protection and renewal of the existing national road network in Galway, with an additional €11 million allocated for the construction of new national roads.

This included funding for the proposed Claregalway relief road as well as for other projects, including the Galway city ring road, which is the first road project to receive designation as critical infrastructure.

The allocation for protection and renewal of the existing national road network will fund a range of activities, including road safety improvements, pavement renewal, maintenance of bridges and structures and measures to ensure the network can withstand the increasing number of severe weather events. The N83 Claregalway relief road will remove through traffic from the village, as Deputy Kyne rightly pointed out, and will enable the improvement of the environment for visitors and locals alike, with improved walking and cycling infrastructure when the relief road is in place. It will include the construction of a new bridge over the River Clare. A single carriageway road is planned and the relief road would also complement the N6 Galway city ring road project.

As Deputy Kyne alluded to in his contribution, Galway County Council is finalising the tender documentation for the appointment of technical advisers. It is anticipated that the final tender documents will be completed and reviewed by TII within the next four weeks. The tender competition will be advertised and is expected to remain open for a further six weeks. Subject to completion of the tender evaluation process, the appointment of consultants is anticipated to be completed by the end of January 2027, which is important in terms of progressing the plans further. I welcome, on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the fact it was possible to allocate funding in 2026 for this project. As I have said, allocations for 2027 will be announced in the coming weeks.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for his response. It is positive that things are progressing. Based on the response, I expect that there will be a significant allocation in the transport budget announcements due in the coming weeks for the N83 Claregalway relief road to ensure consultants can be appointed to progress the route selection and go through the processes to prepare it for planning and consents. There is still some way to go but, based on the response and engagement with the county council and Councillor David Collins, progress is being made on this project and I welcome this.

It is important that the pressure now be kept on TII and the Department of Transport to ensure there is a significant allocation in the 2027 transport budget for TII to progress this project because, as I have said, it has been talked about for decades at this stage. It will have a hugely positive impact on Claregalway, Baile Chláir, when it is constructed. As I have said, residents in Claregalway have to put up with a huge amount of traffic, with some 20,000 vehicles passing through the village every day. It can be choked up and snarled up. Therefore, it is a very deserving project and will make a huge difference, not only in relation to traffic but also future development and a more ordinary development of the town of Claregalway.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy Kyne for his advocacy on this road project and many road projects across Galway over the years. It is very important that we have public representatives who advocate to progress projects. I will feed back Deputy Kyne's comments on the importance of funding for 2027 to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who unfortunately could not take this Topical Issue this morning.

There is a commitment in the programme for Government to increase funding for new road projects as part of the national development plan review. There was a publication on 26 November 2025 that reviewed the sectoral investment plan for transport. It showed an increase in the capital ceilings out to 2030 and an increased funding commitment to capital projects in comparison with the first half of this decade. This will be very important in progressing many national road projects throughout the country. I have some in my constituency of Waterford, which many people will be advocating for as well. I will feed back Deputy Kyne's points on the N83 Claregalway relief road to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in the context of the upcoming announcements on the capital plan for 2027.

An Garda Síochána

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue. It is very important that we discuss Garda vetting procedures. Many people feel it is unnecessary to be vetted multiple times for certain jobs and voluntary work. I understand the importance of Garda vetting and that it is essential for those working with children, the elderly and vulnerable adults. People dealing with them have to be Garda vetted. However, the Garda vetting process needs to be improved and streamlined. I thank the Garda vetting bureau for the great work it is doing because it is snowed under with, as I have said, multiple and repeat applications and I will give a few examples.

When nurses on a panel for the HSE are offered a job they have to wait for the Garda vetting to go through, even if they are already working in another hospital and have been Garda vetted. This does not make sense. The same applies to substitute SNAs who cannot get a permanent

job. This is the case in many places. They cannot get a permanent post and when they do substitute work they have to get Garda vetted for every school in which they want to work. If they see a job advertised for a few days to cover sick leave, they cannot apply for the position unless they are Garda vetted for that school. This makes absolutely no sense. On the other hand, teachers are Garda vetted for all schools if they are working as substitutes. This is the way we want to go. There has to be some common sense here.

Another example of which I am very aware is school bus drivers. They are very hard to get, as the cut-off at 70 years of age is still in place. If an operator has a driver, that driver cannot drive a school bus for another operator. It is quite possible, and it happens, that drivers get sick or something happens on a certain day. Drivers are very scarce but an operator could get the loan of drivers who have already been Garda vetted from another school bus operator. They could do the job and would be well aware of it, understanding the school runs and how they operate. An operator is tied to the times when operating a school run. They are somewhere between 7.30 a.m. and 9 a.m. and between approximately 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. The operator is shackled by the times and the drivers have to be there. Bus Éireann's rule, and I do not know why and I do not think it is necessary, is that a driver Garda vetted for one operator is not covered to drive for another operator. I ask that this be reviewed urgently. I have raised this issue several times before and I know other Deputies have raised it and it has been going on for a long time. I ask that if a person is Garda vetted for one type of job the vetting should last for three years.

Another group of people, parents of young children, tell me they have to be Garda vetted to serve on a school parents' association. They have to be Garda vetted to train a football or soccer club. If they volunteer with a basketball club or youth club for the same group of children, they have to be Garda vetted over and over again. The time and resources required for this are hampering the system. It is hurting those doing the job of Garda vetting.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy Healy-Rae for raising this really important matter on the floor of the Dáil. I am happy to take this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for justice. The primary purpose of the vetting carried out by the Garda National Vetting Bureau is to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults. This clearly requires a robust Garda vetting process that reassures the public, particularly parents, that appropriate checks are conducted on people taking on positions of trust.

The Government is aware of ongoing concerns regarding certain aspects of the vetting process and it has listened very carefully to the views of affected sectors. The Deputy articulated many of these in his contribution. In this regard, I understand that the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is conscious that aspects of the current vetting system result in a highly segmented process. I also understand that the Minister believes the vetting system should be updated to ensure the burden of seeking vetting disclosures, particularly on volunteers and organisations working in their communities, is minimised to the greatest extent possible while maintaining the high standards that are necessary.

Further to the work carried out by the national vetting review group, steps are now being taken to implement a number of key changes to the process that will ensure it remains robust and effective while improving the service to customers. In practice, it is envisaged this will mean that people who have been vetted will not be required to repeat the process if they move

to another role within the same risk category, subject to a general requirement that vetting be renewed every three years. The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is actively engaging with the Garda National Vetting Bureau on the detailed work of developing the necessary legislative and technical steps to meet these goals in a way that is workable in practice. This includes an assessment of appropriate models for an expansion of digital service delivery, which is a very significant project that will necessarily take time to fully scope and implement.

I reassure the Deputy that the current system used by An Garda Síochána is delivered in a standard format to all organisations seeking vetting. This approach aligns with good practice internationally. I take on board the very legitimate points the Deputy has raised, which I will feed back to the Minister for justice. However, the Deputy will see from the response that it is acknowledged that the system needs improvement from the perspectives of duplication and process, although not in respect of the content and quality of the vetting done right across this State every day, which the National Vetting Bureau carries out to a very high standard.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State. I am glad to hear that the line Minister is aware of this and is actively pursuing a policy that would be more favourable and helpful to people. I agree with the Minister that there is no question the safety of children is paramount. We must never lose sight of that. However, I do feel that the process can be streamlined. The need for Garda vetting is increasing every day and every year and if we do not do something to streamline the process, the Garda vetting bureau just will not be able to cope. There could be a card like the Safe Pass that would state which category or sector a person is safe to work in. That should be one of the things.

The issue I raised about drivers is a very real and live thing that is happening. Many school bus operators are one-man bands. Others may have one or two drivers. People get sick and other things happen; maybe there is something the matter with a family member or child. It is vital. Other school bus operators may have an extra driver who could sort out the situation for a few days, ensuring the service continues. It is a very onerous task to bring children to school on time and to be there to pick them up. You do not want any misunderstandings. The system should be streamlined for the different sectors and people should have a card that would cover them for three years or whatever is deemed appropriate. Something needs to be done to rectify the confusion that is there at the present time.

Deputy John Cummins: I again thank the Deputy for raising this matter. He is right that the demand for vetting is considerable. To put it in context, the Minister has been informed by Garda authorities that the Garda National Vetting Bureau processed over 600,000 applications in 2024, almost 597,000 last year and over 512,000 so far this year. That volume is obviously very considerable.

The bureau's target turnaround time for vetting applications submitted by organisations using the e-vetting system is five to ten working days for over 85% of vetting applications received. Vetting applications are processed on a first come, first served basis in chronological order from the date of receipt. The current average turnaround time for e-vetting applications is approximately seven business days from the date of receipt for 85% of applications. There are a number of factors outside of An Garda Síochána's control that can impact on the timeline for individual applications. These include a person having lived overseas. For obvious reasons,

such applications can take additional time because checks have to be carried out with other jurisdictions.

The Deputy has made his points well regarding the issues, including duplication, that can occur. I know about this from my own experience as I used to teach, coach and be involved in other community organisations. Even though I was vetted for my teaching profession, I also had to be vetted for my local GAA club and my local soccer club. That undoubtedly adds to the volume of applications. I am heartened to see from this morning's response that the Minister is examining this. It will obviously take some time to scope out exactly how it is going to be done for the different categories and segments of applications so that people can have vetting in place for a period of time, allowing them to move between similar sectors.

Airport Policy

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue. I raise an issue that has recently emerged concerning future operational capacity at Shannon Airport. Three wind farm developments in east Clare, at Carrownagowan, Fahy Beg and Lackareagh, have now received planning permission and three more, at Oatfield, Ballycar and Knockshanvo, have live applications in the planning system. I will not comment any further on any live planning cases but recent assessments undertaken by AirNav Ireland indicate that if any of the three developments that have planning permission were to proceed, Shannon Airport could potentially lose its category II, CAT II, capability. In simple terms, CAT II capability allows aircraft to land safely during periods of poor visibility, such as when there is fog, low cloud or heavy rain. If this capability is lost, the consequences for Shannon Airport, passengers, airlines and the State will be extremely serious. In practical terms, there would be times when flights that would currently land at Shannon would be forced to divert elsewhere while departing flights could face delays or cancellations. This would reduce the reliability of operations at the airport and weaken confidence in Shannon Airport as a dependable location for airlines to operate from.

This is not simply an operational issue. First and foremost, it is a safety issue. Shannon Airport is the State's de facto diversion airport. It is often the first suitable airport available to aircraft crossing the Atlantic that encounter technical difficulties, medical emergencies, fuel concerns or adverse weather conditions. The airport also provides vital diversion supports for other Irish airports, regularly facilitating diversions during periods of bad weather. Over the past five years alone, Shannon Airport facilitated 357 diverted aircraft carrying a total of more than 39,000 passengers. If CAT II capability is lost, the options available to pilots and air traffic controllers dealing with emergencies will become far more limited.

This would weaken the State's ability to respond to aviation emergencies. It would also weaken Ireland's ability to support transatlantic aircraft that depend on Shannon as a safe and reliable diversion airport. It is also critical for AirNav's ability to provide safe and efficient air navigation services.

There are also important strategic and national security considerations here. Shannon Airport serves a role that extends far beyond commercial passenger services. It is a critical component of the State's aviation infrastructure and it provides important contingency capability for Government and State operations. Shannon Airport has welcomed heads of states

from governments all around the world, including every US President since John F. Kennedy. President Zelenskyy regularly stops at Shannon *en route* to the US, while the airport has played a key role in facilitating visiting heads of state during Ireland's EU Presidency. Furthermore, Shannon provides essential support to the Air Corps. In 2025 alone, the airport facilitated 185 Air Corps aircraft movements. At a time when resilience, security and preparedness are becoming increasingly important, reducing the capability of one of the State's most strategically important airports is a matter of significant concern.

There are broader economic considerations here. Shannon is a critical gateway for business, tourism and investment in the western region. Any reduction in the airport's reliability risks undermining connectivity, regional competitiveness and future economic growth. A weakened Shannon would therefore be far more than an airport-specific setback; it would inflict lasting damage on the region. This is an issue that goes to the heart of aviation safety, national resilience, emergency preparedness and the long-term economic development of the western region. What steps can be taken to ensure that Shannon Airport's CAT II capability is protected and this critical national infrastructure is not put at any risk?

Deputy John Cummins: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I assure him that both the Minister, Deputy Browne, and I acknowledge the importance of Shannon Airport to County Clare, the western region and the State. Its safe and reliable operation, including during poor visibility, is critically important to passengers, airlines, businesses and the regional economy.

Responsibility for aviation policy and safety rests with the Minister for Transport and the relevant aviation bodies. The Irish Aviation Authority is the State's civil aviation regulator, while AirNav Ireland provides air navigation services at State airports and across Irish-controlled airspace. They have the specialist expertise to assess potential effects on radar, communications and navigation systems, instrument approaches and aircraft operations. Aerodrome safeguarding seeks to ensure that development near an aerodrome does not adversely affect the aerodrome or surrounding airspace. It is acknowledged that wind turbines can potentially create physical obstructions, radar clutter or interference with communications, navigation and surveillance equipment. The cumulative effects of multiple developments may also be relevant.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage recognises the potential tension between renewable energy development and the aviation sector. lreland’s renewable energy objectives and the safe operation of aviation infrastructure are both matters of national importance. Onshore wind is fundamental to reducing emissions and strengthening energy security but its expansion must be planned carefully. In that context, potential conflicts in respect of individual projects should be addressed through early engagement, robust technical evidence and, where feasible, agreed mitigation. Individual planning applications are a matter for the relevant planning authority or An Coimisiún Pleanála. Section 30 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 precludes the Minister and the Department from exercising power or control in any particular planning case, except as provided for by law. Accordingly, neither I nor the Minister, Deputy Browne, can intervene in or comment on the merits or likely outcome of an individual application.

Aviation bodies do not determine planning applications. However, their technical evidence can inform the statutory decision maker. Under the arrangements supporting the Planning and

Development Act 2024, the Irish Aviation Authority, AirNav Ireland and the relevant State airport will be prescribed consultees where development may endanger or interfere with aircraft safety or safe and efficient navigation. Part 4, the final part of the Planning and Development Act of 2024, will commence on 26 November. The 2024 Act also provides for national planning statements to replace existing section 28 guidelines. Following the review of the 2006 wind energy development guidelines and policy direction from the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, the Minister, Deputy Browne, intends, subject to strategic environmental assessment, to publish a draft national planning statement on wind energy for consultation as soon as possible. In preparing that statement, the Department has engaged with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and relevant aviation stakeholders. The objective is to develop a clear, balanced framework promoting early consultation, appropriate assessment and workable mitigation, enabling renewable energy development while also safeguarding essential air navigation infrastructure.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The positioning of wind farms near Kerry Airport now means that it can never achieve CAT II status. That is how serious all of this is. If Shannon were to lose its CAT II rating, this would amount to a de facto downgrading of that airport. Airlines need certainty and they need to know that their aircraft can land safely in all conditions, including poor visibility. Losing CAT II could mean the withdrawal of big carriers that fly those all-important transatlantic routes. Ryanair operates approximately 30 routes per annum out of Shannon and is now in the process of developing a €50 million hangar facility at the airport. I do not think it would be too enamoured if there were uncertainty around this and the guarantee of Shannon's CAT II status would somehow be lost.

A loss of CAT II would also put an end to Shannon being the de facto Irish airport for flight diversions and the transit of high-status diplomats. Any plans that this Government may have to develop a permanent base for the Air Corps in the future will also surely be scuppered. Shannon also currently has an enviable pre-clearance arrangement for passengers destined for the United States. We cannot jeopardise all of this. We cannot allow the development of wind farms to hold the airport to hostage or put air safety at risk. Why would we allow Shannon's high status to be undermined in any way? In the interests of fairness, I will not speak about any live planning case whatsoever but there are three wind farms that have already been granted planning - planning in the bag, so to speak - each posing a risk to Shannon Airport's CAT II status.

The Minister has gone into some of the legal provisions. Will this Government consider exercising its powers under section44Aof the Planning and Development Act 2000 to revoke granted planning permissions? Moreover, what guarantees can be given here today that we will not end up with a Kerry scenario and the CAT II status of Shannon Airport will be guaranteed and future protected?

Deputy John Cummins: Both the Minister, Deputy Browne, and I recognise the concern that wind energy development could impact the radar and navigation systems supporting airport operations in the State. However, the existence and extent of any such risk, and the availability of effective mitigation, must be established by the competent aviation bodies through a site-specific technical assessment. Planning authorities cannot just disregard credible

aviation safety evidence but neither can an objection automatically determine a planning application. The appropriate approach is of course early engagement between any potential developer, the airport concerned, AirNav Ireland and the Irish Aviation Authority, followed by a clear assessment of individual and cumulative impacts on any proposed mitigation.

As I mentioned, the prescribed consultee arrangements in the 2024 Act will help ensure that the relevant aviation expertise is brought formally into the planning process because they will be now determined as statutory consultees. The forthcoming national planning statement also provides an opportunity for relevant stakeholders to input into the consideration as to whether clearer national guidance is required on aviation safeguarding, consultation and cumulative impacts. The Department will continue to engage with aviation stakeholders to ensure that the planning framework supports renewable energy development without compromising aviation safety or the continued operational effectiveness of the State's airports.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 9.50 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 9.50 a.m. and resumed at 10 a.m.

10 o'clock

Health Budget and Recruitment Restrictions: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

condemns the repeated presentation to Dáil Éireann of annual Estimates for Health, which on the evidence of the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Government's own outturns, the Government must know to be inadequate to maintain existing services;

notes the doubtful legal basis for the Department of Health taking operational control of recruitment decisions for health regions in Tier 3 financial escalation; and

calls on the Government to reverse the systematic under funding of the HSE by the Department of Health in 2026, by presenting a Supplementary Estimate for the Health Vote that provides for the cost of the services delivered in 2026, and specifically covers maternity leave, so that the 2027 allocation, and future services, are not impacted and cut further, by the 2026 deficit.

We in the Labour Party are bringing forward this motion because we believe the people of this country deserve honesty and certainty when it comes to how our health services are resourced. Each year for well over ten years now, this Government and the previous Government have asked the Dáil to approve a health budget they know will not pay for the services demanded and needed by patients in our country. For many years now, Government has had to come back into this Chamber each year to pass a supplementary budget. Even though it has forecasts from the ESRI and the IGEES at its disposal, the Government is systematically underfunding and misfunding our health service year after year. It is not just me saying that; it is the former chair of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, the current chair, its economists and the Parliamentary Budget Office, PBO.

This year, the Minister promised it would be different. We were told there would be no supplementary budget and this was doubled down on when budget day came, when it was stated that a Supplementary Estimate would not be sought for a pay budget that had not been managed. The Minister even went so far as to announce a type of multi-annual funding in reverse, stating that overspending regions had very clearly eaten into next year's provision. I am relieved that sense has prevailed and the prospect of starving regions has been put off. However, the question remains of whether the €780 million covers the pay increase and the deficit or, alternatively, just the deficit. What exactly is the deficit? We do not have precise figures as to what was the €780 million at the start of October. We seem to have the same figure quoted at the end of October. The reality is we need to have a comprehensive package for our health services going into this winter.

Some 22 years ago, this country passed legislation which effectively gave hospital managers and clinicians the power to decide how our health service should be staffed and operated. How is it that in 2026 the Minister seems to think she knows better, that she knows more about the running of hospitals than the people on the ground, the very people tasked with running these organisations? That is exactly what is contained within the HSE HR memo issued in October regarding the Department of Health promotion financial sanction process. The HSE makes the business case to the Minister on recruitment and she gets to make the ultimate call. I have to say, I do not believe the Minister has the legal basis for her actions and I think she is straying into very dangerous territory.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I wrote to the Minister two weeks ago about that legal basis and what I got back was, quite frankly, gobbledygook. I see now that she has a slightly different answer in her countermotion but, whatever way she dresses it up, it is a veto on staffing. If it does not get past her office, it does not happen.

When I look at the cost and productivity reports for the end of October, I see very clearly the number of recruitment requests coming from the regions to her office. A total of 16 requests were sent from the Dublin and midlands regions. The number approved was 16 but the number for Dublin and the south east was zero. Are we really saying there is no recruitment need in Dublin and the south east? There were zero requests sent into the Department of Health from the south west and, of course, zero were approved. In the west and north west, there were 168 submitted to the Minister's Department and 168 were sent back for more information. That is the chill effect on the HSE.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Your information is wrong.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Ultimately, the reality is that there is a block on recruitment by the Minister's Department. There were mechanisms within the Health Act that the Minister could have relied upon but she chose not to use any of them.

Being honest, I have a real fear now that we are effectively seeing the politicisation of healthcare appointments. The HSE HR document suggests the decision was made on cost-neutral grounds. It was not based on need, but instead on cost. We know about all the waiting

lists, and I do not need to rattle them off here, but that is simply unacceptable. Taking one example of what is currently happening on the ground, there is an oncologist in Cork who specialises in lung cancer. She is one of two lung oncologists there. She has now gone on maternity leave. When the two of them are there, they run a great operation, but there has been no sanction for her maternity cover. This woman in the health service going on maternity leave is effectively seen as a saving, while the workload has to be passed on to someone else or the waiting lists will get longer. That is all wrong. Another example is the six radiographers sitting on a HSE panel in CUH who have been granted approval to be used as agency staff but not as direct HSE staff. How does that make any sense?

Anyone listening to the Minister's account of the deficit in recent months will have been left with the distinct impression that excess recruitment is to blame for the HSE's second-highest deficit in the history of our health service, and that the south west is the biggest culprit. We need to start telling the facts here about what exactly is happening. When I read her seven-page countermotion to our motion this morning, I did not see the reasons for the figures behind the almost billion euro deficit she is currently presiding over.

We know the south west has been singled out for its sins on recruitment above the permitted thresholds, but the reality is the pay bill in the Dublin and midlands and Dublin and south-east regions is actually larger. That deficit is larger than the one in the south west, but that is never spoken about. 2026 was to be the year when agency spend was supposed to go down by €240 million. It is now running 91.3% above its target to the end of August. They are the most recent available figures. Four of the six regions are running agency overspends more than double their agency allocation for the year to date. In fact, national schemes and services directly controlled by the HSE centre have the highest agency overspend at 188.5%. As one hospital manager in the west and north west said to me in recent days, the only way they can maintain patient safety right now is through agency because they are not getting recruitment for replacement staff. It is not as if we are talking about additional staff; it is replacement staff. That is a very expensive false economy. I have said to the Minister before that it is not what the HSE spends but how it spends. If we are serious about reducing and getting value for money within the HSE, we have to improve direct pay.

Of course, we are all talk about pay at the moment, but non-pay is the biggest driver of the deficit according to the internal cost and productivity reports. In fact, non-pay overspend was running almost three times more than pay to the end of September. When we drill into non-pay, we see that 40% of the €431 million overspend is mysteriously down to some other column accounting for €170 million. We were repeatedly told that drugs are driving the overspend, but drugs are only 15% of the non-pay deficit. When one looks at it, the big drivers are capitation and grants. They have surged ahead by €81 million. That relates to the PCRS and reimbursements for GPs and medical cards. We have this mad situation where, on one hand, the Minister is urging people to take up their eligibility for their GP-only card, while on the other hand the Department of Health is not properly budgeting for it. That is outrageous and we have to ask why the Department of Health keeps setting fantastical savings targets that will never be realised.

The HSE national plan had a target of €181 million in savings in 2026. This was on top of savings of €633 million in 2025. Now, I see the HSE is targeting €360 million in savings across the regions. This is completely farcical. When the HSE is facing one of its biggest ever deficits

- and we all support measures here to reduce lab outsourcing, agency conversion and the use of biosimilars and whatever else - the reality is €360 million of savings is simply not realisable.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have three things to say in the time I have. First, I appreciate the Minister's hands-on approach in her Department but if she adopts such a style, she needs to deliver. I do not know what legal basis she is working under for the changes she has made from a Departmental perspective on regional governance within the HSE. I have here the 2004 Act. I have been knocking around here for 20 years and I have challenged issues relating to this Act previously. I cannot see if the Minister is acting under section 10 of this Act, and she has not led what she is doing before the Houses as she is meant to. I do not know what basis she is working under. The Minister can get all the legal advice she wants in her Department, but I remind her that other Ministers have done so in other cases and, at times, they have lost. It is a very serious consequence for a Minister to act without legal authority. I want to know exactly how the Minister is acting because, for anyone looking at this, the manner in which decisions are being made on staffing in regions is now coming from the Department and I cannot see how that aligns with this Act.

The second issue relates to what is going on down in CUH. Jennifer Kearney is a formidable lady and when she and her clinicians try all the internal channels to speak and their message is not getting through, she needs to be listened to. The manner in which she is currently being treated is very dangerous and worrying.

I would be deeply concerned that someone in her position cannot speak out about the issues she is facing on behalf of the patients in her hospital.

The Minister made a big announcement just over a year ago, which I welcomed, about a new hospital coming to the mid-west. John Wall, who is the patient representative on the board that was set up, has spoken about the terms of reference - which I had to get the Minister to publish, because they were not published - and, basically, they do not use the word "hospital". The Minister committed to a hospital, so it needs to be delivered. In the meantime, this board also needs to deal with the real issues. I went to a meeting last month with other Oireachtas Members. It was the scariest meeting I have had in 20 years working with the HSE. It talked about governance and clinical issues coming in the next number of months, as it faces into 400 accident and emergency admissions each day in December and January. It is getting its retaliation in first and I do not blame it. What is the Minister going to do for the people of the mid-west, who have been discriminated against for decades ever since the Hanly and Teamwork reports? What is the Minister going to do in the short and medium term to make sure those clinical and governance risks do not materialise?

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The CEO of the HSE is down in the committee rooms right now. She is criticising CUH for doing its business through the media. The CEO of CUH has done her job. The nine clinical directors have done their jobs. They have clearly stated that their hospital is unsafe. If they cannot get that message through internally, what other way do they possibly have to raise the unsafe conditions that patients in Cork University Hospital face if they go in those doors?

The Government is failing these patients. They are waiting for care and waiting on trolleys. Jennifer Kearney has raised those alarm bells and because the Government does not like it, it

has criticised her consistently, including in the media. The Minister, the Taoiseach and now Anne O'Connor point to significant increases for CUH this year. Where did CUH start? In 2024, CUH's own strategy stated that it had the largest inpatient bed and critical care capacity deficit in the country. CUH inherited a shortfall. We can say all we want that CUH has had significant increases in 2025 and 2026 ,but it inherited a shortfall. It is only working with what it has. While we can welcome progress in 2025 and 2026, the Government should please acknowledge that it inherited a shortfall.

I will make this point clear. The Taoiseach must come in here and correct the Dáil record. Dr. Andy Phillips had no instruction from either the Minister's Department or the Department of the Taoiseach and the Taoiseach then cast doubt on those minutes. The recording backed up the minutes and, instead of actually addressing the issue at the weekend, the Taoiseach and Anne O'Connor said that meetings should not be recorded. However, because there are not enough administrative staff in CUH to actually take minutes of meetings, all meetings are recorded in CUH. That is how it does business. The HSE CEO knows this but deflected from it, saved Andy Phillips' back - or tried to, at least - and instead of addressing the core fundamental issue that Jennifer Kearney and her nine clinical directors raised about an unsafe hospital, instead Ms O'Connor said that the recording should not have happened. The Taoiseach said the recording should not have happened. That is not acceptable.

Ultimately, the crux of this issue is making sure that our hospitals are safe environments for the patients going through those doors. If Jennifer Kearney has to do that through the media because neither the HSE nor the Government will listen to her, that is ultimately the fault of Government and the HSE.

Deputy George Lawlor: I stand in support of this motion because, along with the dire national picture, the situation facing my own Wexford General Hospital is the direct result of Government underfunding, failed workforce planning and chronic HSE financial mismanagement.

Every year, the Government produces health estimates that do not reflect the real cost of running our health service. Every year, we are told the figures balance but, every year, they do not. The consequences are being felt by patients and healthcare workers in hospitals across the country, just like Wexford General Hospital. For years, the HSE failed to recruit and retain enough permanent staff. Instead of fixing the problem, it became dependent on agency workers. Millions upon millions of euro have been spent on agency staffing in Wexford and other areas but much of that money never reaches front-line healthcare workers because it is swallowed up by agency fees, commissions and administration costs.

The HSE created this dependency and now, having created it, is trying to remove it overnight. Hospitals are being told to reduce agency spending while recruitment restrictions remain in place. That is not workforce planning; that is chaos by design. The inevitable result is understaffed wards, exhausted healthcare workers and a growing risk to patient safety.

The reality of this failure can be clearly seen in Wexford. I recently highlighted the case of a child who spent 30 days in Wexford General Hospital because appropriate psychiatric services were unavailable - 30 days in an acute hospital bed because the State could not provide the specialist mental healthcare the child needed - yet the money was available for round-the-

clock agency support. That is a perfect example of a system spending money on crises instead of solutions.

Meanwhile, patients in County Wexford are waiting up to 20 months for an ultrasound. What is the value of an early diagnosis if patients cannot access the diagnostic tests required to identify illness? At the same time, oncology nurses in Wexford General Hospital continue to carry enormous workloads under relentless pressure, while doing extraordinary work for patients and families. They deserve support, not excuses. They deserve the resources required, not a Minister coming in here reciting trolley numbers week in, week out, claiming success while all around these trolleys, the system is crumbling.

The truth is simple. The Government is asking hospitals to make savings from budgets that were never adequate in the first place. It is trying to cut agency costs after creating a dependence on agency staff and it is expecting patients and front-line workers to carry the burden. Enough is enough; Wexford General Hospital needs proper funding like every other hospital, with proper staffing and planning. The people of Wexford and beyond deserve a health service built on reality, not political spin.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister for being here this morning. The reason we are here is because even though the health budget is a record one, when you look at the cost over-runs that are there, it is simply not realistic. I always try to be fair and balanced in what I say. Maybe it is the Minister for public expenditure we should be raising these issues with because he is the one who essentially sets the Minister's budget envelope.

We have a situation, as was alluded to earlier, where we could have 400 people presenting at the UHL emergency department this winter. When Aoife Johnston tragically died, there were 190 people there that Saturday. We have had improvements in how the emergency department is run but with the way things stand, with the current level of vacancies that are there in University Hospital Limerick, how are they going to cope with 400 people? I am not saying that to score a political point; I am saying it as a genuine question because there are 226 vacant posts at the moment between UHL, St. John's Hospital and maternity services. The centralisation of the budgeting means that approval is going up to the CEO of the HSE for critical posts. The CEO of the HSE is approving them, which effectively gets her out of jail. They then have to go and get them from their own resources, however, which they do not have, and the posts remain unfilled. That is being done knowing well that the money is not there.

We have such a crisis, as we do every winter, in the mid-west that we need to see those critical posts, particularly critical nursing posts. We cannot open the surgical hub at the Scoil Carmel site unless it is properly staffed. We have, unfortunately, seen the impact of that in Cork.

What I am concerned about as well is the potential chill effect set out by the CEO of the HSE in recent days - that when clinicians have reasonable concerns, they cannot voice them. As one clinician said to me, it is their job to advocate for their patients.

In HSE Mid West, we need to see a planning application go in for that new hospital, whatever the first stage of that hospital is, and then a five-year plan in respect of the rest.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I move amendment No.1:

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

"acknowledges:

— the substantial and sustained increase in overall Health funding, which is rising by approximately €13.7 billion, or 88 per cent, between 2019 and 2027;

— the contribution of nurses, doctors, health and social care professionals and the wider Health service workforce in delivering care, often in challenging conditions, and the significant expansion of the workforce, including net growth of more than 30,000 staff between 2019 and 2025, and an increase of more than 4,000 staff in the first nine months of 2026, with approximately 400 staff added in September alone;

— that HSE spending was growing by nearly 9 per cent at end-September, against funded growth of approximately 5 per cent above 2025 actual spending. Separately, by end-October, cash drawn down was €781 million above budget;

— that the 2026 financial position reflects a combination of significant and genuine demand and cost pressures as well as savings not delivered. Pressures include medicines, pensions, State Claims, higher prices and demand as well as lower private-patient income. Pay expenditure also exceeds budget, with over-reliance on agency and overtime;

— that a Supplementary Estimate will be provided for 2026 based on the assessed year-end cash requirement; with genuine demand and cost pressures, expenditure above approved budgets and savings not delivered assessed separately to inform future funding requirements;

notes that:

— the controls are financial controls and do not transfer operational responsibility from the HSE, which remains responsible for workforce planning, prioritising posts, recruitment, deployment, service delivery, clinical decisions and patient safety;

— the enhanced controls for the Health Vote were introduced in accordance with the revised letter of delegated sanction issued by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation on 14 September. This sanction is in accordance with the statutory framework established under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Acts 2011 and 2013, the Public Financial Procedures, DPER Circular 21/2026 Expenditure Control and Escalation Process;

— there is no blanket recruitment freeze and essential and patient-safety posts can continue to proceed where the HSE has prioritised them, secured the required internal approvals and demonstrated how they will be accommodated within the pay budget;

— additional funding and staffing must be matched by improved productivity, improved rostering over weekends and evenings, better use of theatres, outpatient clinics and diagnostics, reduced reliance on agency and overtime, stronger procurement and full use of IFMS, alongside a stronger focus on prevention and a shift towards community-based care to meet need earlier and reduce avoidable hospital demand;

supports:

— continued investment in Health services within a sustainable budgetary framework;

— targeted recruitment and workforce deployment based on patient need and service priority;

— the delivery of savings, efficiencies and reforms that enable more care to be provided from existing resources; and

— strong financial governance and accountability to ensure that public funding delivers improved services and outcomes for patients.

and that Dáil Éireann further notes:

Health funding and the 2026 financial position

— There has been substantial and sustained growth in Health funding. Between 2019 and 2027, the overall Health allocation will have increased by approximately €13.7 billion, or 88 per cent, to €29.1 billion. This includes an increase of €1.76 billion, or 6.4 per cent, in Budget 2027, comprising an additional €1.6 billion in current funding, an increase of 6.2 per cent, and €160 million in capital funding, an increase of 10.3 per cent.

— The Department has strengthened health expenditure forecasting through dedicated Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service resources. It combines component-based modelling of demographic pressures, using ESRI age/cost curves developed through the Joint Research Programme on healthcare reform, with regression analysis of health expenditure and wider economic growth. This work includes the 2021 paper on demographics and existing service requirements, the joint 2023 OECD report on the Future Fiscal Sustainability of Health Spending in Ireland, and the 2025 Health Service Capacity Review with the ESRI, now embedded in budgetary, workforce and capital planning. The Department also contributes to the EU Ageing Report and PBO work on Health spending. A paper on multiannual budgeting, providing baseline expenditure estimates under a no-policy-change scenario, is being finalised for publication.

— Forecasts remain subject to uncertainty. Budget 2026 used the Department of Finance's April 2025 inflation forecast of 2.1 per cent, before geopolitical instability in the Middle East; inflation is now running at 4.3 per cent. CSO and ESRI population projections based on Census 2022 have consistently underestimated actual population growth. For 2026, this increases the estimated demographic expenditure requirement from 2.1 per cent to 2.4 per cent.

— The Health service is responding to substantial demand and cost pressures, with Emergency Department attendances, particularly among older people, growing well ahead of projected demographic change. Further capacity and staffing are needed. Sustained investment is supporting additional services and changes in how care is delivered, including surgical hubs, safe staffing and expanded community care.

— At the same time investment has outpaced measured hospital activity: between 2019 and end-2025, real acute-hospital expenditure increased by 52 per cent and staffing by 33 per cent, compared with approximately 14 per cent growth in measured activity over broadly the same period.

— The financial position reflects a combination of factors, including recurring funding pressures, commitments beyond approved resources and savings not delivered. The assessment of the Supplementary Estimate and future funding requirements must distinguish these factors. An overspend does not, on its own, establish the extent of structural underfunding. The objective is to meet genuine need while ensuring that investment delivers more timely, safe care and better value for patients.

— The Government recognises that healthcare faces genuine demand, demographic and cost pressures. The Department's forecasts explicitly assess pay, workforce growth, medicines, inflation, demand-led services, pensions and income. However, a forecast of the likely cost of services and the final allocation are not the same. Government must determine allocations within the overall resources available, and budgets appropriately require the HSE to deliver savings, efficiencies and changes in service delivery.

— A Supplementary Estimate will be provided to meet the assessed 2026 cash requirement. This addresses the year-end cash position; decisions on recurring funding require a separate assessment of the underlying costs and scope for savings and reform. Budget 2027 provides for identified recurring pressures, including medicines, non-pay demand, inflation and lower private patient income. Pay expenditure above budget, savings not delivered and volatile expenditure must also be assessed to determine the appropriate ongoing provision, alongside the HSE's responsibility to manage expenditure within approved resources.

— Maternity leave cover forms part of workforce planning and is reflected in approaches such as the Safe Staffing Framework. The assessment of funding requirements should take account of existing provision and identify any additional staffing and funding required to maintain safe services.

Legal basis and nature of the controls

— The Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2011 sets out the functions of the Minister for Public Expenditure, including expenditure oversight and policy and responsibility for central accountability, governance and value-for-money frameworks. Under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2013, Government determines the overall expenditure limit and the amount apportioned to each Minister. Dáil Éireann votes the Estimates and the Appropriation Act gives them statutory effect. The Secretary General of the Department of Health is the Accounting Officer for the Health Vote and is accountable for the management of that voted expenditure.

— Under the Public Financial Procedures, formal sanction from the Minister for Public Expenditure is an essential part of the management and control of voted expenditure. Neither the voting of money by Dáil Éireann nor inclusion of an allocation in an Estimate, of itself, constitutes expenditure sanction. The delegated sanction for the Health Vote issued on 28 May 2026 and reflected DPER Circular 21/2026 Expenditure Control and Escalation Process, which provides that breaches of delegated sanction and persistent overruns may lead to an escalation process and additional oversight. A revised delegated sanction was issued to the Secretary General on 14 September 2026.

— The measures introduced following the revised delegated sanction are financial controls. They do not transfer the management of Health services to the Department. The

HSE remains operationally responsible for workforce planning, recruitment processes, deployment, service delivery, procurement, clinical decisions and patient safety. In the four Regions with the greatest pay pressures, recruitment proposals are submitted to the Department only after the HSE has prioritised the posts and secured the required internal approvals, including approval by the HSE CEO. The Department's role is to confirm that the full cost has been identified and is supported by a credible financial offset before financial sanction is granted.

Recruitment and workforce growth

— There is no blanket recruitment freeze. Health service staffing continues to grow substantially. The workforce increased by more than 30,000 between 2019 and end-2025. At end-September 2026, the Health funded workforce stood at 133,084 WTE, an increase of 4,004 WTE since December 2025 and 6,000 WTE over the preceding twelve months. This includes net workforce growth of approximately 400 WTE in September 2026. This was already ahead of the funded net recruitment target of 3,300 WTE for 2026. The increase included 992 nurses and midwives, 731 health and social care professionals and 138 consultants. These are net workforce increases after departures and therefore understates the substantial volume of gross recruitment taking place.

— Graduate recruitment is continuing. The most recent HSE information shows that offers have been made to many graduate nurses and midwives who completed the relevant recruitment process, with more than 1,000 offers accepted. The Department and HSE continue to work on improving the process so that graduates can move into suitable permanent posts as quickly as possible, taking account of registration, service need and available Pay resources.

— Investment is also expanding future workforce supply, supporting more than 1,100 additional healthcare training places by 2028. Workforce growth and expanded training capacity provide a stronger basis for meeting rising need. Strategic workforce planning, appropriate skill mix and effective deployment are needed to support new services and make best use of permanent staff, agency and overtime expenditure.

— For 2027, the HSE will be required to develop more strategic pay and workforce plans that explicitly provide for planned capacity openings, new services, graduate recruitment. Plans will identify when and where staff are needed, the appropriate skill mix and how costs will be met within the pay allocation, both in-year and on a full-year basis. This will include opportunities to replace agency and overtime expenditure with affordable permanent recruitment where service requirements and skill mix permit.

— The enhanced process applies only in Regions materially above their approved pay budgets. It requires prioritisation, not cessation. Essential and patient-safety posts can proceed where the HSE demonstrates the service need, priority, full-year cost and funding plan. Graduate recruitment and agency conversion are continuing. The controls are intended to ensure that finite pay resources are directed to the posts that make the greatest difference to patients and do not create further unfunded and unsustainable commitments.

Safe staffing and safe care

— Investment in the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix supports an evidence-based approach to identifying nursing requirements, taking account of patient dependency, complexity and care needs. This informs workforce planning and prioritisation, alongside the HSE's responsibility to deploy staff effectively and manage its overall pay allocation.

— The reported rollout covers all 26 adult Emergency Departments and 39 acute hospitals, with 96 per cent of identified baseline staffing requirements delivered nationally. Baseline delivery is not the same as assurance that staffing needs are met in every service at all times: staffing requirements must continue to reflect patient dependency, complexity and care intensity. Reported benefits where the Framework has been implemented include reduced length of stay, reduced staff intention to leave and lower agency usage. The priority is to sustain implementation and use the evidence on care needs to inform staffing and deployment decisions, rather than relying solely on aggregate workforce numbers.

Productivity, savings and reform

— Meeting rising need requires continued investment in capacity alongside reform and better use of existing resources. Emergency Department demand is growing rapidly, while growth in other measured hospital activity has been more modest. Persistent congestion and waiting times underline the importance of improving how staffing, facilities and funding are converted into timely care. This means organising services differently as well as expanding them, with a focus on the value and patient benefit secured from every euro.

— Between 2019 and end-2025, real acute-hospital expenditure rose by 52 per cent and staffing by 33 per cent, compared with approximately 14 per cent growth in measured activity over broadly the same period. These measures do not capture every aspect of care or changes in patient complexity, and emergency pressures can disrupt planned treatment. Nevertheless, the difference warrants examination to identify how investment can support more treatment, shorter waits and better outcomes.

— Reform also means providing care in a more appropriate setting. Community services, chronic disease management and digitally enabled care can help prevent avoidable hospital attendance and admission and support earlier discharge where clinically appropriate. The objective is not simply to increase activity within hospitals, but to make better use of hospital capacity while providing more care closer to home.

— There is clear evidence of scope to improve utilisation. A review of operating theatres found that only 67 per cent of staffed and available theatre time was used. Improvement programmes in theatres and outpatient services have demonstrated that additional activity and higher throughput can be achieved without additional resources or capital investment. Better rostering and extended day and weekend working can increase the use of theatres, outpatient clinics and diagnostic equipment and shorten waiting times.

— There is also substantial scope on non-pay expenditure. The HSE is the State's largest purchaser of goods and services and must use national contracts, product standardisation, price comparison and stronger procurement compliance to secure measurable savings. IFMS is now live across HSE statutory services, covering approximately 80 per cent of

Health expenditure. It provides earlier visibility of financial pressures and, when used fully, will support price comparison, purchasing controls, standardisation and stronger accountability at Region, care-group and site level.

— Pay and workforce reforms must reduce reliance on premium staffing. Agency expenditure reached €817 million in 2025. Agency expenditure fell year-on-year in 2026, with further reductions needed to bring spending within budget. Direct recruitment and conversion of agency workers, where there is an ongoing service requirement and an affordable permanent post, can improve continuity and reduce costs. The 2027 allocation therefore includes specific savings requirements for agency, overtime and allowances, supported by redeployment, better rostering and stronger workforce practices.

— The objective is to support safe services and meet growing need within a sustainable financial framework. Further investment, stronger workforce planning, effective procurement and service reform are complementary parts of that response. Together, they should enable additional capacity and existing resources to deliver more timely care and better outcomes for patients.

Multiannual capital investment and additional capacity

— The €9.25 billion National Development Plan provision for health for 2026–2030 supports a substantial programme of additional and modernised infrastructure to meet existing capacity needs and future demand. This multiannual investment provides a basis for expanding services alongside changes in how care is delivered. Capital provision and current funding serve different purposes: delivery of new facilities must be aligned with workforce plans and recurring operating costs so that completed projects can open and provide the intended additional care.

Winter vaccination and prevention

— Vaccination is one of the most effective public-health interventions available, protecting people from serious illness while reducing avoidable hospital admissions and pressure on finite Health service capacity.

— The influenza and COVID-19 vaccination programmes are underway, with vaccines available free of charge to eligible groups through participating GPs and pharmacies.

— The RSV infant immunisation programme is also being delivered through maternity hospitals, helping to protect babies from serious illness and reduce the risk of hospitalisation during the winter period.

Surgical hubs and elective hospitals

— The surgical hub programme combines additional capacity with a different model of service delivery. Four hubs are operational at Tallaght, Mount Carmel, Swords and Cork, with further hubs being developed and elective hospitals being progressed in Cork, Galway and Dublin. Separating planned treatment from emergency care helps protect patients from cancellations and releases acute hospital capacity for more complex care. Aligned staffing, scheduling and activity plans will be important to bring this investment into full use and shorten waiting times.

— Mount Carmel illustrates the improvements that additional investment and service redesign can deliver together. From opening in February 2025 to end-August 2026, it delivered 8,006 procedures, while average waiting times in participating specialties fell from 8.5 months to four months. The Reeves Day Surgery Centre at Tallaght has treated more than 20,000 patients since opening and has supported a significant reduction in the hospital's day-case waiting list. Further progress will depend on developing capacity and applying the lessons from dedicated elective provision across the wider service.

Urgent and emergency care and winter preparedness

— Pressure on urgent and emergency care is substantial. By end-August 2026, Emergency Department attendances had increased by 7.2 per cent, including an increase of 9.8 per cent among people aged over 75, well ahead of projected population growth and ageing. Long waits and overcrowding affect patients, staff and the safety of care. The concentration of 80 per cent of the daily average 8am trolley count in 13 of 29 sites reinforces the need for targeted responses to local capacity and patient-flow pressures, alongside national investment. Further staffed capacity must be supported by timely diagnostics, community services and safe discharge arrangements across the whole patient pathway.

— The winter response includes GP respiratory support, site-specific Emergency Department plans and action to address barriers to safe patient flow. Delivery requires clear responsibility at national, regional and hospital levels, timely diagnostics and discharge supports, and access to appropriate community services. Financial provision and safe staffing are essential but must be accompanied by these operational improvements; additional expenditure alone will not resolve all causes of overcrowding.

— Performance is not uniform across the hospital system. A relatively small number of sites account for a substantial proportion of national trolley pressures, while other hospitals have sustained improved patient flow despite increased demand. This demonstrates that additional capacity must be accompanied by strong operational management, timely clinical decision-making, effective discharge planning and consistent seven-day working.

Moving care closer to the community

— Investment in the Enhanced Community Care Programme, structured chronic disease management in general practice and the expansion of community pharmacy services is strengthening alternatives to hospital-based care. These developments support earlier intervention and a home-first approach where clinically appropriate. Continued expansion and integration of community and hospital services are needed to prevent avoidable attendance and admission and support safe discharge, rather than treating Emergency Departments as the default route to care.

— Virtual wards are operating in every HSE Health Region and have provided care to more than 5,300 patients. They offer suitable patients an alternative to hospital-based treatment and can support earlier discharge. Continued development of these services, with evaluation of their impact on access, outcomes, hospital demand and costs, will help meet growing need and make effective use of acute capacity.".

I thank the Deputies for tabling this motion. I apologise in advance that I will move through things quickly, but it is in a genuine effort to respond to as many issues as I can that have been raised. Let me try to do it efficiently.

In respect of the legal basis, as Deputies Kelly and Sherlock mentioned, the Health Act 2004, as amended, sets the financial framework within which the HSE operates. The Minister determines the HSE's maximum expenditure and approves the service plan. The HSE is then required to manage services within that approved framework. That does not exist in isolation, however; it exists within the wider public expenditure framework. Dáil Éireann votes on the health Estimate. The Secretary General is the Accounting Officer for Vote 38. Expenditure from the Vote remains subject to formal sanction and the conditions attached to that sanction. Following persistent overruns, additional conditions were introduced through the revised delegated sanction arrangements for Vote 38. Generally, that is under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2013, which provides a statutory basis for expenditure limits and ministerial allocations, and then there are the Dáil-approved Estimates that are given legal effect through the Appropriation Act. The controls were introduced under the delegated sanctions arrangements for Vote 38 following escalation under the Department of public expenditure Circular 21/2026. That is the legal basis for it. I appreciate that Deputy Kelly is waving the Health Act at me, but it exists within a wider-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Why is the-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): The Minister has the floor.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: -----legal and public expenditure framework. The HSE continues to identify and prioritise the posts it needs in a strategic way. It remains responsible for workforce planning, recruitment and all of the operational elements. In the four regions with the greatest pay pressures, namely, those that have exceeded the 2% we consider reasonable - HSE Mid West, which has managed extremely well under difficult circumstances, is not of those regions - the posts come to the Department only after it has been prioritised by the HSE and recommended by the chief executive of the HSE. I am sorry but I am deviating widely from the script provided. The Department checks the full-year cost that has been identified and the credible means of maintaining it within the available pay budget.

There is quite a lot of recruitment. I appreciate that Deputies will not have a running commentary on it, but let me provide the best update I can at this time. Clearly, there has been a priority on graduate nurses and agency conversions. They are things we really want in our health system. Every Deputy present in the Chamber has said that we want agency conversion. When we operationalise that, however, we have also got to want it. For example, we have approved graduate nurses across HSE Dublin and Midlands, HSE Dublin and South East, HSE West and North West and HSE South West. The only application for posts that has reached the Department from HSE South West has been for graduate nurses, of which 176 have been approved.

There have been approvals in Naas. The Deputy is correct to identify HSE Dublin and Midlands. It has the highest overrun precisely because of the dependency on agency staff. There is a conversation ongoing around a significant agency conversion in that region. Surgical

hub posts for the Waterford surgical hub in HSE Dublin and South East, as well as posts in Limerick, will be in the early part of next year, as Sandra Broderick and I, as well as the Deputy, discussed. I know Deputy Kelly could not attend that day, but there was a significant follow-up meeting with Deputies arising from concerns in the mid-west. We answered many of the questions at that time.

To quickly address HSE Mid West, we did not include any particular word so as not to delimit anything, but it is clear that we have bought a site. As Deputy Sheehan said, we need to get planning permission in for something in order to exercise the purchase of that site. Deputy Kelly is right; it is not the board's work to resolve today's issues but it is its job to solve the region's issues. Nevertheless, we continue to work with the region in conjunction with Sandra Broderick and her team because there are significant pressures on UHL that are not category 1 or category 2 presentations. It has the safe staffing framework in place. It is really working well, with very different changed processes. However, there are too many people who do not require that level of acute care presenting. We have to find different ways to support them in other areas to reduce the numbers in the emergency department, as was discussed in great detail last week.

I will turn to the deficit more broadly. To be clear, at the end of September, around 17% of the deficit related to what are clearly controllable pay issues. Those are things we can, and must, control. Deputy Sherlock referred to the deficit last year. We started 2025 with an opening deficit at the centre, which was a non-pay deficit. The ultimate Supplementary Estimate, which was €300 million, covered that original opening position. The cover of €40 million related to a once-off programme for section 38 workers and their historic deficit, while €10 million was for a section 39 pay agreement with the Department of public expenditure. There was no deficit. Last year, we came in on pay, which is the controllable piece of it. We recognise that the cost of medicines will grow over time. There is a difficulty with that but pay is where we can demonstrate responsibility for how we deliver our pay budgets, and that is not something that has happened this year in contrast to last year.

With regard to this year's deficit, approximately 17% relates to those pay issues. A further 18% relates to mixed, non-pay pressures, including genuine demand, price pressures and expenditure that is potentially controllable and, therefore, should be controllable. The remaining 65% comprises 12% in drugs and medicines; 11% in State claims; 8% in pensions; 7% in net income pressures; and 28% at the HSE centre. I offer that by way of explanation across the two different years.

More broadly, the investment in the health system has been substantial. Between 2019 and 2027, the overall health allocation has increased by 88%, from €13.7 billion to €29.1 billion. I have to ask the question: how high do we want it to get without exercising some control-----

Deputy George Lawlor: It is based on need.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: -----in relation to that? I do not criticise Wexford General Hospital. It has done a fantastic job this year, particularly in its management of its urgent-----

Deputy George Lawlor: Its staff are about to ballot.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: -----and emergency care. The manager there, Linda O'Leary, is excellent.

Deputy George Lawlor: She is.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The budget has increased by 88%. It is not credible to say that there has not been a significant increase. There has been an increase in every region and hospital.

Deputy Kenny raised the issue of CUH. The funding for CUH has doubled in that period. Its staffing is up 41% in that period. It was the second-best staffed hospital at the beginning of this year out of all of the hospitals in the country. It is an important hospital and it does extremely good work in the face of many pressures. Deputy Kenny sits in this Chamber representing Cork, and he is a great advocate for it, but CUH is no more important than University Hospital Waterford, the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital or University Hospital Galway. They are all important and different. There is no question that, coming into 2026, CUH had the second-highest staffing allocation, only behind St. James's Hospital, which is a physically larger hospital with more beds. At the end of the year, it has recruited the highest number out of any hospital in the country. That is not okay because it is exceeding its pay budget as a result. What about the other hospitals? While we all want as much as possible for our areas, as Minister for Health, I have an obligation to point out the differences between them.

For example, Tallaght University Hospital – I just looked at my notes and picked it - has only recruited a net additional 42 people this year. It is a significant hospital. CUH has recruited 323 people. St. James's Hospital, the biggest hospital in the country, has only recruited 94 people. These things matter and I am trying to say it in a way that is not confrontational in any way, but I have to point out the disparate positions between the hospitals and the reality of controlling pay budgets. To me, it does not seem right or fair that one region might take from another. How we manage that over time matters. That region has recruited so many.

We continue to talk about acute hospitals all of the time when all of us should also be talking about the balance with community care. I want to see recruitment in the community, but there will always be that tension around the need to provide more to our acute hospitals. What acute hospitals actually need, however, is for as many services as possible to be moved to the community so that we do not have all of the people presenting to the hospital, such as in the case of UHL. We must invest in the community to keep people out of the hospitals and reduce the pressure on them.

I will go back to the budget because that is the subject of the motion. The motion claims that there is systemic underfunding. I cannot accept that. We have submitted a counter-motion precisely because of the 88% growth in the budget. An additional 30,000 staff have joined the health service between 2019 and 2025. In the first nine months of this year, the workforce grew by 4,000 whole-time equivalents, approximately 400 of whom were added in September alone.

I have asked the HSE to prioritise those positions that relate to patient safety or patient flow concerns, such as how we get people out of hospitals, how we keep them out of hospitals and how we shorten their time in emergency departments. I have not received them yet, but we will approve those positions that we can approve within the budget, recognising that the only reason we are in this situation is because we have recruited 4,000 people when there was a provision for 3,300. We recruited 4,000 people this year without sufficiently reducing agency spend. That is something where there is progress this year in a way that there was not progress in any other year. Our target was €720 million on agency.

That will probably be €760 million but we are 3% below last year and the conversion of the posts is really significant. People do not want to work in agency. I think they prefer the opportunity of a permanent sustainable post and we see the opportunity to do that. Our agency spend is 24% below what it was at its March peak, but crucially, agency conversion is giving real people an opportunity for a sustainable, permanent position in the health system and that is of huge value to everyone.

Deputy Mark Wall: I really appreciate that the Minister is with us today to listen to what is going on in the health service as we see it. I thank Deputy Sherlock for bringing forward this motion.

I want to concentrate on Naas General Hospital, which I have raised with the Minister previously in this House and privately. There were 379 people on trolleys in Naas General Hospital last month. That is an increase of 179% compared with October of last year, when there were 136 people on trolleys. These figures are extremely concerning, which nobody in this House or in my county of Kildare wants to see. Recently I attended a briefing by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation on what it sees as the crisis in Naas. Admissions in the emergency department are already more than 10% above this time last year. The hospital has seen an increase of almost 30% in people over 75 attending the emergency department, while ambulance admissions are up by 13% on this time last year. We are now seeing over 100 people in the ED at Naas at any one time.

Since raising this with the Minister, I have spoken to the INMO in recent weeks. I am aware that as a result of the WRC hearing on Friday last, 28 nursing posts will be sanctioned to Naas General Hospital. That is welcome, but the question remains as to why it took the INMO going to the WRC to get 28 additional posts. I am also told that at that WRC hearing there was a commitment to implementing the framework for safe staffing on medical surgical wards and in the emergency department. These things should be happening anyway in Naas General Hospital but they are not, and that is why the hospital and the INMO organised the meeting with our staff last week. When will we see these 28 nursing posts? How quickly will they be allocated to Naas General Hospital, because they are so badly needed?

Only recently I hosted the Psychiatric Nurses Association, which told us that student nurses are still waiting on panels for contracts while the HSE pays agency staff double. Its representatives said, as the Minister has said here this morning, that no nurse wants to be on an agency contract. They want a contract from the Department of Health. The PNA was at pains to say that. However, it is reporting over 700 vacancies in the area it serves. I am again raising this with the Minister because I am aware of two parents from my area of Kildare South who, in the last 24 hours, have brought their children with suicidal tendencies to the emergency

department of their local hospital and been told no help was available. Is that a result of the vacancies that the Psychiatric Nurses Association has told us are happening under its watch and under the Minister's watch? These are the questions that I get in my clinics and from people who contact me. There was no help for two children with suicidal tendencies in the last 24 hours. That is what is happening day in, day out. I ask the Minister to address that issue and the other important issues I have raised with her today.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I commend Deputy Sherlock on bringing this motion forward and formally second it. It is very important. We appreciate the Minister staying for the debate but we take serious issue with two assertions she makes in both the countermotion and her speech. First, she refers to an overspend in the health service and, second, she says a number of times in the countermotion that there is no blanket recruitment freeze. For the Labour Party and for anyone experiencing the health service currently, those two assertions simply ring hollow. There is, in fact, systematic underfunding. That is the reality, not the overspend but the under-resourcing we are seeing as the HSE heads towards a deficit of €1 billion.

There is clearly a recruitment freeze in all but name. There are 1 million people are on waiting lists, nearly 500 on trolleys and 2,900 vacant nursing and midwifery posts. Patients are being severely impacted. I speak to senior managers in the health service who tell me of their frustration that they cannot recruit the staff they need. This has impacts. In Dublin Bay South, in St. Vincent's hospital, we see impacts. One constituent has been waiting for reconstructive surgery following a road traffic accident in 2021. Their condition is now chronic as a result of the lengthy delay. People who have been summoned to St. Vincent's for DEXA scans have arranged to take time off work to attend appointments only to be told no staff are available to operate the machine when they get there. One of the hospital's two scanners has been consistently out of operation since 2022 due to staffing constraints. These are the realities. These are the consequences of a health service without the staff and capacity to meet patients' needs.

The Minister promised that 2026 would bring rigorous oversight of health budgeting, transparent reporting and population-based funding. She promised savings of €181 million and no supplementary budgets but these have turned out to be fictional assertions. Instead, there is a lack of honesty in health budgeting and the resourcing of our health service. The Minister's countermotion says there is no blanket recruitment freeze. These are hollow words for managers grappling with recruitment decisions for staff and the consequences of understaffing and with the patients experiencing the glaring gaps in service that I have described.

Another constituent I am supporting was admitted with a fractured spine, suffering acute pain. Two weeks later, he still had not been seen by a consultant. He had not received a care plan or even a diagnosis. He was left to suffer in pain. This is the reality of the gaps in staffing that the Minister's Department is presiding over. No denials that there is a blanket recruitment freeze and no assertions that hospitals are overspending can counter the reality of patient and staff experience. We cannot keep patients waiting until treatable conditions become chronic. We cannot keep asking staff to deliver safe care without resources, and when healthcare workers raise the alarm, the Minister must stop pillorying them or gaslighting them. We want Deputies to support the motion. The health service is underfunded and understaffed and we are undermining safe patient care while the systemic and systematic under-resourcing continues.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister for staying for the debate. It is much appreciated. Looking at the eye-watering amount of money being spent on our health service, a budget that other Departments could only dream of, you would imagine we would have a world-class health system. We are paying for a first-class health budget, but delivering a second-class health service. Billions of euro are going in - hard-earned taxpayers' money - with many people who are paying into that system believing that if they or their families get sick, they will be looked after. Unfortunately, that is just not the case for far too many people. Nurses and senior management tell us they are working at dangerous levels, fearful about the services they are trying to deliver.

I will give some examples from my own constituency of Dublin Fingal West and go from the micro to the macro. Every one of these cases has come to me or come back to me in the last two weeks. A constituent had an MRI in April. She is still waiting for the results. I have made two representations on her behalf but there is still nothing. An older person with a medical card was charged €70 as an administration fee. I must have made five or six representations about this and we have got nothing. The HSE is turning a blind eye. A woman of 24 years has spent seven years being prescribed a cocktail of contraceptives, antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication. Her mother was left on suicide watch before her daughter was finally diagnosed with premenstrual dysphoric disorder, PMDD. She has spent seven years suffering. That is a complete failure of the system. A women aged 51 is still waiting for her breast check. I believe it is two years behind. That is a scandal in itself. People in the Balbriggan community in the north end of Dublin Fingal West are waiting on proper funding for a primary care centre that was supposed to be brought in by one of the Minister's predecessors. It would serve as a release valve for minor injuries in particular and take pressure away from Beaumont Hospital. Many more people who will be moving into the north county could go to Balbriggan rather than Beaumont or Drogheda.

Mental health has already been mentioned by one of my colleagues in the context of the psychiatric nurses who attended the audiovisual room briefing last week. What they told us should concern every Member of this House. They are struggling to keep services going while enormous sums of public money are wasted on agency staff, even as qualified nurses are sitting on recruitment panels. These same nurses are being hired through the agencies despite being on the panels. It is an absolute waste of taxpayers' money.

Last week, a family whose son has serious mental health difficulties came into my clinic.

They reached out on behalf of their son and were told they would have to get the Garda to arrest him. Another person, a woman, took her own life because the mental health services operate only from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday. Every single one of these people has been failed.

The Minister can quote the statistics back at us, but they do not tell the full story. This motion is about accountability. It is about proper recruitment, retention of staff, funding of front-line services, putting patients before bureaucracy and getting value for money on behalf of the taxpayer. We cannot continue pouring money into a system that is failing the very people it is supposed to protect.

Deputy David Cullinane: I thank the Labour Party, including Deputy Sherlock, for tabling this motion in the first instance and giving us an opportunity again to talk about recruitment in healthcare and capacity issues.

It was quite incredible that at the end of last month, for the first time in the history of the State, we reached 1 million people on some form of acute hospital waiting list. If that was not bad enough, there are other waiting lists. That is on the acute side and those lists are published by the National Treatment Purchase Fund. There are over 260,000 people on community waiting lists. We have people on mental health waiting lists and disability waiting lists. We also have people who cannot access a GP or register with a GP.

We had record numbers of patients on trolleys, according to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, in September and October. There are extreme pressures within hospitals and within the healthcare system. All the while, the Minister, the head of the HSE and others talk about employment controls. They talk about these controls as if they are just a matter of efficiency and are necessary and so on. I am a believer in efficiency in healthcare and I will get to that in one moment, but employment controls are an embargo by another name in this instance, when hospitals are coming forward with very clear requests in relation to priority posts that they say are necessary for patient safety. For me, patient safety is paramount. It is the most important issue for any of us to focus on and get right. When I see that we have had 220,000 hospital-initiated cancellations this year to date, including 35,000 at Cork University Hospital, CUH, I note that these are extraordinary figures.

The head of the HSE, Ms Anne O'Connor, made headlines over the last 48 hours when she said at the meeting of the Joint Committee on Health, which I attended a short time ago, that CUH is not unique in facing huge service pressures, but it is unique in that it appears to be conducting its management business via the media. I put it to her, and I now put it to the Minister, that those words have real meaning for people. People will read into them what they believe the intent is, no matter what the individual says. What I found extraordinary when I put it to the head of the HSE is that she has not picked up the phone and had any conversation with the CEO of CUH.

I was in RTÉ on Sunday, on "The Week in Politics", and as I was coming out I met Ms O'Connor. She was on the "This Week" programme. She was talking to the media. Therefore, the same person who was criticising the management of the hospital for conducting its business through the media was speaking to the media about the hospital's management without talking about the issues. That is obvious for anybody to see. It is wrong and it needs to stop. What is necessary now is for the HSE's senior management to sit down with the management of CUH to try to resolve these issues. I am sure the Minister will have a role to play in that as well.

I also want to raise a constituency issue that I spoke to the Minister privately about yesterday. The Minister has praised the management of University Hospital Waterford several times in this House, and rightly so, because there is a lot that it gets right. There are still pressures. The management would say that. Every hospital has its pressures. The staff and management have put in place a zero-tolerance approach to trolleys that is an example to every other hospital. It still means that patients are waiting, by the way, and I see them in chairs waiting a long time. While it does not mean that they are not waiting, the hospital is performing better. There is no doubt about that.

About five years ago, the hospital put in place an arrangement that makes sense to me. It has very expensive scanning equipment, including CT scanners. Rather than leaving that equipment unused out of hours, the hospital put in place an arrangement under which its staff, not staff employed through any company, would provide what they call extended out-of-hours scanning. I have been told by management in the hospital that the arrangement was discontinued on the instruction of the HSE. Worse than that, they told me that about 13,000 scans a year will now not be done.

I had cancer patients phoning me, worried about this. One of them had surgery five months ago and was told he would have his scan within three months. Five months on, he is still waiting. Bizarrely, when he contacted the hospital he was told to contact me, who would raise the issue. There is still no date for his appointment. I found that bizarre in the first instance. The main issue here is that this needs to be sorted. I know I have raised this with the Minister privately, but in circumstances where a hospital is performing well and is trying to get bang for its buck and make the most of the capacity it has, the arrangement needs to be reinstated as soon as possible.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Labour Party, particularly Deputy Sherlock, for this motion.

We are very fortunate in this country to have thousands of healthcare workers who are providing a dedicated service. Many people have chosen to live and work in my county, Kerry. They feel invested in and proud of the work they are doing, but they are not receiving the support from the Government and they are not receiving the support from the HSE. In particular, older persons' services in Kerry, such as home support, respite, community beds and residential care, are severely challenged. People are coming to all of our offices seeking beds for their loved ones. Between 55 and 60 beds are available but remain closed in the county due to staffing shortages. I refer to community hospitals across the county, to the north, south, east and west. That is having a direct effect on the services provided at University Hospital Kerry because patients cannot be discharged from the hospital to community nursing hospitals, step-down beds or long-term care beds, which are so necessary.

There are over 100 nursing, healthcare assistant and multitask attendant vacancies in the county in older persons' services. How is that allowed? There are another 35 vacancies for home support staff and 90 older people in the community waiting for services. Family members are stepping in, exhausted. Staff are stepping in and are exhausted because they are volunteering. They are doing extra work and sometimes the work of two or three other people. Unless this staffing freeze is lifted, the older people will not be able to remain at home. They will end up in the emergency department of University Hospital Kerry.

Quite unbelievably, the approval process for a single post requires ten complex administrative steps. Line managers have to complete 12 pages of forms to justify why a post is required as part of the Department of Health's approval process. How does that make sense? Surely that justification should not be needed.

While the authorities cite budget deficits and non-strategic planning, clearly the deficit is related to a budget that is not sufficient for a growing older population. While we are still waiting on support for physiotherapists and there is no minor injuries unit in Kerry, patients are going to remain sicker for longer, or may become even worse. That is the reality of what is happening.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister is very aware of the situation in Letterkenny University Hospital and of the fact that dozens of consultants and over 100 GPs united with health campaigners, with the backing of all the public representatives in Donegal, to say we needed a surgical hub for the county, needed to ensure our people were not enduring long waiting times, and needed to attract and retain the best surgeons possible. That was based on evidence and data. In fairness, the Minister essentially overturned the HSE decision and ensured the surgical hub would be granted. Here is the difficulty. This campaign was years in the making, involving parliamentary question after parliamentary question and years of indifference and blockage by the HSE in the west of Ireland in the face of wilful neglect and systematic underfunding of the hospital. Following the victory we had last year, there is deep frustration because time is moving on. There is also frustration that the recruitment freeze could not come at a worse time, because we need to catch up with the rest of the State. We need more nurses, doctors and beds, not just in Letterkenny University Hospital but also in the new community hospital in Letterkenny and our primary care services.

As the Minister knows, emergency department bottlenecks are not just about the acute hospital. They are also about beds in the community, beds in homes and primary care supports.

We need to recruit the necessary health professionals in Donegal to catch up with the rest of the country and to ensure that our people are not second-class citizens. I ask the Minister to have a regional approach that reflects the reality that places like Donegal fell behind.

I want to be fair. The decision the Minister made on the surgical hub was a breath of fresh air. I ask her to intervene again and ensure the HSE in the west of Ireland does not undo that victory and good work.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I strongly welcome and support this motion. St. Luke's General Hospital provides vital care and treatment for the south-east region. It is a top-class facility but it is being held back due to vacant staff posts. It has the potential to deliver so much more, yet the inability to fill staff posts is having a detrimental impact. More than 75% of emergency department admissions had to wait longer than the six-hour target. That target is already too high and it is being missed. Staff and management are ringing the warning bells. The winter period is here, and the hospital is understaffed. This will present serious and life-threatening conditions.

Recruitment conditions are not just impacting those seeking treatment. They are impacting families seeking medical records and those visiting and working in the hospital. I recently spoke to a woman who has a sick son. It is a worsening condition. His parents want to seek private treatment but the hospital has been unable to release the medical records. This is simply down to lack of staff. The administration delay due to lack of staff is putting their son at risk. This is simply unacceptable. The canteen staff in St. Luke's are on reduced hours and there is a risk of a shortfall there because of the hospital budget. This seems like a small matter but the hospital canteen is a vital resource for staff. It is wrong and unfair to expect staff in the hospital to not have these facilities in place. The message is clear. Fill the posts, support front-line workers, protect patients and properly fund the running of St Luke's hospital. There is an issue with the older people who are actually fit to go home from hospital but there are no home care staff. This is affecting bed space in the hospital.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In October hospital waiting lists exceeded 1 million people for the first time and just a few weeks later that has grown by another 10,000. The Minister needs to get control of this runaway train. Emergency departments are full to capacity and bursting at the seams, never mind the trolley numbers. We have more than 40% fewer dentists participating in the dental treatment scheme than we had a decade ago. The reasons for this are successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments that have underfunded our health service and not had a workforce plan. Various Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Ministers have put in place recruitment freezes. Hospital managers, nursing directors and other front-line staff are now sounding the alarm. The recruitment freeze is a risk to patient safety.

When I examine safety and staffing levels in hospitals in Monaghan and Cavan, wild wastage is not what jumps off the page at me. What stands out are the vacancies across our services, including vacancies in what we need in Monaghan - a medical assessment unit that could offer vital potential to Cavan and Monaghan, and to dental, orthopaedic, children's disability network team and mental health services. I could go on all day about vacancies in Cavan and Monaghan. When I have sought explanation as why these services are not adequately staffed, the HSE reports back to me is that it is unable to anticipate or account for people who retire or women who may become pregnant. The only deliverable that this Government has for workforce planning for the HSE is a workforce recruitment ban. The Minister needs to get on top of this. The Government needs to ensure that the safety and well-being of patients comes first. The Minister is being called out on this, not just by the Opposition but by hospital managers and front-line staff. Bin the recruitment ban and let us see a workforce plan.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Unfortunately, we are back in this same place again and we will have arguments about management. I accept that the Minister has often spoken about Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital and the improvement in systems operated there. I have no doubt that there is room for improvement in an awful lot of circumstances. We all understand if there are vacancies in vital positions, it must impact a hospital's ability to operate. Where do we start? We are talking about an entire health system. I remember going back to when Gerry Adams was a TD and we were talking about the primary care centre in Dundalk. It is not going to be up and operational until 2028. I do not know how long I have been here talking about the ten-bed extension in the Drogheda department of psychiatry at Crosslanes. We have a really low level of bed provision for those who require serious mental health supports across the State but in my own area, it is even lower. I was told before that just adding that ten-bed extension would just bring us up to some normality compared with the rest of the State although none of that is going to deliver the service that is required.

While I am talking about mental health services, I know we are moving from one Act to another and there are to be more authorised officers. It needs to be looked at with regard to those who are in chaos with real issues. We have all come across people in our constituency offices who need supports. We need to look at the powers of authorised officers, as much as there are more to be recruited. We have to compare it with what an authorised officer can do in the North and in Britain, where they have a greater level of power and are not necessarily as reliant on GPs and others. Even with the issues I may have with the legislation, there is a need to ensure that gardaí and general practitioners have absolutely clear guidelines. That is not to take away from the work they are doing. I have seen too many scenarios where people who

have become homeless who have been left for weeks on the street and not dealt with because they are not an imminent threat to themselves or others, which is causing huge issues.

We know what needs to be done. We know we need primary care settings and the home support. We know we do not have enough GPs, so therefore people are forced to go through the emergency departments, which require a greater level of support. We could stand here and talk about the lack of orthodontic services and the specifics. We need to look at all of this but, first and foremost, if there are vacancies, they need to be filled. I am dealing with a graduate nurse who has been on a waiting list for a year waiting to be taken on. That is not good enough in the present circumstances. I could go on.

Deputy Liam Quaide: When I speak to HSE staff these days, no matter where they are working, the response is similar. They have never felt so demoralised and so under pressure. So many want to leave their jobs. The scale of the Minister's failures as Minister for Health and the human cost of those failures is felt across the entire health service. That reality was laid bare at the health committee on 20 May, when we heard about the punishing impact of the Minister's recruitment restrictions, with unmanageable waiting lists and staff having to work in, and patients having to endure, unsafe environments. I am not sure what the Minister's incredulous expression is about but I will go on. Her recruitment restrictions are exposing elderly patients to risk of serious harm and premature death in our hospitals and denying young people crucial early intervention.

Last year, my parliamentary questions revealed a child waiting 13 and a half years for primary care psychology in Dublin West. This year I uncovered waits up to ten and a half years. Children are routinely waiting three, four or five years or longer for psychology, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and yet the Minister continues to place severe recruitment restrictions on these services.

11 o'clock

The idea that primary care is supposed to provide early intervention would be farcical in this context if it was not so tragic. Children are growing up without the help they need, families are left trying to piece together fragmented private therapies, and physical and mental health issues that could have been addressed early are becoming more entrenched and complex.

In February when I asked the Minister at the health committee to set staffing targets for primary care services based on population need, she refused even to commit to that. Her bottom line is the budget, not what people need. How can she possibly plan to address these out-of-control waiting lists when she will not establish how many staff our services actually need? Threadbare staffing and appalling waiting lists have become normalised from primary care to our acute hospitals.

Nowhere has the Minister's failure been more apparent than in her treatment of Cork University Hospital, a desperately overcrowded hospital where patients with brain injuries remain stranded because the Minister will not fund the 20 new neurorehabilitation beds in Blarney they need. Nine clinical directors wrote to the Taoiseach seeking an independent assessment of staffing and urgent approval of 172 priority posts. It is clear the Minister will not listen to the moral and clinical arguments of CUH's leadership, workers' unions, the Irish Hospital Consultants Association or the Irish Patients Association. None of that makes a blind

bit of difference to her, it seems. She has acted like somebody who has a vendetta against CUH. It seems she is trying to make an example of Jennifer Kearney so no other hospital manager will dare put their head above the parapet.

I wonder if political reality might eventually break through where those arguments have left the Minister unmoved. These are our constituents she is failing. They are also those of the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and of Deputy O'Shea. How will they face people in 2029 and ask them for votes after the Minister has spent five years running down our regional hospital? The Taoiseach has provided political cover for her, rather than heeding CUH's clinical leadership. He has even cast aspersions on CUH's management, insinuating wrongdoing over the legitimate recording of a meeting in which a senior HSE manager threatened the hospital CEO with a performance review after she raised concerns about patient safety. We all know Micheál Martin will not contest the next election. I find it hard to imagine him remaining in the Dáil in a lesser role. That raises the prospect of a by-election in Cork South-Central in the next year. How will a Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael candidate in that contest explain the Government's record on CUH? Voters will remember who stood up for their hospital and who stood by while its clinicians' warnings were dismissed and they were smeared by the Government and Anne O'Connor.

If any sheen remains on the Minister for Health's tenure, Brian O'Connell's harrowing RTÉ report from CUH's emergency department last Tuesday put paid to it. Elderly patients lay on trolleys or sat on chairs in overcrowded corridors. One woman described her elderly mother waiting two hours for assistance to go to the toilet. Professor Conor Deasy described conditions as tantamount to torture for these patients. People are enduring unnecessary suffering and indignity in a country where we have extraordinary economic prosperity. That is on you, Minister. How dare you put our family members, neighbours and friends in harm's way through your hostile neglect of Cork University Hospital?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: This is outrageous.

Deputy Liam Quaide: How dare you condemn our constituents to hours upon hours on chairs and trolleys in overcrowded hospital corridors? We are all a car crash or sudden serious illness away from needing emergency care in CUH. Any of us or someone we love could depend on that hospital tomorrow. How dare you come to this House-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: How dare you?

Deputy Liam Quaide: -----week after week and blame the very CEO and senior clinicians who have been desperately trying to alert you to the dangers? CUH staff are not taking it from you any more, Minister. We are not taking it from you any more. You have a duty to protect patients and you must answer for the consequences of your Government's decisions.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I hope you are pleased with yourself.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Labour Party for tabling the motion. A lot has been reported about CUH in recent weeks and my colleagues, Deputies Rice and Quaide, have been

working on the issues of patient safety and staff. Recruitment restrictions are across all areas of the health sector. It is from the cradle from the grave. I have brought up many times, but nothing is happening about it, the shortage of public health nurses in my constituency. Mammies in my constituency are being given a checklist to use for their child. This is not acceptable. I do not know how many times I have to bring this up. I have submitted many parliamentary questions asking what the difficulty is. It is not changing for these families. When things are not picked up at that level, prevention and early intervention cannot happen, which leads to a backlog. Then when the child needs an assessment of need, there is a waiting list and people have to sue the country to get one. Now the Minister is saying we do not need them for special classes and special schools. It is a disaster for parents who are battling every single time to get the services their children need. Even if they get an assessment of need, they cannot get the services because there is a waiting list for the occupational therapists and speech and language therapists they need. It is an utter omnishambles.

In terms of going to hospital as an adult, one in six patients at James's Street in my constituency left before they got full treatment because they could not wait any longer. People are waiting more than 24 hours to be seen. I am not blaming the staff in James's Street for a minute. They are working in incredibly difficult circumstances but the health sector is on its knees. It is on the Minister and she has to do better. This is the biggest issue, apart from housing, that comes up every time I canvass and I am sure everybody else here is the same. I spoke last week about a woman who was 31 weeks pregnant waiting for hours and hours on a trolley. We are a rich country. This should not be the situation. I could keep going on about the different levels there are.

Deputy Quaide talked last week about his father in hospital. My mother died with a curtain between her and another patient because there was no space in that hospital. It was not for the want of trying on the part of the people working in the hospital. They were so good but it was an undignified death. That is the system we are working with in this country - a really rich country. It is not just my mother; it is other mothers, other fathers and other people. There was one curtain and she was in pain. It is just not right. That is the legacy this Government has in health.

Deputy Rory Hearne: There is something deeply concerning going on in terms of the treatment of the CEO of CUH, and across the board. I have said before that something deeply disturbing about the Irish State since its foundation is how it has tried to silence dissent and silence people who have spoken up. I ask the Minister and Government to reflect on how they treat and respond to people speaking up about issues in our public services. I have experienced it before in housing and homelessness, with services getting direct calls from senior civil servants and being asked why they are speaking up about these issues. We need to hear the reality of what is happening and to respect and respond to that reality, rather than doing what this State has done since its foundation, which is to try to silence those who have questioned and critiqued the way things are. If things are to change, we need to support those people.

The issue I wanted to raise today is delays in access to speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychology in my constituency. There are huge delays. Children are left waiting unacceptable lengths of time. To give an example, 1,500 children between the ages of five and 17 are waiting more than a year for occupational therapy. We have the longest waiting time for psychology in the country - 514 weeks or almost ten years. In one case, parents

came to me whose child was referred for speech and language therapy, psychology services and OT at 18 months and is now six years old, but still has not received one service from the State. Those parents have had to pay privately for OT and speech and language therapy but the cost of that private therapy is putting a huge strain on them. They are finding it very difficult to manage the costs. There is a massive inequality in this country between those who can afford to pay for services and those who cannot. It is wrong and we need our public services, particularly for children in these areas, to be able to provide the services they need now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is hard to understand the attitude of the Minister and the Government to the mess in the health service. I thank the Labour Party for bringing this forward. I will pick up on a line from the Minister's speech that says a lot, which stated that an overspend does not, by itself, establish structural underfunding and automatically carrying it into next year's budget would remove the incentive to deliver savings, reduce agency costs, improve procurement or change how services are organised. That is Fine Gael ideology in a sentence. I remember well the Fine Gael slogan about the health service during the austerity period was that we would get more for less.

This was at a time when Fine Gael was butchering the number of staff and austerity was being imposed across the health service after the crash. That was the slogan; we are going to get more for less. We had a culling of staff, recruitment embargoes and cutbacks left, right and centre, but apparently somehow we were going to get more for less. Of course, we did not get more for less. We got less for less and it was an absolute disaster. It seems the lessons just have not been learned and they are captured in that sentence. In other words, what the Minister is saying is that she is systematically underfunding the health service in order to put pressure on hospitals. That is why we have supplementary budgets every year because the Minister is systematically underfunding them to put pressure on them to cut costs. That is essentially what that sentence means and we can see the consequences.

The Minister is expecting us to not believe it when the people who run the hospitals, consultants and nurses tell us they are understaffed and when young health professionals - I think it is about 70% - are saying they are thinking of leaving the country because they do not want to work under these conditions and it is a disaster in the hospitals. We are supposed to not believe them but we are supposed to believe the Minister for Health, who has managed to have a supplementary budget every single year. Now we know the reason. It is because the Minister is using it as a whip to try to get the hospitals to reduce costs in the misguided belief that it will deliver efficiency when in fact it delivers a million people on various waiting lists, people on trolleys, people waiting hours and hours in emergency departments and understaffed hospitals and health services, with the staff who are there being absolutely demoralised, run into the ground and not wanting to work in the health service.

The thing that angers me in all of this is that when Covid happened and emergency measures had to be taken to make the health service work there was, briefly, a recognition we had to nationalise private healthcare capacity so there should be no two-tier health service when responding to the pandemic. Of course, we moved very quickly back to the two-tier system because in truth, despite nominal commitment to Sláintecare and all the rest of it, Fine Gael does not believe in having a universal healthcare system. It believes in the two-tier system. It just infuriates me when I hear about the disaster of trolleys and the hardship and suffering of elderly and sick people in emergency departments and on waiting lists, that I then hear the

advertisements for the Blackrock Clinic. Come to the Blackrock Clinic; it will be okay there. There will not be any waiting list there. How much goes out to the private healthcare system every year? I put in a question recently and the reply was €234 million is going to the National Treatment Purchase Fund. How much is going to these agencies who recruit agency staff and so on to fill the staffing gaps? Big profits are being made there by the private health insurance companies so there are people benefiting from this misery. If you have the money or are wealthy, you may be able to avoid all the hardship and suffering so many people endure when they go into our public health system or when they try to get into our public health system.

I believe the nurses and the hospitals. I do not believe the Government or the HSE.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy never did.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Minister for Health, the Department of Health and senior HSE management are abusing the goodwill of health and hospital staff. Hospitals right across this country are like a pressure cooker ready to explode, due to understaffing, an effective ban on recruitment, failure to fill vacancies and consistent underfunding in successive budgets. Hospital staff, nurses, doctors, porters, household staff, administrative staff and general staff are being asked daily whether they can stay on duty for an hour or two after their shift, come in on their day off, change their shift pattern or do split shifts. Staff, conscious of their responsibility to patients, their local communities and their hospitals generally agree, but they are under huge pressure. This situation simply cannot last. It leads to burn-out, anxiety, stress on staff and safety issues for patients. That situation will explode unless it is dealt with by increased staffing, the filling of vacancies and the reversal of the systematic underfunding of the health service.

The current ban on recruitment because that is what it is, a ban on recruitment, is unworkable and unsafe. The previous system where there were three levels of approval before you got to the CEO's desk was bad enough. The new recruitment system, where all recruitment must be approved by the Department of Health, is unworkable and unsafe, and God forbid it leads to avoidable deaths. The Department of Health will only approve contractually obligated posts or what it calls clinical-critical posts. This is against the background of 2,900 nursing and midwife vacancies and that is in the nursing sector alone. The Minister should take on board the views of the 137 nurse managers who say this recruitment system and restrictions are "unsafe and unworkable" and that the system is designed to cause delays to the filling of health service posts. These are the people at local level and at the coalface. They know the service from the ground up. They say they formally reject the new controls. These are the very strong but sincerely held views from nurse managers who know the system inside out. They go on to say that the restrictions "obstruct essential recruitment, undermine our professional judgment, expose patients and staff to foreseeable harm, and threaten our registration." These employment controls must be withdrawn because they expose both patients and staff to harm. Staffing must be based on the needs of patients, on how acutely ill patients are and on evidence-based staffing requirements.

The recruitment ban is taking place against a background of increased demands for services, admissions, emergency department attendances and deficits of beds. The Government's own bed capacity plan for 2024 to 2031 called for an additional 3,000 beds. I commend the staff at Tipperary University Hospital who work as a team and go above and beyond on behalf of

patients and the local community. That hospital is also under pressure due to staff shortages and underfunding. There is a significant number of vacancies in all categories at the hospital. Yesterday, there were 50 patients waiting for permanent beds. Under the Government's bed plan, that hospital should have an additional 48 beds but on yesterday's figure the requirement would be closer to 100. The hospital emergency department built in the early 2000s to cater for 20,000 attendances saw 51,000 attendances last year. There is an extension for that department included in the HSE capital plan and I urge the Minister to expedite that extension.

The restrictions on recruitment must be withdrawn. They are unsafe for patients and staff. The systematic annual underfunding of the health service should stop and realistic multi-annual funding should be put in place.

Deputy Michael Collins: The reality of our health service can be seen every day at Cork University Hospital. In recent weeks, there have been days when around 70 patients were left waiting on trolleys for a bed. We have heard senior clinicians warn about the conditions patients are being forced to endure. We have seen reports of an emergency department operating at close to double its intended capacity and occasions when there were no ICU beds available.

At the same time, hospital management was warned of major staffing shortages and has sought approval for more than 170 priority posts. Those warnings are coming from the people trying to run the hospital, and not from politicians. The consequences are real. Surgeries have been cancelled at short notice, including cancer procedures. Patients who thought they were finally getting treatment have instead been sent home because the system could not accommodate them.

Serious concerns have also been raised about the lymphoedema services for breast cancer patients at Cork University Hospital, CUH. Women recovering from surgery are reportedly unable to access the continuous treatment recommended for their recovery because of ongoing staffing shortages that have persisted for years. The pressure is being made worse by the lack of step-down capacity. Clinicians have pointed to the impact of reduced capacity at St. Finbarr's Hospital and the Riverstick transitional care facility. When patients who are fit to leave an acute hospital cannot move on, beds remain occupied, admissions back up and trolley numbers rise.

For the people of west Cork and across the south west, CUH is the hospital they depend on when they need specialist care. They are entitled to ask why, after record levels of health spending, we are still seeing overcrowding, cancelled procedures, staffing shortages and patients waiting on trolleys. The staff at CUH are doing their jobs. The patients are carrying the burden. The question is: when will the Government finally do its job and provide the capacity, staffing, in particular, and planning required to end this cycle of crisis?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister for agreeing to attend the meeting of the budget oversight committee next Tuesday.

Today, however, I am going to talk to her on a business level. University Hospital Limerick, UHL, has been in the headlines for many years because of issues we have had in Limerick and the mid-west. Last week, we had a meeting with the Minister. Everybody in the room, all the

TDs and Senators at that meeting, praised the management and team at UHL for the work they are trying to do. It was my first time meeting the current CEO of the HSE. I met her predecessor, Bernard Gloster, on many occasions during his three years in the role but this was the first time I met the current HSE CEO at a private meeting with the Minister. That concerns me hugely.

In the past two weeks, I have seen the CEO on every television channel and heard her on every radio station in the country giving out about the management in the hospitals. My issue here is that when I sat at that meeting with the Minister, where the management of the hospitals were being praised for the work they were doing, one of the CEO's comments struck me. She said the management does not come to her with care facilities or care issues unless they are in the budget. She said that they know better than to bring me something unless it is in the budget. This person has put the budget above the care. That concerns me.

Anne O'Connor was appointed to the position on 23 March 2026. Like any person in the Civil Service, there is a probationary period. I am going on the record to say I am not happy with her probationary period, which is up to 12 months. I want to know who is responsible for Anne O'Connor during her probationary period. Everybody in this room today has had something to say about the CEO and their concerns. She is rubbing every health professional up the wrong way rather than helping them on their way.

You get an awful lot more with honey than you do with vinegar. A person in that management position is supposed to bring people with them and listen to them. I have nothing personally against Anne O'Connor but the one thing that stood out for me, and it stands out today, is that she put a budget above care. She said they know better than to come to me if it is not in the budget. That is my concern.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Darren O'Rourke): We have to be careful about mentioning people who are not here to answer for themselves. We are aware of that. I call Deputy Paul Lawless.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to speak about the nurses and what is a recruitment freeze in HSE west at the moment. Despite Government rhetoric, I have spoken to many nurses who still have no start date. I am aware of a number of nurses who have contracts and are still waiting. They have received no information from HR in the hospitals. An email to my office last week outlined that an individual's Garda vetting is due to expire and that she is about to have to undergo it again, which will potentially delay her recruitment even further.

This is not just about nurses or newly qualified nurses. I am also aware of a nurse who took a career break, went to Australia, is now back in the country and wants to start but cannot start because of what is happening. I am aware of clerical staff who were removed from their positions as of last week. As a result, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, OTs, in a primary care centre in Mayo are facilitating and managing the administrative workload. The result of that is that there is a reduction in their provision of front-line therapeutic services.

What is happening is absolute chaos. I am very concerned that the rhetoric from the Government is essentially about back-slapping and claiming to fix a problem it has created. The nurses on the ground, the OTs and the nurses who are coming back from career breaks cannot access the system. While this is happening, there is a crisis in so many emergency departments right across this State. In Mayo and Galway, patients are suffering in real time and front-line staff are carrying an enormous workload.

There are 80 vacancies in Mayo University Hospital, MUH, and 50 of them are in the nursing profession. We have nurses who I speak to daily who cannot access the system. To make matters worse, many of these hospitals have advertisements today for agency staff. The HSE spent almost €1 billion on agency staff last year and almost €2 billion over the past two years. We have a system that is actually favouring agency staff.

Our nurses, OTs and physiotherapists were born here, reared here, buttered here, trained in Irish universities and did their placements here. They know our wards, patients and procedures, and it is unimaginable to think that the Minister's Department is now favouring agency staff over our own. I ask the Minister to make a statement today, because many nurses are watching, and give them clarity. I ask the Minister to tell the people who are waiting and have contracts what is happening and when they will receive their start dates.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Health budgets have to reflect the real cost of maintaining services rather than deliberately budgeting below that level and crisis-managing afterwards. The Government has pointed to substantial increases in health expenditure and staffing, which is true, of course but the budgets still do not reflect the actual costs. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, described health overruns as partly a problem of bad budgeting and planning. It referenced hospitals overspending by an average of approximately €1.2 billion per year between 2023 and 2025.

We see the consequences locally in my constituency in Dublin Mid-West. Children are missing routine developmental checks because of staffing shortages and vacancies in many areas, including OT, physiotherapy and psychology. The HSE has acknowledged recruitment and retention difficulties affecting public health nursing and other services but the solutions have still not been found. The Government again says there is no blanket recruitment freeze. That may be technically correct but the additional local financial controls and approvals and already overstretched services can still delay recruitment, and this has happened.

There is a false economy, as others have said. If we cannot recruit and retain our permanent nurses, therapists and other health professionals, we become more dependent on costly agency staff and overtime. Agency expenditure alone reached €817 million in 2025. We train skilled professionals at considerable public expense and then we export them. Poor workforce planning, bad conditions and promised jobs that do not materialise drive people abroad. We then recruit people internationally, and approximately 50% are international recruits. They do a great job, and I acknowledge that, but this should not be the case when we are sending our own home-trained professionals abroad because we are not giving them the jobs they were promised.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I compliment the Labour Party on bringing forward this very timely and important motion. I also compliment the Minister on staying here for the debate

and listening attentively all the time. It is not often that happens, so well done to her on that. She does, however, have a lot of work to do.

The whole situation regarding the HSE is just dire. There is a lot of good work carried out in hospitals and the HSE in general. My wife went through CUH in Cork recently and there was nothing but exceptional care as a public patient in the Dunmanway unit.

There are many good things going on but there are blockages. A lot of it is administrative. There is a growing bill for agency staff while young nurses are training here, going through the education system here, choosing it as a career and emigrating. I am aware of one nurse in particular who has been wanting to come back to Tipperary for the past six to eight months. It could be anywhere in the country but preferably Tipperary. She cannot get in and we have a shortage of nurses. It beggars belief. Every time I go to the HSE, it tells me it is recruiting nurses abroad. I commend it, and it has to do that, but what is the blockage? There is a recruitment ban, full stop. You can get home help but you cannot get anyone to fill the places. This is a new trick - it will approve you for it but it will not fill the places.

The blockages in acute and step-down hospitals are enormous. South Tipperary general hospital is under severe pressure, taking in 50,000 patients while it does not have the capacity for that. It only has capacity for 25,000 to 30,000 with the building. I salute St. Theresa's Hospital in Clogheen. I was there yesterday. It is a wonderful hospital under the staff of Anne Walsh, the matron and the team there. It is a wonderful step-down facility and hospice. It is a model people should look at. There is a lot of work to do to get it right, trying to cut down on agency staff and respect our nurses.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister for her recent intervention with regard to the situation where young people who were trained and qualified were waiting for contracts. That was in the Kerry and Cork region specifically. I acknowledge her work in that regard, the response I got when I went to her and that she took on board that issue. It is like every problem; she did a lot at that time but we have more to do in that regard because young nurses and young people who have trained are ready and want to work for us in the HSE. We quite simply have to be in a position to give them contracts. We have the work in our community hospitals. I commend our management at senior levels in Kerry and at local level in Kerry University Hospital and in district hospitals. I will name in particular my nearest hospital in Kenmare and the new hospital in Killarney, which is an excellent facility. I thank the matron and management there for the work they are doing.

Around all of Kerry, in Listowel, Tralee and Cahersiveen, we have excellent facilities but we need more staff. We have beds but we need our hospitals operating at fully capacity when it comes to operations. I acknowledge the work the Minister did in dealing with consultants. It is like having a digger and having it idle half the time; that does not make sense. If there is an operating theatre, people able to perform operations and patients on waiting lists, it does not make sense not to be operating those theatres day and night. I know the Minister acknowledges that and she is trying to push hard in that regard. We just have a lot more work to do.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Labour Party for tabling this very timely motion. First of all, I thank all the staff in our hospitals in Kerry who are doing fierce work continuously.

There are nurses who have given 40 or 41 years of their lives looking after patients day after day. We really appreciate them.

I just cannot understand this embargo. We only had the budget the other day. We have hospitals in Kenmare and Dingle and our new community hospital in Killarney, which we really appreciate and are thankful for, but still has 37 empty beds. With this embargo, the worry is they will not be staffed. People are on every day. Our nursing homes are all full. Elderly people get sick and they cannot stay in their homes. It is hard to get home help to come to them. It is not happening. They are allocated hours but nobody comes. The option then is to go into a nursing home but many of them are full. Many people from the greater Killarney area are now in nursing homes outside the county in Macroom, Boherbue and Limerick even. This embargo is stopping the staffing of the hospitals I mentioned, which need to be opened. We are still waiting for a primary care centre, more respite beds and a minor injuries unit. Is this embargo going to stop all that?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It will not.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That would be terrible and have a desperate effect in Killarney, Kenmare and all of Kerry. The Government has to see the light and ensure our sick and elderly people, who paid their way all their lives and brought us to where we are, are looked after.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the additional funding for our health service in this budget but I raise a serious concern regarding recruitment across County Clare and the wider mid-west region. Hospital management has identified more than 350 vacant posts across this region. While the Minister clarified that recruitment has not been completely stopped, I am hearing that increasingly restrictive HSE and departmental approval processes are making it quite difficult to fill positions which management itself has identified as being necessary.

The HSE Mid West region services almost 500,000 people across Clare, Limerick and north Tipperary. University Hospital Limerick, our principal acute hospital, recorded more than 95,000 emergency department attendances last year, the highest of any hospital in this country. I acknowledge the UHL staffing budget from approximately €378 million per annum in 2025 to €419 million in 2026 but additional funding must translate into additional staff on the ground. I also welcome the planned 48 additional beds at Ennis Hospital by 2030-2031. However, a bed is only a bed if there is someone there to care for the patient who occupies that bed. We must plan for the necessary staffing alongside additional capacity.

We have really excellent healthcare professionals in this country. I join others in commending them yet our hospitals are struggling to fill essential vacancies. Of the more than 350 vacant positions identified across the mid-west, how many have been approved for recruitment? How many have been filled? How many remain awaiting sanction? Will the Minister commit to giving hospital management greater flexibility to recruit essential clinical positions without any unnecessary delays? We can announce the biggest health budget in the history of the State but the real test is whether patients in County Clare and the wider mid-west see a difference. That is where the budget must deliver.

At the Oireachtas education committee, an aspect relating to the health Ministry came up, CAMHS. It offers a vital service for young people. We had experts at the committee a couple

of weeks ago talking about all the wonderful therapeutic supports our young people with mental health difficulties can avail of. They are obviously in short supply which is a well-documented debate.

I want to flag that since the debacle with prescribing psychiatric medicines in north Kerry, there is now a system where no medicines are being prescribed at all. For many young people, therapeutic supports are entirely what is needed but for some, their mental health difficulties can be so profound that they require medicine and prescribing. At the moment, there is a logjam. There is paralysis because those qualified to prescribe and diagnose, psychiatrists, are reluctant to do so because of what happened in north Kerry. That paralysis is not good overall. I appreciate it is a slight deviation from the debate but I ask for the Minister's intercession. There are lot of young people who would appreciate that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is a tension between being required to manage a budget within a single year and also the demands to increase staffing. One of the Sinn Féin Deputies looked for workforce plan. We had a workforce plan this year; it was to recruit 3,300 extra people along with agency reduction. Some 4,000 people were recruited without sufficient agency reduction, although we are beginning to make progress in that regard. There is that tension all the time.

It is a balance. I appreciate the way in which it is raised and the tension is for us to resolve. We are trying to balance and resolve that. Next year, we will have a more specific workforce plan, which will bring greater transparency to how that is done. There are some very important patient safety posts in the community that have been identified and others that are in my own mind. Deputy Mac Lochlainn raised Letterkenny and while the design team for the surgical hub has been appointed and that is progressing, I am really concerned about the community nursing unit opening across the road from Letterkenny hospital. We want that open and to me, that is a patient safety priority post. There are 184 graduate nurses approved in the last number of weeks for that region and some of them will work there, though not all of them will. It cannot be staffed entirely by that. Those are patient safety posts, as far as I am concerned. I have sought for the HSE to send in those types of patient safety and patient flow posts that are so important in community nursing units and so many other places because taking people out of hospital is as important for patient safety as anything else. I have not received that to date but that is a really important priority. It brings ahead the recruitment for next year.

On graduate nurses and Deputy Boyd Barrett's assertion that nobody wants to work here, I do not agree with it at all. We have had 1,145 offers for graduate nurses - that is the most recent figure I have and forgive me if it has changed over the last number of days - and 1,000 have been accepted. There are 1,000 graduate nurses from this year who do want to work in the Irish health system and we should encourage that more and more. I know Deputy Boyd Barrett has ideological views about everything but we are all talking about Sláintecare. I am talking about Sláintecare; I am not talking about private healthcare facilities. I am talking about getting the best value. As Deputy Healy-Rae said, when we have facilities, they should be used. That is a value for money proposition. Using the public-only consultant contract is value for money. That is what I referred to in my speech. While I appreciate that Deputy Boyd Barrett is not committed to a value-for-money proposition, I assure him his constituents are and I am happy to remind him of that. I would also remind him of the significant investment in St. Michael's Hospital, notwithstanding his election posters that said it is under threat.

All of that aside, the most significant issues here today have been raised by Deputy Cullinane and the Labour Party. I will address them in turn because they are very similar issues but I will start with CUH and Cork. For me, the most important thing is patient safety. Deputy Kenny asserted - incorrectly, I have to say - that CUH is unsafe and that is terrifying for two reasons. The first is for patients but the second is that it begets its own slippage in terms of behaviour. We know that from the literature and we know that from our senior clinicians. My first concern when I saw the articulation by Jennifer Kearney in the media was of course about patient safety which is why, in terms of sequence, we conducted an immediate patient safety analysis. What has happened this year that might be different that would give rise to such a concern? Colm Henry, our chief clinical officer, immediately went down and assessed what was happening. What was the quality and patient safety, QPS, system in the hospital? There is a deficiency there that needs to be addressed but that should be a priority and it should be addressed by now.

While we always acknowledge that healthcare is risky every single day in every single hospital, we have systems that help us to assess and manage that. The really important ones are there was no increase in the most serious patient safety incidents identified in Cork University Hospital this year. No mortality concerns have been flagged through the national audit of hospital mortality. The interim HSE patient safety assessment found the overall position to be broadly reassuring, despite what we all acknowledge are significant operational pressures. HIQA has been in over the last number of weeks to inspect CUH and has not identified any red flags, as such, and broadly continues to engage with the hospital management. The safe staffing framework is fully in-place, as it is in Naas since July 2026, for the information of Deputy Wall, whom I see in the Chamber. They are important markers of patient safety and we have to deal in facts. They are the facts and while something could happen in Waterford tomorrow or Cork next week, based on the science we have on patient safety, that is in place. That is the first and most important thing.

The second thing is we have a new integrated healthcare area, IHA, manager working with CUH and all of the hospitals in Cork. There is a full assessment of both the current and future needs of CUH, as happens with all hospitals with their IHA managers. It happens with St. Vincent's, the Mater and Cork. There is a full assessment. It is true to say that CUH has recruited more people than anyone else and that is important. How are they being used? It is also true to say that, for example, CUH has more radiographers than any other hospital in the country. How are they being deployed for the benefit of patients? There are four CT machines and it has been reported some are not operational. CUH has 97 radiographers and that is important, particularly when Deputy Bacik raises radiography concerns in her own local hospital where there are only 79. Deputy Bacik raised the issue of St. Vincent's. It has six fewer people working in it this year but Cork has 323 extra people. There has to be a measure of balance and equity across the regions. One cannot take from another. We must have planning and reasonableness in how services are delivered. It is important and how we deploy our resources is particularly important.

Sonya Cotter, whom I have really great confidence in and who comes from an acute background, is doing very deep work with CUH on how current assets - they are not assets; they are people - and how current healthcare professionals are working within the hospital, what the deployment of that is, where are the patient safety pressures and what are the future needs of the hospital as we expand the surgical hub. When we build a new building, of course

it will need more people. How do we consider the needs for the future? What the Taoiseach said yesterday is so important. CUH, like every other hospital, has to work within its region. I met Jennifer Kearney most recently in September on the edge of the surgical hub and I totally reject Deputy Quaide's presentation of this engagement. I work with all of the different hospital managers, whether it is Josephine Ryan in the Mater, Catherine Peters in Mayo or Laura Waters in Cavan. I meet and talk with them all in different contexts, both formally and informally, but they all have to work within their respective regions. Josephine Ryan in the Mater has to work with Mellany McLoone in the IHA, for example. They have to work with the region and the Taoiseach is right about that. That is how, in a single organisation, we are working together all of the time. Deputy Cullinane is right; the CEO also needs to be present, as the chief clinical officer has been present, on the ground to work through all of these different issue. We remain there to support CUH, as we support every other hospital in this country doing really excellent work.

I reject the question of a recruitment freeze, as such. I am asking for the HSE for patient safety priority posts. I am asking for agency conversion and graduate nurses because those are the things we know make the most financial sense over time. They are the most sustainable and that is where we want to be. This is my suggestion but it is the HSE that decides and prioritises that, which is within its service plan. It wants to recruit graduates and reduce agency staff and that is within its service plan, along with delivering patient safety. All of the resources have to be used. I have highlighted the community nursing unit in Letterkenny because there are as many beds there that would take all of the delayed transfer of care, DTOC, pressure off Letterkenny. I was on the trolley call and Ian Carter from University Hospital Limerick is always on that. On the trolley call over the first weekend in November, that Sunday morning there were 42 people on trolleys in CUH but there were nine beds plus four surge beds in Mallow that were available that night. Those kinds of things cannot happen. They are patient safety problems. There should be a move into the region.

I will say one last thing around language on this. I have the utmost respect for Deputy Bacik as the leader of the Labour Party. I have worked with her for so many years in so many different contexts, as I have respect for Deputy Sherlock but Deputy Bacik and I go back some time and I have such respect for her. I know she comes to work every day in good faith, as do I. I know Deputy Bacik knows that is true. I have to challenge the use of the language around gaslighting. No matter how much I disagreed with the Deputy, I would never, ever say that to her. She knows as well I know that term has come into the vernacular but it has its roots in coercive control and emotional and psychological manipulation, particularly of women. It does not matter how much I disagree with any Deputy in this House, I would never use that phrase to somebody else. The Deputies can disagree with me all day long but Deputy Bacik knows I do not come to work in that way and I do not think she comes to work in that way. Maybe we could just reflect on the use of that term and how we want to talk to each other in the Parliament. I have every respect for the motion she brings and the motivation behind the motion. I ask for the Labour Party to leave space to try to help all of the hospitals and particularly in Cork.

As the Taoiseach said yesterday, everybody has to work within the region. Our first priority is patient safety and establishing that. Deputy Bacik will understand I do not want to cut across what HIQA is doing and I need to leave space for it to do that also but it is within the region that everything can be resolved, as is the case for every other region.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I commend my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, for bringing this motion forward and thank all of the Members for their contributions to the debate this morning. For my part, I would like to talk about my constituency of Dublin Fingal East. From a hospital point of view, we are served by Beaumont Hospital.

Like many hospitals in Dublin and throughout the country, Beaumont Hospital is under an awful lot of pressure, particularly its emergency department. Of course, Dublin is carrying 800 nursing vacancies spread across the city and county and this is having its impact. I commend the fact that Swords primary care centre is coming on. The site that was purchased and is being developed is the right site for it. The scale and size of it is appropriate for the size of the town. I plead with the Minister to ensure it is resourced appropriately and has the services to be able to serve the people of Swords, which is the third-largest town in Ireland and the largest town without a primary care centre. This will end when the primary care centre is up and running. We are a town of 41,000 people and we have intense health pressures which are then funnelled to Beaumont Hospital. I would like, and hope, to see progress on this.

There are also Donabate and Portrane, and I have made representations to the Minister on the need for a primary care centre there. I am working with my colleague Councillor Corina Johnston on basing a primary care centre in the village of Donabate. We have spoken about sites and the HSE has examined some sites. Unfortunately, none of them seem to have come to fruition. One of the responses I got, which we need to challenge, was that when the Swords centre is built the people in Donabate and Portrane will be able to use it. Donabate is not a suburb of Swords. Thirty years ago, Donabate was a village of 1,400 people. It is now a town of 11,000 people and growing. Anyone who has been out there in recent years will have seen the scale of the development. It needs a primary care centre of its own. This needs to be in the centre of the old village of Donabate and not on the periphery of the peninsula. Donabate cannot be served by Swords. I will keep the pressure on the Minister and I hope I will continue to receive updates. I will submit parliamentary questions in respect of a site in Donabate in the next couple of days.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I commend Deputy Sherlock and our party staff for all their work on this motion. The first formal meeting I had as a TD was with my local primary care centre in Ballyboden and the CDNT there. It was immediately clear to me in the weeks after I was elected that one of the biggest issues in my area was the lack of supports available for children with autism and that this was largely due to staffing issues. The staff in the primary care centre and the CDNT are absolutely amazing. They are doing their best under the circumstances but these circumstances are that they do not have the capacity or staffing levels to meet demand. In 2022 there were five speech and language therapists. When I met them they had one and this was a part-time position. Two positions were entirely wiped out because they were vacant when the pay and numbers strategy was introduced. Over the summer I was contacted by an occupational therapist working in a different primary care centre in my constituency. She alone, working part-time, was covering a patch that should have had four full-time occupational therapists.

Like everyone in the House, to this day I get emails and calls from parents who are at their wits' end because they are being told that it will be years before their child get the supports they need in the public system. As a father, I know the feeling of just wanting what is best for your child. I can imagine the sheer desperation and helplessness these parents must feel. They know

exactly the supports and therapies their children need but they cannot get them because of the Government's failure to adequately resource and staff our local HSE services.

The issues regarding adequate staffing and resourcing extend beyond our local health services. Tallaght University Hospital is the major hospital in my constituency. In the first six months of this year 1,869 patients spent more than 24 hours in its emergency department. Of these, 391 were aged 75 or over. There were 4,210 more patients who walked out of the emergency department without being seen because the wait was too long. This is an average of 23 people walking out of the emergency department every day without being seen. Tallaght hospital recorded the longest average emergency department wait in the country at the start of this year at 19 hours. I am glad to say, and I acknowledge, that progress has been made in the emergency department but the wait was still 16 hours in June.

This is all happening in the context of existing financial pressures on the hospital. The Tallaght hospital board has repeatedly delayed signing its annual service level agreement with the HSE due to severe funding shortfalls and the legal risks associated with mounting deficits in the hospital. Barbara Keogh Dunne, the hospital's former chief executive officer, told the Committee of Public Accounts earlier this year that funding for Tallaght hospital was €33 million short of its running costs, with extra costs driven by inflation, wage increases and a 12% surge in emergency department attendances due to the demographic changes in our area. The catchment area for Tallaght hospital is due to grow to 1 million people by 2030 but the hospital has been talking about having to cut back services. I know a supplementary budget was agreed yesterday and I welcome the progress on 98 more beds in Tallaght hospital but this is half the beds that are planned and a fraction of what is actually needed and we are only hoping to go to planning on this next year. I ask that we give those who are working on the front line in our health services the funding they need and do so urgently.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I should have clarified and apologised when I had to step out of the Chamber; the health committee is meeting today. I thank everyone who has contributed today and I thank the Minister for her comments. We reject the Government's countermotion and we will oppose it. When we heard all the accounts from across the country today we heard of a dysfunctional and deeply flawed health system. The manifestation of this is that one in seven people are waiting longer than a year on outpatient waiting lists, delayed transfers of care are up about 25% on last year, and there are all of the other shortages throughout our health system.

It is important to say that obviously the Minister wants to do her best for the health service. We have very strong views and there is a fundamental difference of opinion on how to go about it. There are a number of fundamental flaws in how the Minister is discharging her role as Minister for Health. The first concerns the failure to plan. It is simply not tenable that the health budget figure is based on a 2% demographic growth and does not take account of the actual pressures in particular parts of the health service.

Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke earlier about Fine Gael ideology. Any self-respecting business would work out the demand for the following year and base its budget accordingly. We are not doing so in this country with our health system. It is ten years since activity-based funding was initiated in the health system by the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Simon Harris. We have yet to see any progress on activity-based funding for the two largest drivers of demand in our health

service, which are emergency department attendances and outpatient care. There was zero mention of any initiative in this regard today.

Another key issue is the obsession with pay. It is quite ironic that the financial escalation procedure is based on a 2% pay overspend when there are so many other aspects to the health budget. As the INMO and 137 directors and assistant directors of nursing stated in their letter this week, overspend should not be evidence of patient safety and yet this is how it feels the Department of Health operates at this time.

I have to correct the Minister on what she said about Jennifer Kearney being in the media. I do not believe Jennifer Kearney has given a single interview to the media.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I did not say that she did.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The Minister spoke about Jennifer Kearney being in the media. The reality is that Jennifer Kearney has followed all the correct channels by writing to the IHA and to Anne O'Connor. This correspondence was leaked and has been fully played out. Jennifer Kearney has done everything correctly in advocating for her hospital, as any director or chief executive of a hospital should do.

We have heard a lot of talk with regard to community care but when I look at the detail of the Government's countermotion and the Minister's comments I see no real commitment to community care. There is not a single mention of GP care other than with regard to the winter initiative. The reality is that 76% of people attending emergency departments last year went there without a GP referral letter. The reason they go there is because they cannot access care in their community and little or nothing is being done in this regard.

I want to mention Sláintecare. Fine Gael went into the last general election campaigning to expand free GP care, to provide 5,000 hospital beds to give effect to the ten-year-old Sláintecare plan. We are seeing little or no progress on it. Where is the expansion of free GP care? This nut has to be cracked if we are to take people out of hospitals and keep them in the community. I thank the Minister for this engagement today but the reality is that there are fundamental problems with how the Department of Health is running our health service and this needs to change.

12 o'clock

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: The vote will be deferred to the weekly divisions block this evening.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: We have a lot of people in the Gallery. I welcome the guests of Deputy Ivana Bacik, students from Dublin, Wicklow, Cork and Minnesota, some of whom are related. I hope they enjoy their day. I also welcome the guests of the Minister, Deputy Lawless, Aebhric McGibney from Dublin Chamber and his nephew Senan, who joins him today.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cosnaíonn an glas triarach neamhspleáchas na hÉireann maidir le cinneadh a dhéanamh faoi fhórsaí cosanta na hÉireann a chur ar mhisin thar lear. Tá an cheist seo ró-thábhachtach le fágáil don Rialtas amháin. Gealladh guth do mhuintir na hÉireann. Ní mór an ceart sin a thabhairt dóibh anois agus reifreann a reáchtáil.

In the Taoiseach's rush to remove the triple lock, he has deployed dishonesty, sleight of hand and duplicity. He wants to dismantle the triple lock while insisting that our neutrality will be untouched. This is wrong. He calls this reform. He says it is about keeping pace with Europe, but in reality, he is hitching Ireland to Europe's headlong rush to rearming, pouring hundreds of billions of euros into weapons and deepening military integration. Many of the capitals to which he now looks for approval represent former colonial powers. He should remember that Ireland knows what colonial rule means. Decisions about our country were made elsewhere, for far too long, in the interests of an empire. That experience shapes our solidarity with people seeking freedom and self-determination. It informs our choice to stay outside of military blocs and our determination to always act in accordance with international law and the authority of the United Nations mandate. Why would we now doff our cap to former imperial powers or join them in their very questionable military agendas?

The Taoiseach sets up various straw men to avoid the real question. Defending the triple lock does not mean standing aside from international crises. Ireland has a proud record of peacekeeping, one made possible by the protection and sanction of the UN mandate. Without that UN safeguard, Irish Governments will face pressure from powerful states with regard to Irish troop deployment - of that, there is absolutely no doubt - and our people know that. That is why they believe, as do I, that it is the sovereign Irish people who should decide on neutrality and that it should not rely on the whim of any Government of the day.

In 2013, the Taoiseach said the triple lock was at the core of our neutrality. At that time, he rejected attempts to remove it, but he is now carrying out that very assault himself. His predecessor Brian Cowen - remember? - made a solemn promise that there would be no change to the triple lock unless the people first gave their assent in a referendum. The Government gave solemn assurances on neutrality and the triple lock during the campaigns on the Lisbon and Nice treaties. You cannot simply give your word and then discard it. The Taoiseach's own party is divided on this issue. Fianna Fáil's partner in government, Fine Gael, has long wished to dispense with Irish neutrality and the triple lock. As far back as 2003, it described our neutrality as a sham. At that time, the Taoiseach condemned that agenda and called it out. However, in the time since then, Fianna Fáil has become more Fine Gael than Fine Gael itself.

There is then the proposed mission to Lebanon, an EU mission that is being discussed and which the Taoiseach want to deploy troops on. I will repeat what I asked yesterday. Will the Taoiseach tell us the extent to which this mission involves intelligence sharing, operational co-ordination and planning with Israel? I would like the Taoiseach to make that clear to the House.

The Taoiseach: On the last occasion, I asked the Deputy not to imply in any shape or form that the Irish Defence Forces would be supporting Israel or siding with it on this peacekeeping mission because that endangers the lives of Irish soldiers currently in Lebanon. It is reckless on the part of the Deputy. It is wrong and it is an untruth. The Deputy should not be saying it. There are peacekeepers with UNIFIL in Lebanon right now endeavouring to fulfil Resolution 1701 as a peacekeeping mission. By her commentary, the Deputy is putting them at risk.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I absolutely am not.

The Taoiseach: She should not do that. She is doing it to further her own political campaign. It is reprehensible.

What the Deputy uttered at the beginning of her contribution is utter nonsense. She talked about former colonial powers. She is talking about member states of the European Union. I know you opposed the European Union in 1972.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I did not, actually. I was-----

The Taoiseach: You did.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It predates my-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Standing Orders require respect from both sides of the House. Everybody must be allowed to speak, regardless of whether the Deputy agrees or disagrees. Let us extend that courtesy to all sides of the House.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin opposed entry into the European Union. At the time, it said, "Neutrality will go and compulsory military service for our youth will be introduced." I would tell the public who are listening to Sinn Féin today to go back and look at what it said in 1972 and in every single referendum on the European treaties. It was the same old untruths that there would be military conscription and that we would join a European army. None of it ever happened. The Deputy now has the brass neck to stand up and again say it is going to happen because we are reforming the triple lock.

The Deputy talks about former imperial powers. How about current imperial powers? Russia is an imperial power right now. It has invaded a European country, Ukraine, and is behind a lot of hybrid attacks across Europe. Russia is the real imperialist. The Deputy is saying that imperialist Russia should have a veto over where Ireland goes in peacekeeping terms. It is such hypocrisy. She does not believe in Europe at all, does she? The European Union has transformed Ireland. It has been a very good experience despite Sinn Féin's opposition. Europe is not on a big mission of military rearmament. Europe is a peacekeeping project. These former colonial powers the Deputy speaks of managed to bury the hatchet after the Second World War, the worst conflict in human history. They created a peaceful endeavour, which Sinn Féin can never bring itself to embrace because it is fundamentally against it despite the fact that it has been of huge benefit to Ireland.

In respect of Lebanon and the decision of the Foreign Affairs Council, the Deputy is again deliberately conflating issues and misrepresenting what is involved. If you read what has been set out, you will see that the European Union support mission in Lebanon will provide advisory support and training to strengthen the capabilities of the Lebanese armed forces. This has already been happening. We want Lebanon to be a strong and independent sovereign state. Israel has been undermining Lebanon, as has Iran, by the way. Iran has created havoc within Lebanon through its malign activities, as has Israel. It is entirely fit and proper that we would

support and strengthen the democratically elected Lebanese Government. It needs a lot of support.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The only veto that can exist in respect of our neutrality is the veto of the Irish people, the voice of the Irish people, the democratic decision and consent of the Irish people, but the Taoiseach does not want to hear that. He reaches instead for history. He reaches for distractions. He reaches for hyperbole, but none of that will ever disguise the fact that he is set on a reckless course of action. The recklessness is the Taoiseach's and not mine. It is he, by removing the triple lock and the need for a UN mandate, who will put Irish lives at risk. It is he who will put our troops in harm's way. It is he who will wreck the foundations of our neutrality, the very thing that has enabled our proud record of peacekeeping. That is what he is set on doing. More than that, he wants to do that without the sanction and permission of the Irish people. Shame on the Taoiseach. He has no authority to do that. That is not for him to decide.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He knows that Irish people feel passionately about this issue, and that is why he evades it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald's time is up. Thank you. Please accept the direction of the Chair.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Give us the referendum, let us have this debate and allow the Irish people to make the decision.

The Taoiseach: It was the Fianna Fáil Party, actually, in government that began that noble history of peacekeeping, which Deputy McDonald and her party had nothing to do with. I have gone through Sinn Féin's history and so on. They are a bunch of hypocrites, but anyway. We have all shared in it. Every party in government down through the decades has proudly supported our peacekeepers. It is a noble tradition, and that is what we want to continue-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No.

The Taoiseach: -----but at the moment, Russia and the former colonial power that Sinn Féin is very friendly with, the United Kingdom, believe all these people should have a veto on whether we participate in peacekeeping.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is actually moronic.

The Taoiseach: What the Deputy has ignored as well-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is actually moronic.

The Taoiseach: -----and again she interrupts, is that we already have voted into the Constitution-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This is too serious for the Taoiseach's moronic nonsense.

The Taoiseach: ----- the twenty-sixth amendment, which states, "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".

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are talking about the UN mandate.

The Taoiseach: In other words, we cannot join a European defence pact and-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are talking about the UN mandate.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy cannot listen. She does not like the truth. She is on a campaign. This is about a campaign-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I do not care at this stage. This is too serious.

The Taoiseach: -----not about the truth. We have never had a referendum other than one amending, deleting from or adding to the Constitution. We have a written Constitution-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. His time is up.

The Taoiseach: -----and our Constitution prohibits us from engaging in any war or defence-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, the Taoiseach's arrogance prohibits him from doing the right thing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cian O'Callaghan is on his feet.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: At the health committee this morning, the head of the HSE, Anne O'Connor, made an extraordinary admission. Unbelievably, she has not spoken to the CEO of Cork University Hospital recently. This is the same head of the HSE who went on radio on Sunday to lambast Jennifer Kearney and CUH for "conducting its management business via the media". So, on the one hand, the head of the HSE is on the airwaves attacking CUH for raising serious issues in the media, and at the same time, she does not even talk directly to CUH. It takes a lot longer to drive to RTÉ than it does to pick up the phone. It is an absolutely remarkable admission.

Staff at CUH are begging for help, but the response of the HSE is essentially "get back in your box". It is a classic case of shooting the messenger in order to deflect from the serious concerns about patient safety and to deter staff at other hospitals from speaking out. The

Government is up to its neck in this. My colleagues Pádraig Rice and Liam Quaide have repeatedly raised this crisis with the Taoiseach, and the response from him and his Ministers has been to deflect. They blame the management team. They refuse to take any responsibility. They point to increased funding and staffing, and yet they totally ignore the fact that a 2024 report found that CUH had the lowest rate of workforce growth of any acute hospital in the country, while it also has the biggest bed deficit in Ireland.

The Taoiseach and I know that CUH was starved of funding for years and is now playing catch-up as it struggles to cope with hugely increased demand. Do not take my word for it. Read the internal HSE report covered in today's *Irish Times*. The HSE South West region had the highest increase in demand of any region in the country, and its deficit growth is "clearly demand-driven". It is patients in the Taoiseach's own constituency and across Munster and south Leinster who are paying the price for his failure to address this crisis. We know that cancer surgeries have already been cancelled, new trauma bays are gathering dust and CT scanners are out of action for extended periods. What will it take for the Government to take action? Why is it attempting to discredit the leadership team and clinicians at CUH who are raising the alarm? I ask the Taoiseach again: will he ensure that an independent assessment of staffing levels at the hospital is carried out as a matter of urgency?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I reject the Deputy's assertions. I have read the prepared statements of Anne O'Connor, the director of the HSE, and also Rachel Kenna, whom I refer him to. I have not been involved in any campaign here. I have not been involved in any campaign about this. For 30-odd years of my political life, I have been involved with Cork University Hospital, and I have engaged with people through a whole variety of channels, meeting with consultants and administrators, and that has always been the way. I am used to campaigns of this kind, by the way. I am used to letters getting written and then ending up in the media. That happens. It is not new, but let us not pretend that it did not happen either, because it did. I am quite philosophical about it. That is life, but what I am more focused on is problem-solving. That is my agenda.

The response of the HSE has not been quite what the Deputy said because there has been engagement between the HSE and CUH. There was a visit by Dr. Colm Henry, the chief clinical officer of the HSE. He was accompanied by Sonya Cotter, who has direct oversight of all the hospitals in Cork. That took place on 27 October and was to meet with the CEO of Cork University Hospital and its clinical teams in relation to the patient safety concerns because, if the Deputy remembers, it was originally patient safety concerns that were identified. We have to have a systemic basis for defining and understanding that because it is a very significant issue. People took it very seriously when issues were raised around patient safety. There has to be a systemic basis. That means HIQA has to be involved, along with the national patient safety office. It just cannot be the Deputy or I or others saying putting our hands up and saying there is a safety issue. There has to be a systemic basis. There have to be standards and metrics that govern whether there is a safety risk or not.

There is then a separate issue about resources, in terms of advancement, development and so on. Rachel Kenna in her presentation summed it up. We need investment and reform in our health services. The Deputy should read that because there are some very good illustrations about where you get reforms such as simpler administration and better use of resources. You can have dramatic impacts on waiting times in various areas, gynaecology or wherever, where

demonstrable progress has been seen by meaningful reform. It is not all about activity levels, and we have to have a twin-track approach. It was determined at that visit by Dr. Colm Henry and Sonya Cotter that emergency department, ED, safety measures are in place and were demonstrated to the chief clinical officer, CCO, in the ED. These included focusing close attention on triage times and the ongoing review of category 2 patients. There are areas of concerns in terms of the large volume of patients, both admitted and non-admitted, in the ED, surges in presentations in the evening and the sufficiency of egress options from the ED, including inpatient beds. The clinical directors discussed areas for further review and interventions that will assist in-site operations, and there were a whole range of agreed next steps between Colm Henry, Sonya Cotter and the clinical directors. That is how this should be resolved.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Dismiss, deflect, repeat - that is what the Taoiseach keeps on doing. The staff, doctors and management in CUH have raised serious issues of patient safety, and the Taoiseach is just dismissing them out of hand as if the staff working in the hospital do not know what they are talking about. What assertion did I make that the Taoiseach rejects? He did not expand on that. When my colleague Liam Quaide asked the Taoiseach about this a few weeks ago, he tried to dismiss what he was saying. He said the Deputy had some nerve raising these questions. Why did the Taoiseach do that?

The Taoiseach: I did not.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yes, you did. It is on the record of the Dáil. Sooner or later, the Taoiseach is going to have to resolve this, so why will he not agree to an independent assessment of staffing levels? That is a very simple request that would get to the bottom of this.

There is a difference between the numbers the HSE has cited and what the staff on the ground have said, and this would resolve it. Why is the Taoiseach opposed to an independent assessment of the staffing levels and numbers at the hospital? Why will he not do that?

The Taoiseach: First, I have dismissed nothing. Just because the Deputy says I have dismissed or deflected does not mean it is the truth. He seemed to have this rehearsed line and he just repeated it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: We have all seen it.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: You have dismissed the concerns-----

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did not listen at all to what I said. There is already engagement in response to the correspondence from the clinical directors. A process is now in place between the chief clinical officer and Sonya Cotter of HSE South West in respect of the issues raised. There is a whole list, including consideration of any additional post that may be required, which Ms Cotter will identify and prioritise, such as a review of inpatient length of stays, increased supports and options for discharge, transfer from site, CT capacity and a roadmap to full utilisation, including continual review of any vacant posts.

We are dismissing nothing, and do not dare say I am. When I said Deputy Quaide had a nerve, it was about a comment he made and not about his raising the issue. I have allowed every Deputy in this House to speak. In fact, I am a parliamentarian first and foremost. I would never question a person's right to raise anything in the House.

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

The Taoiseach: However, I reject the Deputy's suggestion that we are up to our necks and stuck in a box. That is all nonsense.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Jennifer Kearney was the canary in the coalmine. In August, she wrote to a senior manager in HSE South West warning that staffing levels at CUH were fundamentally unsafe for patients. Her warnings have been backed by senior hospital consultants and are borne out by anyone with experience of the emergency department at CUH and other hospitals. Jennifer Kearney did what should be expected of any healthcare worker. She saw vulnerable and sick people's health and lives being put at risk and she spoke up for them - truly as a canary in the coalmine.

Far from heeding her warnings, however, official Ireland has pilloried her. The Minister for Health called her requests for help unrealistic, and the Taoiseach alluded to Ms Kearney engaging in what he termed megaphone engagement. Most bizarrely, at the health committee today, HSE head Anne O'Connor made the comment that CUH was unique in that it appeared to be conducting its "management business via the media with extraordinary regularity". In later committee exchanges, Anne O'Connor fell short of expressing full support for the CEO of CUH, which is very concerning. In all my years as a legislator, I am not sure I have ever seen the head of a public body escalating matters in this way.

What exactly does Anne O'Connor mean? Is the CEO of the HSE suggesting Jennifer Kearney has done something wrong, and if so, what? This looks like a witch hunt. Jennifer Kearney has not given media interviews about her letter. She used official channels to raise her concerns in the spring and early summer. As the winter drew nearer, having received no substantive response, she wrote the strongly worded letter setting out profound concerns for patient safety. Far from being an overreaction or creating a media offensive, she raised these concerns carefully. She was ethically obliged to do so, but she is now being pilloried for it.

This raises the question as to whether the Government wants to silence those who speak out about failings in the health service. The debacle has already had a chilling effect. I have seen that myself. Representations have been made to my office by people flagging systemic failings in hospitals, dangerous overcrowding and people missing out on care because of staff shortages. I have had to close several cases before escalating. Why? Because the people making these serious, credible claims are too frightened about the consequences if their identity is uncovered by the HSE. Is it any wonder when we see Jennifer Kearney's treatment by the Government and the HSE?

It was not Jennifer Kearney who enflamed this situation. Indeed, it was a HSE regional manager who used false political threats, invoking the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health against hospital management at CUH. Now, it is Ann O'Connor who has escalated the situation today. How is the Taoiseach going to address the real issue at the heart of this, Jennifer

Kearney's concerns about safe staffing levels at CUH? Has he spoken directly to Jennifer Kearney about this, and will he publish the HIQA report into CUH?

The Taoiseach: I spoke briefly to Jennifer Kearney in October, but being honest, I would have preferred to meet her before anything emerged in the public domain. I have met managers many times in the past, but that is the way it is. I am not pillorying anybody, and I never have. I have not in this case.

Deputy Liam Quaide: She wrote a letter. Are you implying----

The Taoiseach: Here again, the Deputy's question is over. This is outrageous. I did not interrupt-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I will handle this, Taoiseach. Excuse me, Deputy Quaide. This is not your question. If we cannot respect one another's right to speak, we will not get very far. This Chamber has to run efficiently. This is the last time I am going to intervene.

The Taoiseach: I have never been a person who is comfortable with raising people who work in our public service on the floor of the House or in committees. I am not sure that is appropriate. There has to be a proper human resources process. I am not pillorying anybody, and I have no issue. My only issue is to resolve the issues identified. I outlined already in my earlier reply that there is a process in place involving Colm Henry. There can be many factors governing people in employment in the public service, irrespective of what level people are at. We should respect dignity in the workplace and due process for all individuals. That is why I am more anxious to focus on the issues and the management of those issues between the HSE and the hospital, which is part of that. Prior to the HSE, it was a Southern Health Board public hospital and it took pride in that, with private activity going on. That has since changed, because of the public-only consultant contracts and the end of resourcing, which was a big factor in the hospital in the sense that it got a lot done. However, collectively in this House, everybody felt that practice should not continue. The movement to a public-only consultant contract has had impact because it has reduced resources in terms of revenue for the hospital in the short term.

It is also not credible to say there has been no investment in CUH. Staff have gone up by 49.8% from about 3,467 in 2020 to 5,194 today. That is a 1,700 increase in staff since 1 January, which is significant. Now, the population has grown and demand has increased, and the age and acuity of patients have increased. That is why I was struck by the presentations today, particularly from the director of nursing, who made the point that the analysis cannot all be activity focused only. Reform is critical. The health budget has gone up exponentially by any yardstick. Some of that is clearly health inflation and the pressures of demography, with people getting older and needing more complex care after 70 or 75 years of age, so there are big issues facing us right now. These will become progressively more acute as a financing issue. Therefore, reform has to be a core part of what we are about. That is important for patients in particular.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I do not often quote the Taoiseach's predecessor Bertie Ahern, but to do so now, if the Taoiseach stopped waffling, we might get some work done.

Deputy Mary Butler: That is scandalous.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I asked two very specific and straightforward questions. Did the Taoiseach meet Jennifer Kearney on the issues she raised and her concerns about State staffing levels at CUH? Will he publish the HIQA report into CUH?

This is symptomatic of the wider problems within the health service. This morning, the Labour Party brought forward a motion, proposed by our spokesperson Deputy Sherlock, where we raised these serious concerns more broadly about systematic underfunding of the health service, the understaffing and, therefore, the undermining of patient care and health. This is a serious issue. We brought a concise motion and got a seven-page amendment from the Government in return. There were seven pages of text but nothing substantive to deal with the underfunding, the understaffing and what is in all but name a recruitment freeze. Senior managers are telling us there is a recruitment freeze in operation that is hampering their ability to ensure they can offer safe patient care.

I will ask the Taoiseach again. Will he publish the HIQA report and has he met with Jennifer Kearney?

The Taoiseach: The HIQA report is ongoing and I do not think the Minister or the Department has it. Of course it will be published once we have it, as well as the work of Sonya Cotter. There is a process in place to engage with the issues raised by the clinicians and Jennifer Kearney. If I am being honest, and I do not want to go back into the megaphone of who did what, once that letter was published, it was a matter for the HSE to deal with. I was not comfortable wading in, nor was I comfortable with the way the whole thing transpired in August, if I am frank, and I am experienced. I will leave it at that. I know when things happen, how they happen and so on. We all need to be upfront about that, but we will leave it there. I am not impugning anybody or anything like that, but there is a set way of doing business and engaging. I regret the situation we have in CUH as regards the ping-pong nature of rows, campaigns and this, that and the other. That is not going to resolve it. It will be much more prosaic in resolving this than the next soundbite. That is the point I am making.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Has the Taoiseach read the 30-page Parliamentary Budget Office, PBO, report entitled Ireland's Costly Love Affair with Greyhounds? It is absolutely damning but, of course, it is not a love affair with greyhounds. It is a love affair with the greyhound industry because the greyhounds are totally dispensible. They are mere products people can profit off from gambling. Two out of every three greyhounds born and kept in Ireland between 2021 and 2024 are dead. That is 8,414 dead greyhounds. I ask the Taoiseach to digest that. The average lifespan of a greyhound is ten to 15 years but if they are roped into racing, they die aged three to five.

The head of Greyhound Racing Ireland, GRI, Mr. Tim Lucey, has no idea how they are dying, despite boasting great welfare and traceability. Of course, it is an industry; it is not a sport. That is why it is under the Department of agriculture.

While racing greyhounds pay the ultimate price, the Irish taxpayer is paying very dearly too. What a cause? What real sport? They would only love if the Dáil was lining up tonight to allocate them €20.4 million. Badminton Ireland got €1.1 million in 2026. Women in Sport got €4 million. How many refuges for victims of domestic violence could be opened with €20 million? Every few years, GRI commissions a cost-benefit analysis weirdly from the same economist - Jim Power - every time. These reports are not independently audited by the Department of agriculture. This is the same GRI, the board of which racked up €70,000 in expenses and €9,000 for hotels.

I am not going to spend long on animal welfare. It is absolutely not a priority for the Taoiseach's Government, with fox-hunting, hare coursing and greyhound racing all being supported but what about the public finances? The Minister for Finance has not read the PBO report either. Normally he is very worried about public money when it comes to the long-term unemployed but he seems very disinterested in what is effectively a nationalised greyhound industry. GRI claims 4,000 jobs, although active owners of greyhounds have fallen dramatically. One in four jobs is in pet food manufacturing and industry. That would presumably continue if greyhounds were not racing. How can anyone take the economic claims of €132 million seriously? Nobody is, except the Government. Will the Taoiseach commission an independent report into the greyhound industry?

It is clear that greyhound racing is moving towards gambling. That is what is propping it up - people online watching greyhounds being raced effectively to death. Will the Taoiseach end the State life support for this cruel and negative industry, just as happened in Wales, Scotland and New Zealand?

The Taoiseach: First, I reject the Deputy's assertion that Government is not committed to animal welfare. The Minister for agriculture and food, Deputy Martin Heydon, takes the issue extremely seriously. He is very committed and has developed a new animal welfare strategy, which sets out very clear actions to deliver across a range of very important areas. We will continue to support that across the board in relation to all issues.

The Deputy has described the greyhound industry as an industry and not a sport. There would be quite a number of people who would disagree with her on that. I am not an expert on greyhound racing and I have not specifically read the report but the Government and the Minister take the report seriously. Many people see it as a sport, by the way, so the Deputy should not dismiss them. There are many communities that have been involved all their lives in greyhound racing. It is similar to other people doing different sports. That is a fact of life, and it is one in both urban and rural Ireland and in particular communities. That is a reality. There are issues that emerge, and have emerged, with respect to the welfare of greyhounds. About €4.2 million was spent in 2025 in the area of welfare and integrity in that area.

The legislation for the Horse and Greyhound Fund dates back to 2001, where significant revenue from vetting and so on was ring-fenced for both industries. There was about 80% for the horse racing industry and about 20% for the greyhound industry. Animal welfare is a key priority in regard to the greyhound industry in particular. In budget 2027, a further €2.9 million for the fund has been allocated. That is distributed, as I said. There has been an independent review of the Department's governance of the fund, which was carried out by Indecon back in 2025. It included consideration of the efficacy of the fund in ensuring the highest standards of

greyhound and equine welfare. One of the recommendations is to increase resources over the medium term for welfare purposes. The Department is engaging with the racing board to implement this and other recommendations.

About 67,611 greyhounds are subject to traceability as of October 2026. In 2025, there were 4,393 active owners and 305 trainers using the system. There have been about 2,636 welfare and kennel inspections carried out in 2025 by welfare officers. The overall compliance rate was 95.55% and about 1,157 greyhounds were rehomed through the Irish Retired Greyhound Trust.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am going to take it that the Taoiseach did not read this report because that is what I asked in my first sentence. It is not *War and Peace*; it is 30 pages, and yet the Tánaiste and the Minister have not read it either. They do not want to read it because it is independent. It has got no skin in the game and it is damning. For some reason, the public is worrying what the Government's affiliation is to this nefarious industry, which has been jettisoned all over the world, in countries close to us as well. If the Taoiseach thinks it is a sport, he should put it into the Department of sport. I consider sport a healthy activity that human beings take part in voluntarily.

How and why did 8,000 greyhounds die? Does the Taoiseach know? The head of GRI did not know when he was questioned at the Committee of Public Accounts. We hear about this great welfare fund. People are voting with their feet. They do not want to go to greyhound racing anymore. The figures are down in Youghal and in the Taoiseach's own city. Zero people went last year; two people went the year before. It is online betting from abroad. We should not be propping up the betting industry. One in ten people has betting problems. We should not be propping it up with this donation.

The Taoiseach: I take it that the Deputy's position is that she does not believe sport should involve any animals.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is rhetorical-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Certainly not greyhounds.

The Taoiseach: I got the sense. That is okay; the Deputy is entitled to have a position-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Do not deflect. I refer to greyhounds.

The Taoiseach: -----but I get the feeling that once greyhounds are dealt with, horses will be next for the Deputy.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: I am just making a point.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Stick with this.

The Taoiseach: That is where this goes.

The most effective way to enhance and strengthen a sporting or cultural activity is to threaten to ban it. The Deputy would be a great fillip to the greyhound industry. What I mean is she would provoke a reaction that would actually have thousands of people coming back to greyhound racing in the morning.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It did not happen in Wales or New Zealand.

The Taoiseach: People will reactive very negatively to Deputy Coppinger's approach.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is Ireland.

The Taoiseach: I do not think it is just an industry. There is an impact in terms of betting. I have no time for gambling or betting myself and I have no affiliation with the greyhound racing industry. I am into different sports but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: -----there are people out there who have been involved in greyhound racing all their lives as a cultural and sporting pursuit, whether Deputy Coppinger likes it or not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: So what?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Carol Nolan is on her feet.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There are people who like a lot of things.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to raise the ongoing delays surrounding the Midlands Hospice project in Tullamore, a project that is desperately needed. Before I do so, I want to make it clear that this is an issue that transcends party politics. Every public representative in the midlands region wants to see a hospice delivered, and I wish to acknowledge the efforts of my Oireachtas colleagues, Deputies Tony McCormack and John Clendennen, in ensuring that the project remains firmly on the political agenda.

The concern now is not whether there is political support for the hospice; it is whether there is a credible delivery plan for this hospice. Planning permission has been secured. The Government says it remains committed to the project, yet families are now being told that the cost of the project has increased to approximately €40 million and that the HSE has initiated a further design review process.

All of this is concerning. I think it was the Taoiseach who announced the €20 million in capital funding for the midlands hospice in September 2022. We are now seeing a 100% increase in costs.

At a recent meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Infrastructure and National Development Plan Delivery, committee members repeatedly expressed concerns about the inability of health officials to provide clear project-level information, delivery milestones and timelines for major infrastructure projects. The people of the midlands have already endured years of delay, site changes and escalating costs. What they are not being given is a clear answer to some of the basic questions they ask, including when the current design review will be completed, when construction will commence and when the HSE expects the hospice to open its doors.

At present, it appears there is no publicly available timeline or information against which progress can be measured. This is a serious governance issue. The Offaly Hospice Foundation, whose fundraising, advocacy and commitment helped to initiate this project in the first place, has stated publicly that it was completely marginalised from the process and that it has no role in the governance of the current development. Instead of being treated as a principal partner, it said it was effectively sidelined on critical decisions relating to the project. That is a matter of considerable concern.

Will the Taoiseach ask the HSE to provide a definitive timeline for the completion of the current design review, the commencement of construction and the delivery of the midlands hospice? Will he ensure that the Offaly Hospice Foundation is formally included as a key stakeholder in all future stages of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is extremely frustrating that this has not got off the ground. I worked hard at the time with the then Minister, Stephen Donnelly, to secure and allocate the €20 million. Now I am informed that the costs have potentially exploded since then.

The application for planning permission was submitted for the hospice in Arden Lane and the notification of the decision to grant planning was received in December 2025. Following submissions from third parties, this decision was subsequently appealed to what is now An Coimisiún Pleanála. An Coimisiún Pleanála decided to grant planning permission on 27 May 2026. We now have planning permission but it has taken a significant length of time. Consequently, the costs have increased significantly. A design team was appointed to progress a new specialist palliative care hospice for the midlands. A value engineering exercise takes place when there is a significant increase in projected costs. That is prudent. That happens in every particular project. That is under way at the moment. I do not have a commencement date yet, but I will engage with the Minister. The remainder of the design stages have to be completed and a tender process has to be undertaken.

We will ensure that the midlands hospice foundation will be consulted. I am surprised it was not included. It is an important stakeholder. Generally speaking, hospices across the length and breadth of the country have a strong community support base behind them, which

can complement official State funding in providing additionality and supports and creating a more enhanced environment for families and so on in a hospice environment. I have been a very strong supporter of the hospice. We have brought hospices within the section 39 process, which has been-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: LauraLynn.

The Taoiseach: Yes, all of them. That has made a big difference to their operational costs and revenue. They are a complementary part of the acute hospital system. They have been increasingly playing an important role in patients who should not be in acute settings having a more direct pathway to the hospice where quality of life issues can be prioritised and worked on. The delay is deeply disappointing but the planning has now been secured. The Minister and I are committed to getting this project done.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Taoiseach for his response and support. We urgently need intervention. I am concerned about the delays, as is everyone in the midlands. The costs are beginning to spiral out of control. It is now at €40 million and a further design is being initiated. Will the Taoiseach intervene and call on the HSE to publish a detailed road plan as to where this is going delivery wise, whether the key milestones are being met and the costs involved? Those issues are pertinent. We need to get to grips with the basics. There is an absence of vital and basic information regarding this project. It is not good enough. The HSE has responsibility for capital health projects, as was said at the health committee. It needs to be responsible and provide us with answers. The public representatives and constituents in Offaly are more than entitled to seek those answers. I am asking for intervention and the publication of a delivery road plan.

The Taoiseach: As I have said, we are anxious to get this project under way. I would be careful of banding about figures. I have not mentioned a figure. I know that a figure has been bandied about but there is no tender process here. I am always reluctant to give figures because that might encourage tenderers to use them as baseline figures. Until we have a full tendering process, we do not know what the precise costs will be. We know costs have increased from the original €20 million that had been the estimate back when we gave sanction for this hospice to go ahead at the site that was identified and preferred by the hospice foundation. I do not have precise timelines for the Deputy, but it makes sense that some work has to be done in terms of value engineering to make sure that it is value for money. What I mean by that is we do a project that gives us value for money and has some degree of a cost framework that is sustainable into the future.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Jennifer Kearney has done the State and the people some service by speaking out on the situation in CUH. Of course, her voice is not the only one speaking of the real danger that is posed by severe staff shortages. A total of 137 directors and assistant directors of nursing have warned that these shortages and the controls that have been imposed without consultation with them are putting both staff and patients at risk. Is the

Taoiseach taking these serious and widespread warnings seriously? Does he propose to respond to them in a substantive way?

The Taoiseach: There has to be a systemic way to define safety risks. Otherwise, it is ridiculous and any individual can sit up and say there is a safety risk. We have to have the national patient safety office. When it comes to nurse safety and so on, there are clear guidelines. If we look at the submissions to the health committee this morning, they identify a 95% compliance rate with staffing levels around-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The safe staffing framework.

The Taoiseach: -----the safe staffing framework. That was an interesting presentation this morning but no one will look at it because, first of all, it is a success, and sure we cannot mention that. Equally, we take anyone who raises a safety issue seriously because we have to. We take it very seriously. As I outlined earlier, there is engagement between HSE South West and CUH, and the clinical directors and the CEO of CUH. A process has been outlined. The chief clinical officer, Colm Henry, has been there. He has visited twice now in the context of the safety concerns that have been raised. HIQA has done an announced visit. It is taken seriously.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: As we have heard many times, in 2013, the Taoiseach described the triple lock as core to Irish neutrality. In a recent debate, he said that the removal of the triple lock will leave Irish neutrality unaffected. His party recently put out a statement saying that removing the triple lock is now supporting our neutrality.

That is quite the journey in three very different statements. Which is the one the Taoiseach now stands by?

I would like to recognise the contribution of the Fianna Fáil party towards Irish neutrality and independent foreign policy. The Taoiseach said himself only a few moments ago that he is proud of beginning that proud tradition of peacekeeping. I also commend Fianna Fáil members up and down the country and in the Taoiseach's own parliamentary party who are now standing up for those values and standing up for the retention of the triple lock because they, like me, are very much in mind of his first statement that the triple lock is core to Irish neutrality. Will the Taoiseach please stand up for those same values and retain the triple lock?

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy's acknowledgement of Fianna Fáil's central involvement in establishing a policy of neutrality during the Second World War and also the work of Frank Aiken as an outstanding Minister for foreign affairs who created and carved out an independent foreign policy, and made a distinctive contribution to nuclear non-proliferation and to the United Nations. I read Seán Lemass's diaries recently, due to the work of Ronan McGreevy, where Lemass outlined the decision to start the first peacekeeping mission in the 1960s. We just want to keep peacekeeping going. The Security Council is now dysfunctional. The Deputy must know that.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: What about the General Assembly?

The Taoiseach: On the Security Council we now have a country that pursues its own interests through the Wagner Group and through other groups in Africa and all over the world.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The USA.

The Taoiseach: The USA has pulled us out of Lebanon on the Security Council, so we can no longer do peacekeeping there. It is because of the dysfunctionality of the Security Council that we have to try and protect peacekeeping into the future.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is rubbish.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I raise again the terrible plight of scholars from Gaza and Palestine denied visas to study here. The Minister for justice is due to decide the last of the Gaza scholarship appeals today. The future of 55 students rests on that decision. The next evacuation is on 23 November. Yesterday, in reply to me, the Minister for foreign affairs confirmed that on 12 November her Department was told no further places were available for that departure from Gaza. The remaining students will be helped, she said, at the earliest available opportunity but there is no indication of a date. The State told the High Court the appeals would be decided by today so the students could travel on 23 November but now we know the departure list closed six days ago. A student could be granted a visa this afternoon and still have no way out of Gaza. This is appalling for the students who did everything asked of them and for the universities which have held places open for months. Are the two Ministers working to the same timetable? Will the Taoiseach commit to putting arrangements in place to ensure a route out for every student in Gaza granted a visa to come and study here?

The Taoiseach: Ireland has had a strong record in facilitating students from Gaza, and indeed the West Bank, to come to Ireland to study. It has to be done in a proper, organised and co-ordinated manner. There is a sense from the Department of justice that did not happen – that is its perspective in respect of the individual applicants from individual universities. The Department of foreign affairs programme did not have similar challenges. There are real logistical issues in getting people out of Gaza. Again, the Irish Government has been very facilitative of quite a number of people getting out of Gaza and coming to Ireland for different reasons. I have spoken to both Ministers in respect of this, particularly the Minister for justice who I think is fully aware of the issues, but we do have to make sure it is done properly and appropriately.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Department of local government has determined that Laois is to be an area of high population growth and that the population should increase by one third by 2034. That is 11,500 new homes, the bulk of which are planned for Portlaoise. Housing needs infrastructure. There are serious infrastructure deficits at the moment in Portlaoise and Mountmellick. The centres of Portlaoise and Mountmellick are choked up with traffic throughout the day. Land is zoned for additional housing but it needs to be serviced, particularly the areas planned in Portlaoise, which happen to correspond with the planned Portlaoise northern orbital route connecting the Mountmellick Road to the Dublin Road. It is not even listed as an objective in the national development plan, never mind funding being

allocated. It is the same with Mountmellick. The Department of public expenditure under the Minister, Deputy Chambers, seems to be totally unaware that the Department of local government under the Minister, Deputy Browne, has determined that Laois is set for population growth. Will the Taoiseach raise with the Ministers, Deputies Chambers and Browne, that Portlaoise northern orbital route is built under the housing activation plan?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. He should use his time wisely. Taoiseach, please.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is not included in the national development plan and it needs to be funded.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. A short response, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The housing activation office exists to unblock any infrastructural bottlenecks that would prevent housing from happening. I will ask those involved to engage with Laois County Council in respect of the issues the Deputy raised. I do not know whether this is a bigger road project or whether it is infrastructure that could facilitate the creation of a lot of housing. We will be willing to be constructive but I do not have the specifics of the scheme the Deputy outlined.

Deputy Michael Collins: I wish to raise two serious healthcare issues affecting families across Cork with CUH. Just today, I had a father from west Cork on the phone who was deeply concerned about his child who has been unable to access support from a diabetic nurse due to the severe staffing shortages within the paediatric diabetes service. The service is currently operating with three fewer nursing staff than required leaving families facing delays and uncertainty while a small number of remaining staff struggle to meet demand. I also want to highlight the ongoing shortcomings in the lymphedema service at Cork University Hospital. Many breast cancer patients who develop lymphedema following surgery are unable to access regular manual lymphatic drainage treatment recommended for their condition because of persistent staffing shortages. Some patients are receiving appointments months apart despite requiring consistent treatment to prevent deterioration. These staffing deficits have persisted for far too long. I urge the Minister for Health and the HSE to take immediate action to recruit the necessary staff and restore these essential services. Stop pointing the finger of blame at senior management and staff in CUH.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I cannot speak to the detail of the individual cases but I will ask HSE South West about it and whether it requires management deployment or additional staff. I will find out about both cases.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Parents in Louth tell me they are still waiting for secondary school places for next September. Schools that never had waiting lists before now have them. Even children with long-standing family ties to local schools are still awaiting offers. This is extremely worrying for so many families. The Louth population is growing. Will the Taoiseach ask the Department of education to review the latest population figures and the enrolment

projections across the county, starting with north Louth, and set out what capital investments are needed to deliver more mainstream places, more special classes in mainstream schools and more special school places? Can we also plan for school transport before applications open? Families have told me about the relief of finally getting a school place only to find their children have no way of getting there. We can see this pressure coming. Can we plan for it now particularly for children who do not get a place in their nearest school?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I will ask the Department of education to engage on this issue. In some areas there is a co-ordinated central applications approach in a given area among all the schools. Not all schools want to sign up to that but it can sort out a lot of issues, if there are multiple applications for different schools and so on, and enable people to get an earlier read-out of the allocation of spaces. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, about the special education aspect of the question in relation to special schools. The ETB could be helpful there.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is great.

The Taoiseach: They are brilliant.

Deputy Seán Kyne: The Government has committed the largest ever investment in the State's history in the national development plan with billions of additional funding for much-needed projects up and down the country. As construction inflation eats into that to a certain degree, are there any plans to review or bring forward allocations to capital budgets? Looking at education and the importance of school building projects, Galway has a number of school building projects that are hugely necessary, including St. Joseph's Patrician College, The Bish, Scoil Chaitríona, Renmore, Coláiste Chroí Mhuire, An Spidéal, St. Annin's National School, Rosscahill, Scoil Mhuire NS and Clifden, all of which we would like to see progress through the capital evaluations and go to construction as quickly as possible. Are there any plans to enhance and bring forward the level of capital investment to allow additional schools to be provided over the lifetime of this Government?

The Taoiseach: We keep all capital programmes under review. There has been very strong investment in education. About 1,800 school projects have been built since 2020 and about 4,000 small-scale improvement and maintenance works. This year about 1,000 projects are on site with new schools, extensions, modular accommodation, climate projects and new special class provision, but there is big pent-up demand.

1 o'clock

Building inflation has dramatically increased the prices for a lot of school extensions. The estimates coming in are quite astronomical in some cases and that is eating into the budget, so we keep everything under review. I believe education is a key investment in our society. I also believe that, of all forms of capital investment, investment in educational infrastructure has greater resonance with communities and ultimately produces greater outcomes for the nation.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I wish to raise serious concerns regarding Mayo County Council's proposed vesting of 440 acres of commonage at Keel Sandybanks, Achill, under a disputed 1970 compulsory purchase order, CPO. Tailte Éireann records identify-----

The Taoiseach: Could the Deputy repeat that? I did not get it fully. Who is doing what?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is a CPO to take 440 acres of commonage at Keel Sandybanks in Achill. I am all for tourism development but there has not been any consultation with all of the shareholders. Tailte Éireann records identify 557 shareholders as registered owners. Approximately 350 of those receive agricultural payments linked to the lands.

The Taoiseach: Sheep, is it?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Their entitlements and livelihoods are potentially at risk. I want to know what the legal basis is for the vesting order and whether the Minister will publish the original CPO maps, ownership schedules, notification records and evidence of any compensation paid.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The problem is that there is-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: My time was cut short and the problem is that there has been no consultation.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy was allowed her time. She and the Taoiseach can correspond.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Yes, but I did not even get to finish.

The Taoiseach: I do not know whether the county council has informed the Deputy as to why it is doing this.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: No. It is development.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, that does not work.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I did not get my time.

The Taoiseach: Surely the Deputy can get on to the local officials in the county council. I do not know, but I am not going to ask-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: They are Fianna Fáil-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: The officials, the management, are doing this, I presume. I do not have the specifics of the case. I will ask what is going on, but I do not have the specifics of this particular CPO by the county council. Obviously, the council has to outline why it wants to compulsorily purchase 440 acres of commonage. Is it sheep farming or is it-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Sheep.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is rhetorical. The Taoiseach should not be asking questions.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Sheep, and it is important.

The Taoiseach: I am seeking clarity.

An Ceann Comhairle: There might need to be further interaction, but not on the floor of the House.

The Taoiseach: Okay. I will ask the Minister what he can do.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Will he please do so?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Lee Reeves, a boxer, died in Limerick two days ago. Lee joined the Defence Forces in April 2024 and was posted to the 12th Infantry Battalion in Limerick city. Lee was a volunteer for Limerick Treaty Suicide Prevention. God rest his soul. He was a young man of 31 years of age. He worked hard as a volunteer for Limerick Treaty Suicide Prevention, but the organisation will be without premises come January next year. Limerick Treaty Suicide Prevention and Limerick Suicide Watch do absolutely fantastic work voluntarily. The least we can do as a country is provide a facility for those who are volunteering to save lives. I am asking for the Taoiseach's help.

The Taoiseach: I take the opportunity to sympathise with the family of Lee Reeves. His death is very sad. He was a fine young man who pursued his career in boxing with a total focus on excellence and, in parallel with that, had a deep concern for his community and was very involved, as the Deputy said, in Limerick Treaty Suicide Prevention. He was also a fine, upstanding member of Óglaigh na hÉireann, our Defence Forces, representing the very best in that regard. Our sympathies go to his family.

In respect of premises for Limerick Treaty Suicide Prevention, I advise, perhaps, engaging with the council in the first instance, or with other agencies, to see if we can identify vacant premises or an operating base for the organisation, which does very valuable work.

Deputy Liam Quaide: On 21 October, the Taoiseach told me in this Chamber that the Minister for Health had sent the HSE chief clinical officer, Dr. Colm Henry, to Cork University Hospital, CUH, and that "Nothing has emerged from any examinations that there is a safety issue" there. Three weeks before that, on 30 September, the Minister claimed Dr. Henry had conducted "a full safety analysis" and she declared that "Cork has been safe all year". The concerns of the CEO were publicly known in mid-August. Today, Dr. Henry admitted to me at a meeting of the health committee that he had not set foot inside CUH for all of August and September and most of October. He was there on 27 October. The Taoiseach and the Minister used that supposed assessment to dismiss serious warnings from those responsible for patients' care. The Taoiseach has no credibility when he refuses to commission an independent staffing assessment of CUH. This is what clinical leaders have repeatedly requested. Why will he not commission it?

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me, but the Taoiseach is to respond.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is constantly changing and distorting the narrative here. I never said Dr. Colm Henry was there in August.

Deputy Liam Quaide: He assessed the hospital.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should not do that.

The Taoiseach: I said he went there on 25 October, that he did visit after-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has put the question.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Our conversation was on 21 October.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has put the question.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Our conversation was on 21 October.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's entire approach has been to try to undermine me or undermine the Government. That is it.

Deputy Liam Quaide: It has not.

The Taoiseach: I am more interested in trying to resolve the issues.

Deputy Liam Quaide: *Ad hominem*.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cullinane.If a Deputy asks a question, he or she must allow the answer. That is the respect required under Standing Orders.

Deputy David Cullinane: I will indeed. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for that.

I want to raise changes that were made to Local Link bus services because I have been contacted by a number of parents in Waterford, specifically about the Dungarvan to Tramore and Dungarvan to Waterford city routes. We all know that the Local Link bus service is important for rural areas. The change is that on a lot of these routes there were what were called unofficial stops. Children, for example, might get off at bus stops that might not be official, and that was facilitated for years. It seems that this has now stopped. It has caused problems for families because the children might now be dropped off two, three or four kilometres away from where they were previously dropped off. I am not sure why this was done, but I have been contacted by a lot of families. I am asking that the Taoiseach have this examined and that common sense be applied, if that is possible.

The Taoiseach: Local Link has been a very good service and it has had a significant impact. I know the Minister is hoping to expand the service in the coming months. The Deputy has identified unofficial stops. The National Transport Authority, because of the public service obligation levy, has identified the official stops that should be used. Notwithstanding safety considerations, I do believe common sense, which is a great old phrase that is bandied about when officialdom baffles us, should apply in this respect because it is a local transport network.

Deputy Joe Neville: I want to highlight the matter of public transport in Kildare, a county where the population is hurtling towards 300,000, with thousands travelling into Dublin city daily for work and education. Each week, my inbox sees an influx of constituents rightly frustrated with the lack of, or inconsistencies in, transport services provided in their area. One constituent wrote yesterday saying that they were riding, wobbling around mid-carriage, on the packed and delayed 5.32 p.m. train from Dublin Pearse. Another constituent, who lives in Johnstownbridge, wrote yesterday that trains are so infrequent and often late, that there are often no seats on the return journeys and that there are no later evening trains. There are issues such as space in carriages travelling from Sallins–Naas and Celbridge, ghost buses, insufficient capacity on buses in Leixlip, particularly given the presence of Intel and Maynooth university, and too few Irish Rural Link services provided for areas such as Clane and Prosperous. Winter months, with harsher weather conditions, cause havoc, with increased delays and timetables that can become a suggestion rather than a guarantee. We live in modern Ireland and this cannot just be accepted. I am aware that there are projects like DART+ West and, hopefully, DART+ South West following suit, but these issues need to be raised and addressed in the interim.

The Taoiseach: There is huge investment in the roll-out of the new DART+ battery-electric fleet on the northern rail line, to Drogheda, for example. Then there is DART+ West, which is a huge programme and is vital. Unfortunately, these cannot be done on an interim basis. These are very big projects that should happen. The allocation has been made. The national development plan funding is enormous.

We fully acknowledge the growth in Kildare, including in population and investment. Much inward investment has come into Kildare industrially, which has created a lot of employment. The university is going from strength to strength following ongoing investment from the Government. We take on board what the Deputy is saying. I fully understand the pressures,

but we are going to continue to try to roll out and modernise both the public transport network and the road network.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Our primary function as elected Members of Dáil Éireann has to be to see after our sick, including sick children and elderly people, especially elderly people in need of a long-term care bed. These people worked all their lives to bring us to where we are.

We welcomed the Minister of State, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, less than three weeks ago to open our new hospital, Killarney Community Nursing Unit. We are proud of it and it is great. However, he opened 96 beds and 37 remain unopened. There is fierce pressure for long-term care beds in Killarney. The nursing homes are full. Many people have to go outside of the county to get a nursing home. Will this embargo on recruitment affect the full staffing of this hospital?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister will respond. With respect, I will not be able to take all Deputies if Deputy Healy-Rae does not resume his seat.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am pleased that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, opened the really important community nursing unit in Kerry last week. It is evidence that there is not in fact a recruitment freeze but that we are trying to open facilities that we need specifically for patient support. That facility is important for the whole community and for people in University Hospital Kerry who need to use it as a step-down facility on their way home. It helps the emergency department in University Hospital Kerry, which has been doing a very good job too. It is evidence of the fact that we are continuing to recruit, as are the 170 graduate nurses across the Deputy's region.

Deputy Michael Murphy: A total of 162 lives have been lost on Irish roads so far this year. Tomorrow, the transport committee that I chair will launch its Report on Road Safety: The Urgent Need for Action. There have been nine months of work, 12 public hearings, engagement with 24 stakeholders and unanimous support. I acknowledge Deputy Pa Daly for his input. There are 52 recommendations about accountability, enforcement, the accelerated use of technology, safer infrastructure and legislative reform. I urge this House and Government to take these recommendations seriously, in a timely manner. Both the Leas-Chathaoirleach of the committee and I are available to meet the Taoiseach next week to brief him on the report. We have a crisis on Irish roads. We need to act now.

The Taoiseach: Is the committee launching it tomorrow or is this a pre-launch?

Deputy Michael Murphy: Tomorrow.

The Taoiseach: The issue is critical. We had tremendous success in earlier decades in reducing death and injury on our roads. There has been an increase recently and there have been different manifestations of that. I certainly will look forward to reading the report. I have not read it yet. The Government will have to respond to it. In the first instance, the Minister for Transport will have to engage with the committee. I have no issue in meeting it but I would

say it will not be next week because it is a fairly full schedule and normally people look for meetings a bit earlier in advance. I commend the work the Deputy has done on the committee. It is important that we act on the recommendations.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: We are in the depths of a cost-of-living crisis. Hundreds of thousands of people cannot pay their electricity bills and over a quarter of people cannot pay their gas bills. In Drogheda, we look at the multiple data centres and wonder why we, the people, have to pay so much more for our energy than those faceless companies. There is no respite from ever-increasing energy bills because the Taoiseach refuses to put a windfall tax on the same companies which make astronomical profits yet continue to rip off their customers. The kicker for us in Drogheda is that Government policy has turned us into a commuter town. Some 15,000 commuters every day pay a fortune for the privilege of going to work. They see toll charges, fuel costs and public transport costs going up. They are pushed to the pin of their collar and it cannot go on. We need a serious focus on cost-of-living measures from this Government that include getting rid of the carbon tax on home heating oil to help people heat their homes this winter, delivering energy credits to support families who are really struggling with their bills and delivering an essential grocery card to ease the immense strain on ordinary working families.

The Taoiseach: There has been a significant focus on cost of living in the budget, in terms of social protection payments, the cuts to income tax, reduction in childcare costs, the introduction of a new cost of disability payment and the increase in the fuel allowance and the numbers of people who can benefit from the fuel allowance. That is a structured, focused way of dealing with the cost of living. On the capital side, we continue to invest in our public transport system, in new roads and also in urban development, trying to bring back life and jobs to areas. We continue to work on investment opportunities so that people can get work, which is the most effective response to undoubted cost-of-living pressures that have occurred because of the war in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine and our over-dependence on fossil fuels and the importation of fossil fuels.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: On Friday, I held a constituency clinic in Mahon Community Centre. I had four women in a row who broke down and cried because of their housing situation. Two of the women are living in massively overcrowded housing, with three generations in one house, and a mother and her two children, including one with autism, sharing a bedroom. The third woman was looking for a residential place for her adult child with intellectual disabilities. A fourth woman, a healthcare worker with long Covid, is about to lose her home. She has spent all of her savings. She is moving into arrears on her mortgage and from January her temporary rehabilitation remuneration payment will be cut to just €40 per week. She asked me what the Taoiseach is going to do for her. Is he going to help her? These are the Taoiseach's constituents. They want an answer. Will he and the Minister for Health intervene on long Covid? It affects a small number of workers who need an intervention from the Taoiseach before Christmas. What will he do for the other women who are in dire housing situations in our constituency in Cork?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy raised two issues. One is housing. We have provided a huge investment in public housing, as the Deputy knows. In Cork, affordable housing bodies and

the local authority have built a significant number of social homes as well as affordable homes. If the Deputy wants to send on the case details to me, he certainly can do so. He knows I have intervened twice on long Covid and it had an impact.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is coming to an end.

The Taoiseach: It has been through the WRC twice. I have met those with long Covid and we suggested the kind of measures that have helped. The more recent reports I got back showed significant progress on that issue more generally, with people returning to work. I do not have the specific case of the individual that the Deputy raised with me, whom he met last week.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The water network in Donoughmore is simply no longer fit for purpose. After years of repeated bursts, the community recently endured nearly a week without a proper water supply. That is difficult for locals. Local councillor Mick Looney and I have been pursuing Irish Water to improve the network. It is spending significant money repairing pipes that were laid back in the 1950s. While approximately 2 km of that 23 km network have been replaced, it is only a small portion of what is needed. People are tired of the patching up and the failing system. Will the Taoiseach join Councillor Looney and me in pressing Irish Water for a comprehensive replacement programme for Donoughmore?

The Taoiseach: I will work with the Deputy and Councillor Looney in respect of this issue. The water mains in the Donoughmore area are old asbestos cement mains laid in rocky ground. The scheme has been experiencing an increase in burst frequency in recent months, probably due to ground movements following a very dry summer and autumn. Uisce Éireann recently installed a pressure-reducing valve. It was hoped this might stabilise the situation, but the pipeline burst again yesterday in two separate locations. Both repairs were completed yesterday but, given the network configuration in the area, it can take a long time for supply to return to all customers following a repair, particularly those on high ground or at the extremity of the network. I think Uisce Éireann appreciates the fact that the supply interruptions are having a significant detrimental impact on the local community, but it has resources focused on carrying out further investigations to improve the service as soon as possible. I will take on board the Deputy's point that dealing with the growing pressure on the system probably needs something more substantial now.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Kitty O'Brien told a German court this week that they were left with permanent nerve damage because of a brutal assault by a Berlin police officer. This attack was unwarranted and unusually violent. Kitty was punched in the face and had their arm broken. The resulting operation left Kitty with 11 screws and a metal plate that will remain in their arm permanently. Kitty was not committing a crime. Kitty was peacefully protesting against the genocide taking place in Gaza. Kitty is not alone. Irish citizens have been the target of outrageous arrests in other countries because of their solidarity with the Palestinian people. Máire Ní Mhurchú, a great-grandmother from Cork, was arrested in London along with her two sisters, Gráinne Murphy and Olga Jowett. What is the Taoiseach doing to support the Irish citizens who are being punished for making a stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people?

The Taoiseach: We always provide online consular supports to Irish citizens who have been arrested or have had issues with agencies or authorities in different countries all over the world, particularly member states. We do not represent people in court; this is not our function as a Government. We cannot do that but we can advise and seek to make sure people are given their rights and entitlements, access to legal advice and so on. I am not *au fait* with the specifics of each individual case the Deputy has raised. The UK Government took a particular position with its laws - I will not go into it in detail - in terms of Palestine Action or whatever. I am not saying this person is part of that. I do not know. I do not have the background to it. We will help people in situations where they are in difficulty.

Data Centre Transparency Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I move:

> That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to establish a public register of data centres, to require certain data centres to report information relating to electricity consumption and water consumption as per requirements under Article 12 of the Recast Energy Efficiency Directive (EU/2023/1791), to confer functions on the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland; and to provide for related matters.

Ireland hosts approximately 123 data centres, which is around ten times the EU *per capita* average. Their growth has been one of the largest drivers of increased electricity demand on our grid. In 2015, data centres accounted for 5% of Ireland's metered electricity consumption; by 2025, a mere ten years later, that figure had risen to 23%. EirGrid projects it could increase to 30% by 2030. During a cost-of-living and cost-of-energy crisis, those figures raise serious concerns. Despite the scale of the data centre sector in Ireland, basic information is really difficult to access. The EU sought to address this gap through Article 12 of the revised energy efficiency directive. The purpose of the article is simple: if data centres are becoming major consumers of electricity and water across Europe, policymakers and the public need access to reliable data about their environmental and energy impacts. It requires that large data centres report information to a central European database and that member states establish the mechanisms necessary to collect, verify and oversee that reporting. In other words, governments must ensure transparency actually happens. Unfortunately, we have one of the lowest reporting rates in the EU with only 18 of the approximately 123 Irish data centres having submitted information to the European database, a compliance rate of 15%.

Reports in the media reveal the Government was reluctant to establish a national oversight framework, preferring to rely on operators reporting directly to the European Commission, but that is clearly not working. The European Commissioner for energy has made clear this approach would not fulfil obligations on member states under the directive.

The lack of transparency has real consequences when it comes to policymaking. Many of the figures we think we know about data centres are based on estimates rather than hard data. I said there were 123 data centres in Ireland. That is according to EU reports, yet the Government has told media in Ireland that there are between 70 and 90, so we do not even know how many data centres there are in this country. The CSO estimates their electricity consumption is approximately 23% of total demand, yet it does not know how many data

centres we have. When it tries to work out how much electricity they use, it estimates. It looks for an area with really high use of electricity and very few jobs, and identifies that as a data centre.

Uisce Éireann has repeatedly assured me data centres are not creating significant pressures on our water supplies, yet when I questioned its numbers it could only point to 57 data centres that are connected directly to its networks. If we have approximately 123 data centres - or 70 or 90 according to Government estimates - where are the others getting their water from? The EPA only has 17 facilities that are actually connected.

In 2021, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar told me there were between 30 and 50 jobs created in each data centre, yet the Government now says data centres underpin 876,000 jobs. There are no facts available whatsoever on data centres - how many we have, how much energy they are using, how much water they are using or what their efficiency levels are. While the public has no access to that information - nor do policymakers or, it would appear, Government - how are we meant to legislate for or regulate them? It makes no sense whatsoever.

This is a simple Bill. It puts on the national Statue Book exactly what the EU requires us to do. That is to ensure data centres tell us what they are doing and how much of our resources they are using. The public is paying for data centres. It pays much of the infrastructure costs and pays for the increased electricity demand. The public has a right to know the true cost of data centres for electricity prices, emissions and the economy in general.

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 Jennifer Whitmore: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (Hardship Meters) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Pa Daly: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 to strengthen protections for domestic energy customers operating on hardship prepayment meter arrangements; to provide for enhanced reporting and transparency requirements; to establish rights relating to tariff selection and movement to bill-pay arrangements; to provide for the recording and publication of involuntary-disconnection data; and to provide for related matters.

I thank Muireann Meehan Speed in my office for all the work she did on preparing this Bill. The Bill will deal with some of the most vulnerable energy customers, people struggling to keep up with their bills and, in too many cases, living in energy poverty. Despite their vulnerability, they feel they have been left to fend for themselves by Government and regulator over the years.

The more you look at this issue, the more astonishing the reality of it is. We are repeatedly told hardship meter customers are protected, but how can the Government or regulators say this when they cannot say with certainty how many households are on a hardship meter, when there is no onus on energy companies to say how many hardship customers have been temporarily disconnected and when there is no way to track how their rights are protected because the regulator does not seem to know what rights they are entitled to in the first place? There is a complete blind spot in the energy hardship meter regime.

Through correspondence we had with ESB and Gas Networks Ireland, it seems the basic information does not exist, is not collected or differs, depending on who you ask. Households can lose access to heat, light and, sometimes, electrically powered medical equipment. They are being voluntarily or temporarily disconnected.

Imagine if we did not have data on people waiting for hospital treatment, homelessness or school attendance. The organisations on the front line - the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, MABS and Social Justice Ireland - have been highlighting for a number of years the lack of transparency and the risks associated with hardship meters. We are trying to put an end to that in this Bill. There are four or five things in it. One is a clear statutory framework governing hardship meters and requiring suppliers to report on how many people are on such meters, how many are entering and leaving these arrangements and how long they remain on them. It will require suppliers to clearly inform customers of their rights, including that these meters are not mandatory and they can return to bill pay if they so wish. It strengthens protections for vulnerable customers and requires informed consent before they are moved to other arrangements. It shines a light on hidden disconnections. It is about dignity and transparency. I ask the Government to allow it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I would like to put on the record my thanks to Freya Coogan in my office and Muireann Meehan Speed in Deputy Daly's office for their work on this. I have spoken many times in this House about micro disconnections. That is a word I have put on it. I had to put a name on it because it came through my office so many times. I have an office in Balbriggan and an office in Rush and I do regular clinics. It is an issue that comes up again and again. I was struck by the situation related by a young mother who came in. I directed her to the Intreo office but she could not get an appointment. She said to me, "My meter is running out. Click, click, click, click, click." That is the noise and she knows the power is about to go. This was a Wednesday.

She was to get her money the next day but she had no access to funds immediately and that issue has to be addressed. The Government cannot fix that which we do not measure, and we need to examine whether everyone who is on a meter is on one because they should be and want to be and because that is the best place for them. In my experience, it is not the best place for the vast majority of people who come into my office. What they find is that they will get a cheaper rate on a bill. They might need a hand to manage those Bills- that is grand; that can

be provided - but the onus has to be on ensuring that people on low incomes, in particular, are paying the lowest rate possible for electricity.

Likewise, we have the issue of people who are being disconnected. It might be only for a couple of hours or only at 9 p.m. and then the next morning the person will have money to put into the meter, but on nights like last night and the night before when it was freezing cold, you need your power, electricity and lights and not just if you have children, but especially if you have children or are a vulnerable or elderly person. There are groups who are marginalised, pushed onto these meters and almost patronised by officials saying to them that they cannot manage the bill so they will put them onto a meter. They end up paying higher rates. We need to know how many people are on meters, how they are ending up on meters and how we can help them to get off them, and ensure they are paying the lowest rate of electricity possible. I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

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 Louise O'Reilly: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Property Services (Regulation) (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Rory Hearne: I move:

> That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Property Services (Regulation) Act 2011 and to provide for related matters.

Ta mé ag tabhairt isteach an Bille seo. I thank the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, the Bills Office, Ellen O'Doherty and my own staff for the work they did on the Bill. Its purpose is quite simple and straightforward. It has been developed with the Bills Office and its aim is to bring greater transparency into the house purchasing process and reduce house price inflation through providing for the increased use of sealed bids in purchasing.

The Bill will introduce a new requirement on property service providers to inform prospective sellers about competitive bidding processes, including sealed bids, that are available to the seller at the outset of the process to sell a residential property. The Bill further provides for a public information campaign to be undertaken under the Property Services (Regulation) Act to normalise sealed bids within the Irish housing system.

The context in which this Bill has been brought forward is that, as the Minister of State is well aware, house prices are absolutely unaffordable. The programme for Government committed to establishing an expert group to make the home bidding process clearer and more transparent, drawing on international best practices. We have yet to see this group set up. We have had one on conveyancing but that is different from the bidding process. The Minister for housing has taken over responsibility for the Property Services Regulatory Authority, PSRA, which regulates property service providers including estate agents. In March of this year, I asked the Minister for housing if he was going to do anything to progress the issue of homebuyers by helping them to tackle issues of ghost bids and gazumping, which were identified quite clearly in the ESRI report of February this year. That is why I am bringing this Bill forward. As the Minister of State is well aware, house price bidding wars, ghost bids and gazumping are pushing unaffordable house prices even higher, way beyond asking prices. Ordinary people trying to buy a home are getting squeezed and outbid. The Government promised to take action on this home bidding process two years ago but we are still waiting.

While the Government is delaying, I have developed a clear proposal in this Bill to promote the use of sealed bids in the house purchase market whereby offers are submitted by a set deadline, bidders cannot see competing offers and all bids are opened together. This can prevent real-time bidding wars. It works in other countries such as Scotland. As the Minister of State is well aware, house prices are completely out of control. They are unaffordable and we have seen them increase by well over 50% since 2020. The median price of a home in Dublin is now over €500,000. This Bill will introduce greater transparency in the house purchase market and help generation locked-out to achieve their dream of buying a home, which is what we want to see - people being able to buy a home affordably.

If you go onto the Crazy House Prices Instagram account, you will see it. People talk about their experiences of being outbid, being gazumped and ghost bids. It is still happening within the housing market. As I referred to, the ESRI report identified that the home buying process is marked by auctions that induce overbidding, a widespread misunderstanding of rights and responsibilities and increase delays after sales are agreed. It found that participant bids were pushed higher in open auctions via estate agents and online platforms and that this happened more often than in a sealed bid auction. It found significant gaps in people's knowledge of their rights during the home buying process and of the responsibility of the PRSA during that process. Essentially, buyers are navigating and operating in a market they do not fully understand, which is causing them significant stress and is actually playing a role in inflating house prices.

My question for the Government is very straightforward. Does it want to do something about house prices that is not just about providing supply but acting and making interventions within the housing market that could cool prices? While the Government has committed to increasing housing supply, it also made a commitment to act within the housing market itself in relation to the bidding process. I ask the Government to support this Bill. It is not overly complicated or onerous but it would put in place that requirement to bring in sealed bids, in a more structured way within the housing market, that would help to make house prices more affordable.

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 Rory Hearne: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Comunity Development has completed its consideration of the Social Welfare, Civil Registration and Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026 and has made amendments thereto.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.38 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.40 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.38 p.m. and resumed at 2.40 p.m.

Childcare: Statements

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Before I call the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, I welcome the Coláiste Dún Iascaigh transition year class from Cahir, County Tipperary. Well done to them and their múinteoirí on their recent show. Their teachers are Stephen O'Brien, Anne Hickey and Gavin Berry. They are all very welcome to Dáil Éireann.

The universal hourly subsidy under the national childcare scheme will increase from €2.14 to €2.50 per hour for children up to and including senior infants. There will also be reductions in the maximum fees that providers can charge.

These budgetary measures will lead to significant savings for families. For example, for a family availing of a full-time place for a child up to senior infants five days a week for 45 hours, their costs are currently capped at €735 per month, taking universal subsidies into account. As part of the early learning and childcare package in budget 2027, their bill will reduce to no more than €550 a month from next September or by 25%. This means the family will make an annual saving of over €2,200 over 48 weeks, provided their provider is in receipt of core funding. The lower income threshold for the maximum income-assessed subsidy will increase from €34,000 to €38,500, ensuring more families qualify for the highest level of support. In addition, the multiple child discount will increase for larger families. These measures will ensure more families receive direct financial support to reduce the cost of childcare and to support participation in work, education and training. These improvements matter because early learning and childcare costs have a direct impact on family decisions. They influence whether parents and in particular mothers can return to or remain in work,

whether they can increase their hours and whether they can pursue education and training opportunities. By reducing these costs, we are not only supporting families financially but also creating opportunities that strengthen participation in society and the economy.

Alongside the national childcare scheme, the ECCE programme continues to provide universal access to high-quality preschool education. This year, over 105,000 children are benefiting from ECCE participation, giving them opportunities to develop key social, emotional and learning skills during a critical stage of development. While considerable progress has been made through these programmes, the Government does recognise that affordability remains an important issue for so many families. That is why we remain committed to continuing the work of reducing costs and supporting participation while maintaining the sustainability and quality of services.

Alongside universal supports, the Government is also committed to ensuring that children who face disadvantage receive the support necessary to access and benefit from early learning and childcare opportunities. The award-winning access and inclusion model, AIM, which marks its tenth anniversary this year, is a really important feature. Since it was introduced, backed by State investment exceeding €500 million, more than 100,000 children have received targeted access and inclusion model supports in over 5,000 settings nationally and more children have benefited from its universal supports. Approximately 8,500 ECCE-aged children with disabilities and additional needs will be supported through AIM in 2027. Budget 2027 also provides funding for the first time to expand AIM supports to children under three years of age from September 2027, with an estimated 1,000 additional children expected to benefit from this move. The equal start model represents another important development in this regard. At its core, equal start reflects a commitment to ensuring the benefits of early learning and childcare are available to all children irrespective of background or circumstance.

Central to the success of the Government's reform programme has been the introduction of core funding. Core funding represents one of the most significant changes ever made to the funding model for the sector. Through this scheme, the State is providing direct and sustained support to providers in a way that strengthens sustainability, supports affordability and improves quality. Budget 2027 provides €534.6 million for core funding, an increase of 27% on the 2026 allocation. Funding for year 6 of the scheme will rise to more than €650 million. This investment will support affordability through fee management measures, with over €80 million allocated to achieve an 11% reduction in the maximum fee cap under the scheme, accessibility through funding for growth in the sector and quality through support for improved pay and conditions, with over €50 million ring-fenced to support for providers with the costs of increases in staff pay.

For many providers, core funding has brought greater certainty and stability, enabling them to continue delivering services while responding to increasing costs and growing demand. Core funding has also strengthened the partnership between the State and providers in delivering public policy objectives, with over 93% of providers now participating in the scheme. That is a very significant percentage and it reflects positively on core funding and what it seeks to achieve. There are always opportunities for others to join at any time.

No discussion of the future of the sector would be complete, however, without recognising the importance of the workforce. The Government has placed a significant emphasis on workforce development and professionalisation. Through the nurturing skills workforce plan

and a range of workforce supports, significant progress has been made in strengthening qualifications, professional development opportunities and career pathways across the sector. Following the conclusion of the midpoint review of nurturing skills, consultation with stakeholders confirms that nurturing skills remains the right framework for supporting the development of a skilled, diverse and valued professional early learning and childcare workforce. The midpoint review will be published in the coming weeks. The next phase of implementation will focus on consolidating the achievements to date while addressing the challenges that remain.

Budget 2027 includes support for the implementation of new employment regulation orders, the fourth set of orders since 2022 supported by core funding. Approximately 65% of staff working in the sector are expected to benefit from increases in the minimum rates of pay proposed under these orders. Budget 2027 also provides capacity to support future improvements in pay that may be agreed through the joint labour committee process, with over €50 million ring-fenced for this purpose. The workforce remains central to every ambition we hold for the future of early learning and childcare. If we are to improve quality, increase capacity and expand access, we must continue to attract and retain talented professionals and ensure they are appropriately recognised for the vital work they perform.

One of the most significant challenges facing the sector remains capacity. While many families are successfully accessing services, there remain areas where demand exceeds supply and where additional places are required. Population growth, demographic change and housing developments have increased demand in many communities. In addition to the supply growth supported through core funding, budget 2027 provides €38 million in capital funding to continue the State-led early learning and childcare programme and to support further expansion under the building blocks extension scheme. Across both phases of the extension scheme, it is estimated that approximately 1,800 new places will be delivered. Childminders will play an important role in meeting future demand. Government remains committed to supporting the development of the childminding sector through the national action plan for childminding.

Notwithstanding the progress that has been made, I concede it is important to acknowledge that challenges remain. We are always, every single day, conscious that challenges remain. Affordability, workforce recruitment and retention, and capacity constraints continue to require sustained attention and sustained effort. However, it is equally important that we recognise the progress achieved and the strong foundations that have been established. We have strengthened supports for families through the ECCE programme and the national childcare scheme, targeted disadvantage and inclusion through the access and inclusion model and equal start, enhanced sustainability through core funding and established a pathway for the future development of capacity. The task before us now is to build on these achievements. Our focus must remain on delivering a system that is affordable, accessible, inclusive, sustainable and of the highest quality. The progress achieved to date demonstrates what can be accomplished through sustained investment, partnership with the sector and a clear long-term vision for reform. While challenges remain, the foundations are now in place to continue building a more accessible, affordable and high-quality early learning and childcare system for children and families throughout Ireland.

The Government has demonstrated that commitment through budget 2027, delivering record current funding of €1.65 billion alongside €38 million in capital investment. These

resources will support further reductions in early learning and childcare costs for families, continued improvements in pay and conditions for the workforce, increased inclusion supports and additional capacity throughout the country.

3 o'clock

I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues across the Government and the Oireachtas to strengthen early learning and childcare for children and families throughout Ireland.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I too welcome the students and staff. I am delighted to have them here.

I welcome the opportunity to address the House and to contribute to what is one of the most significant policy discussions facing children, families and communities right across Ireland. I truly believe there is a broad consensus among all of us here that every child should have the opportunity to access high-quality early learning and childcare, that every family should be able to afford those services and that those who work in the sector should be valued and supported in the vital role they play in children's lives.

While significant challenges remain across the sector, Ireland has, to be fair, made substantial progress in recent years. The debate we are having here today is no longer about whether the State should play a major role in supporting early learning and childcare. That question has been answered, and answered significantly, by the State. The challenge now is how we continue to build, strengthen and improve the system that has evolved through unprecedented State investment and reform. The foundation of the progress made has been sustained Government investment. In recent years, public investment in early learning and childcare has increased to levels that would have been utterly unimaginable only ten years ago.

In 2020, public funding for the sector stood at €638 million. Under budget 2027, current expenditure on early learning and childcare will rise to €1.65 billion, representing an increase in public funding of almost 160% over the past seven years. This includes a further €160 million allocated in budget 2027 compared with 2026. This continued growth in investment reflects a clear and absolute commitment by the Government to transform the sector and recognise early learning and childcare as an essential part of the public good.

This investment has been driven by a clear understanding of the benefits for every child, their parents and guardians, our society and our economy. High-quality early learning and childcare supports children's cognitive, social and emotional development, assists parents to participate in employment and education, contributes to social inclusion and strengthens the economic and social fabric of communities across the country. Importantly, the investment has not been confined to any single programme or initiative. Rather, it has supported a strategic and integrated programme of reform that is improving affordability, accessibility, inclusion, quality and sustainability across the entire sector.

The phase 1 report of Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan sets out measures to achieve this and our programme for Government commitments, two of the principal objectives of which are to reduce parental fees and increase the supply of places while strengthening funding for providers and supporting workforce sustainability. A central principle of the Government's approach to early learning and childcare reform is that policy should be informed by evidence,

research and evaluation and shaped through meaningful engagement with those who deliver services, those who use them and, most importantly, the children and families who benefit from them.

The reforms delivered across the sector in recent years have been informed by research, consultation, evaluation and ongoing dialogue with providers, educators and practitioners, childminders, parents and representative bodies. A significant recent example of this approach is the extensive public consultation undertaken by the Department to inform Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan. The consultation included a national survey that received 11,725 responses, a nationally representative survey of approximately 600 households with children, an arts-based engagement exercise with children, 56 consultation events organised in partnership with the city and county childcare committees, including at least one event in every county, and an online Irish-language consultation session. It concluded with a national consultation forum on 23 September, bringing together members of the early learning and childcare stakeholder forum and randomly selected participants from previous stages of the consultation process to examine emerging ideas. The findings from this process, which will be published in full, are informing phase 2 of Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan and the successor strategy to First 5.

Engagement has not been limited to periodic consultation exercises. The early learning and childcare stakeholder forum and a forum I constituted at the request of providers, the early learning and childcare provider consultative forum, combine to provide structured and ongoing opportunities for representative organisations, providers and other stakeholders to contribute. Engagement also extends well beyond formal consultation structures. The Department engages regularly with parents, providers, childminders, educators and practitioners, elected representatives and representative organisations through parliamentary questions, representations, media engagement and direct correspondence. In the first nine months of 2026, the Department engaged with almost 1,750 written parliamentary questions, 1,000 ministerial representations, over 800 media queries and over 400 queries referred through a communications channel. These interactions provide a valuable source of real-time insight into the issues affecting children, families, educators, practitioners and providers across the country.

It is also important to recognise that policymaking in early learning and childcare requires the careful consideration by the Government of a wide range of perspectives and interests while ensuring that public investment delivers the greatest possible benefits. At the same time, policy in this area contributes to a range of wider Government objectives, including supporting children's development and learning, promoting gender equality, enabling labour-market participation, advancing inclusion and ensuring the long-term sustainability of high-quality services, and more. Consultation and engagement are, therefore, essential not only in identifying challenges and opportunities, but also in understanding how policy choices may affect different groups and policy objectives.

The role of the Government is to listen carefully to these perspectives, consider the available evidence and strike an appropriate balance between competing priorities in a way that supports effective implementation and delivers better outcomes for children and families. Stakeholder feedback has informed important reforms in recent years. The Simplify and Support initiative was developed following extensive engagement with providers and is designed to reduce administrative burdens, simplify regulatory processes and support services to focus on what

matters most, which is, of course, delivering high-quality experiences and outcomes for children.

Similarly, the implementation of childminding reforms has been informed by consultation and engagement with childminders and representative organisations, and by discussions in this Chamber and in committee. Acting on stakeholder feedback, I brought forward the review of the childminding regulations and expanded its scope to examine barriers to registration, regulatory compliance and the effectiveness of available supports. The review process identified a strong desire within the sector for additional time before mandatory registration and that informed the decision taken by the Government this week to extend the implementation timeline.

Alongside consultation, the Department continues to invest in a substantial programme of research, evaluation and data collection to support evidence-based policymaking. This includes the annual early years sector profile, annual parent polling, the ongoing evaluation of the national childcare scheme, workforce research and evaluations of key initiatives across the sector. Data on service providers, capacity and fees from the annual early years sector profile for 2025-26 will be released before the end of this year. The data will provide updated insights into trends in service provision across the sector. The Department is also in the process of gathering child-level fee and co-payment data through the national childcare scheme. This data will provide a more comprehensive picture of costs paid by parents after subsidies and discounts are applied.

The Department also draws on international evidence and actively participates in international policy networks. Ireland participates in the OECD network on early childhood education and care and has participated in major OECD initiatives, including Quality beyond Regulations. The Department is developing a new set of comprehensive regulations for school-age childcare, delivering on commitments under First 5. Building on the initial regulations introduced in 2019, extensive consultation is taking place with stakeholders and the early years inspectorate of Tusla to help shape these new regulations. The regulations will focus on safeguarding children's health, safety, welfare and development, with children's well-being at their core. I expect to publish the new regulations in the coming months.

A key pillar of Government policy has been to improve affordability and access for families through the national childcare scheme and the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme. Through a series of enhancements, substantial reductions in out-of-pocket costs have been delivered for many families. The parents and guardians of 277,000 children throughout the country are benefiting from increased national childcare scheme subsidies. Budget 2027 builds further on that progress.

Deputy Keira Keogh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. It is really lovely to have a couple of members of the joint committee on children and equality in the Chamber. Our committee stands out as one that is very proactive and collaborative. Even though we are often on different sides of the House, we are all working towards the same goal here; the Government has committed to €200 per month per child for childcare in the lifetime of this Government. This is a commitment we must honour and that we are all working towards. The difficulties families are facing, both in affording childcare and accessing available places, really have profound social and economic consequences that cannot be ignored. I know right across this country at

the moment, there are grandparents who should be enjoying their retirement but are sometimes doing some of the childcare or nearly full-time childcare during the week so that their own children can continue to go to work. I know there are people who are falling behind or stepping away from their careers and this mostly impacts women. I know some people are spending too long in their cars trying to commute to find accessible childcare.

For many families, the search for childcare actually begins long before a child is born and it places considerable stress on expecting parents. That sometimes eats into what should be really cherished maternity leave, when you are stressing about finding childcare before you go back to work. It is now almost two years since I was knocking on doors across Mayo and hearing these concerns first hand. I honestly do not think we can say we are moving fast enough. That being said, we are moving, we are taking action and there are a lot of things we have to be proud about. ECCE is a huge success. Even when I visited Ohio this year as chairperson of the children and equality committee, they could not dream of something we have like ECCE with more than 105,000 children being served. It is a fantastic programme and it is a huge tribute that on its tenth anniversary, we will now expand the access and inclusion model, AIM, to children under three. From next year, that will then serve 8,500 children. If a parent had contacted me this year whose child is awaiting an assessment of need, that child is likely autistic and showing all the signs of autism but is not able to access home tuition until they have the piece of paper that confirms a diagnosis. Meanwhile, they cannot get into the preschool until they access the AIM support. Right now, that is only available if the child is enrolled in ECCE. This change would allow that child to access their local preschool and get the benefit of AIM.

In terms of State-led childcare, that is another thing we can be really proud of. It is a breakthrough, a game changer and I really welcome the eight named facilities. Hopefully, progress can be really fast there. I know Deputy Kerrane is sitting opposite me and she did a lot of work to secure the one in Roscommon. I hope to follow suit in Mayo as quickly as possible. State-led childcare has the opportunity to be a game changer but with that, we cannot just rely on the community and voluntary boards. In cities like Dublin or Cork, the boards might have a varied number of professionals, like accountants, HR professionals or solicitors who are guiding them. In rural Ireland, those on voluntary boards are often the same people who are on the GAA board, the school board and we are now asking them to step up for this community childcare facility. We really need to look at how we can support them. In places where there are not those voluntary boards, we must ensure they get the opportunity for State-led childcare.

The fee freezes are also helpful to parents and I know there is a 36% increase going towards core funding next year, which would bring it to €658 million from next September. I have a figure of 92% of services signed up but the updated figure this morning was 93%. That is really something we can be proud of but at the same time, it is little comfort to the parents whose service is not in receipt of core funding who are paying extortionate fees. I know in Mayo, in terms of private childminders, we only have one registered private childminder in Mayo. If they have not signed up, you do not have access to those subsidies. I welcome that we have taken really significant steps in budget 2027 to try to decrease costs significantly. For children up to senior infants, those paying maximum fees could be saving up to €2,000 per year. I am looking forward to those increases for the national childcare scheme in September

2027 and especially when we look at poverty and deprivation, seeing that lower income threshold increase from €34,000 to €38,500.

In terms of pay, we know our staff deserve proper pay and conditions. There are too many childcare workers leaving the sector to become special needs assistants, which is obviously a very important job as well but when we are struggling with capacity, we need to try to keep as many of our childcare workers within the sector as we can. This €50 million that will be ringfenced for the next joint labour committee, JLC, process is welcome but I believe we really need to start talking more seriously about when the State will take on the staff wages. I know that is a very complex process but the sector wants hope and to see a way forward. We are told by some of the centres that with things like the caps on parent fees, providers have very little financial flexibility to raise wages on their own without operating at a loss. I know the Minister is engaging robustly with the sector.

Going back to looking at gender equality, in this country in general, we know that unpaid care continues to place burdens and barriers mainly on women and their social and economic participation. When we look at the early years sector, we know that 97% of the educators are women yet these professionals are continuing to face limited priority. They are facing low pay and poor conditions and, as I said, it is driving many of them to leave the sector. This is then putting more strain on the sector. This is happening at a time when we have up to 40,000 children on crèche waiting lists. I share the Minister's enthusiasm for ensuring our staff get the pay and conditions they really deserve so we can make sure this is a valued profession and that we work closely with them on that development plan.

I also really welcome the increased tax relief in budget 2027 for private childminders. This will allow what the private childminders can earn to go from €15,000 up to €20,000, which is an extra €5,000 a year and goes a long way when we have the cost-of-living struggles we have. More important was removing the cap on the number of children who can be minded. We talk about things like State-led childcare and whether the State take on staff wages but sometimes that sends a shock wave through rural Ireland and people ask whether we are coming after the neighbour up the road who provides a great service. We can all agree we want that choice to remain. No matter how much progress we make, we want that choice to be there for families who like the idea of keeping a child with the local neighbour who is providing a great service. We also need to do more to ensure more childminders are taking up the development grant of €1,000, which buys a lot of educational equipment and toys. We can do a lot more to promote that.

In terms of registration, and I know the Minister has addressed it, right now, the figure is we only have 300 childminders registered. I know a lot more have actually taken part in the course but they are not signing up straight after it. We have been told a lot were waiting to see what the decision would be about the September deadline but we really need to address those concerns around the administration and that administrative work potentially being unpaid when these private childminders do not have HR sections in their business. They are often doing the administrative work late in the evening at the kitchen table. I welcome the indication that the deadline might be moved but at the same time, I know this registration is needed. I know that delay will also have knock-on effects on parents who cannot access the subsidies. Even though we are having this phased path towards registration, we still need to do all that we can to get people to sign up as quickly as possible.

This registration will bring paid, non-relative home-based childminders into a tailored, regulated field where there is more training, more supports and more access for parents to subsidy schemes. It should be a successful process and we must do everything we can to make sure we bring those childminders with us. The additional time that childminders asked for during the review is welcome and a manageable pace is important, notwithstanding what I said about the subsidies. It is a chicken and egg situation. We cannot get parents getting the subsidies until childminders are registered but if we bring in the registration too quickly, too many childminders will potentially leave the sector. We need to work as hard as we can to ensure experienced childminders remain within the sector and that new entrants are encouraged to participate. We need to encourage people to enter the sector and encourage those who are already in it to stay, be empowered and continue to provide the vital service they are providing. As I said, a childcare subsidy is of little use to a family if there is nobody available in their area to provide the service.

On our shaping the future early years action plan, I was at the launch of phase 1 last year and I really welcome that and the progress we are making. I anxiously await the launch of phase 2.

The Minister spoke in depth about the public consultation that is ongoing and almost complete if not completed. This will help us to go in the direction towards €200 per month over the lifetime of the Government.

We know that for too many parents childcare remains one of the largest household expenses they face. Affordable childcare should not be a luxury. We should see it as essential support to help parents work, study and build a future for their families. Affordability on its own will not be enough. In my county of Mayo and many other parts of Ireland families are blue in the face, to use that expression, telling us that even with financial support sometimes affordability might not be their issue as they simply cannot find a childcare place. That is why we must pursue a balanced approach. We must continue to reduce costs for parents. We must expand capacity where places are lacking. We must provide as much support as we can to providers and childminders to ensure they can remain viable. One of the biggest things we can do is to recognise childcare as a key driver of workforce participation and economic growth.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath): I welcome the second group from Coláiste Dún Iascaigh in Cahir, who are transition year students with their teacher Gavin Berry. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their trip.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister for her statement. The most important thing to say is that the best and greatest things we have in our early years and school-age care services in the State are the men and women in them, the educators and practitioners. They are the bedrock of our early years and school-age care services the length and breadth of the State. As I always say, without them costs to parents and childcare places are entirely irrelevant. If we do not have the workforce and if we do not retain them, bring more people in and hold on to them we will have no service at all.

It is now almost two years since the general election. The Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, promised many times during the 2024 general election that we would have a plan to get to €200 per month childcare within the first 100 days of Government. That is long, long past and we still

have not seen the plan. Last week, in response to priority questions, I was told it will be published in the next few weeks. What we cannot have when the plan is published is just a plan on the cost to parents. The cost to parents is very important but they have to have a childcare place in the first instance and the workforce has to be there to ensure the physical spaces are there for them and their children. What concerns me greatly about the budget announcement of a reduction from €735 to €550 is that the Minister cannot tell us how many parents will benefit and will pay €550 per month for childcare from next September. If this data is not in the Department then it needs to be.

Another concern and question which has not been answered is that the reduction from €735 to €550 is for parents whose providers are participating in core funding. If this is the way we will achieve €200 a month childcare then it will only be for those whose providers are in core funding. I am unsure about this. Will we have a two-tier system in which those parents whose providers are outside core funding pay more? We need clarity on that. I would love the Minister to tell us how many parents will pay €550 from next September. Certainly in my office, there was an impression among parents that this was for them but it does not appear that it is. Of course, many pay well over €735 to begin with.

The annual circus around the workforce and the joint labour committee is not working. Workers might get 50 cent, 60 cent or €1 and we go round and round in circles. Every year, the Minister has to come out and tell people to get around the table. A total of €10 million is now going to be handed back at a time when staff turnover in some counties is 30%, 40% and up to 50%. We are not retaining staff. We need to look at the JLC because it is not working. During Covid, the State took on the wages. We have a situation in our education system today in which we have plenty of private schools and the teachers in them are paid by the State. There would be many benefits to doing this for childcare. It would remove core funding and provide far greater transparency about where the money is going when the State pays the wages. We would know exactly where the money was going and what we were getting for it. This cannot be said about core funding. It would take 70% of providers' costs off them, which would take huge pressure off them, and give certainty and security to a workforce in a profession where it does not exist and has never existed.

There is a commitment in the programme for Government on core funding. I understand that a review of year one costs is under way. There is no sense in looking at the costs to providers from four years ago. We need to look at the costs to providers today and we need to know what the gap is between the costs today and the core funding levels. This is a commitment in the programme for Government and it needs to happen.

I also want to raise the sustainability fund. Many providers and people in the sector do not seem to know it exists. It is listed as assistance for operational challenges. There are many providers in core funding. One in my constituency had its bus costs increase by €15,000 a year and it has to try to find this money from within its service. This is exactly what the sustainability fund should be used for but I am very unclear about who is accessing it, how much money is being paid out and how available it is to providers.

Providers raise other issues as well, including small things that would make a huge difference, such as greater efficiency in Garda vetting and the great need for reform of the Hive portal. People seem to have an awful time with it. The biggest job of all for the Minister, in my view, is to rebuild the relationship with small and medium-sized childcare providers in the

State who feel the goalposts are continually changing. There are new systems, new schemes and changes coming about all the time and there is no consultation with them. There is a huge job of work to be done to rebuild this relationship. It is so important.

In relation to childminders, I have lost count of the many times I have stood here and said that alarm bells need to ring. We are looking at approximately 200 and perhaps a bit more out of the 16,000 or 17,000 childminders in the State who have registered with Tusla. There are serious problems and it has been obvious for at least a year that there are problems. I ask the Minister again about the concerns many childminders have regarding the inspection regime and someone coming into their home, as many of us would have in a home or domestic setting. Why can somebody in the Department not tell childminders what the inspection regime will look like and explain that Johnny and Mary will not be going through every room in the house? Give them this clarity. It is a huge stumbling block.

I do not think we need to wait and delay until 2030. If we get round the table and develop the regulations with childminders, we can ensure that the NCS is extended to parents who use childminders. We cannot develop these regulations without childminders. We cannot afford to lose childminders and some are leaving. We need more of them and we need to retain those we have. I ask again that direct consultation with the Minister and organisations such as Childminding Ireland continues at pace but that we start over with a blank sheet of paper for the regulations. We need every childminder who exists in the State and an awful lot more. The way this has been dealt with to date has not worked and we are now going to have delayed by almost four years. These are regulations for a sector that we absolutely should not delay for another four years. Listen to the childminders, develop the regulations and away we go.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: In Kilkenny and Carlow we have a serious shortage of childcare places. Every week, I hear from parents whose children are stuck in limbo on waiting lists. Families are being forced to make impossible decisions. These are parents who are doing everything right. They are working hard, contributing to their community and trying to build a life, yet they are locked out of the workforce simply because they cannot find a childcare place.

This is a capacity crisis throughout the country. In Castlecomer full-time early years capacity is capped at roughly 148 places between two main providers. This leaves a significant gap for working families in the town and surrounding areas. Last summer, Gowran Early Years was forced to tell parents it was ceasing important after-school services due to rising costs. Nationally, Early Childhood Ireland figures show that tens of thousands of children under three are on waiting lists. Families in Carlow and Kilkenny feel this pressure every day. Childcare is not a luxury; it is essential infrastructure for our local communities.

When a room in a local crèche cannot open because of rising costs or because providers cannot recruit and retain qualified early years educators the consequences ripple through the entire community.

Parents, particularly mothers and single parents, are forced to turn down promotions, cut their hours or leave employment entirely. This is having a harmful impact on wider Irish society and the future of our State. The Irish birth rate has dropped by over 18% over the past decade. There were 10,000 fewer births in 2025 than in 2015. High childcare costs and limited availability are major barriers for couples in Ireland who wish to have children or expand their

families. There are schemes to help with affordability but subsidies mean very little when there is no physical place for your child.

Every family deserves a childcare system that works when they need it most. Every couple looking to start a family deserves the security of knowing they will be able to access affordable childcare. I was lucky. I had grandparents who looked after my children. However, parents are leaving it later and later to have children. They face so many barriers. They may have to work longer hours to get more money in the bank to afford a house. Grandparents are getting older. They are not going to be there to look after the children. We need affordable childcare in every community.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: The decision not to include Kildare in the State-led childcare expansion programme is deeply disappointing. Kildare has one of the lowest rates of community childcare provision in the State. Just 4% of childcare places are provided by community services. These are spread across only eight providers. Given the scale of population growth across the county and the number of new housing developments being built, it is difficult to understand how Kildare was overlooked. Families are crying out for childcare places, yet the Government has failed to recognise the level of demand that exists in the county.

The reality facing parents is stark. A survey carried out by a Naas mother last summer found that 64% of families surveyed were on childcare waiting lists. Many parents put their children's names down years before places become available. At the moment, some parents in Kildare need to reduce their work hours, while some are leaving the workforce entirely and not by choice. This caring responsibility is disproportionately taken up by women, which has negative effects on gender equality. Access to childcare is not a luxury. It is an essential service that enables families to work, study and participate fully in society.

This crisis is the result of poor planning. When new communities are being built, common sense tells us that childcare facilities and public services must be planned alongside them. Instead, the Government continues to play catch up. While budget 2027 brought measures to reduce costs for some families, albeit two years late, they have done little to address the lack of places. Affordability means very little if there is no childcare place available in the first place. The situation is even more challenging for the families of children with disabilities and additional needs. Too many parents struggle to secure access and inclusion model, AIM, supports and appropriate placements. These families deserve certainty and support rather than endless delays and bureaucracy.

Teastaíonn gníomh freisin chun soláthar an luathoideachas lán-Ghaeilge a fhás. Dúnadh an t-aon naíonra i mo cheantar féin le gairid agus tá an treocht chéanna le feiceáil in áiteanna eile. Ba cheart go mbeadh an rogha sin ar fáil do theaghlaigh ar mian leo a bpáistí a thógáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Teastaíonn tacaíocht agus ceannaireacht ón Stát ón earnáil luathoideachais lán-Ghaeilge. Níl a dhóthain dul chun cinn le feiceáil againn sa réimse seo faoi láthair. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go mbeadh nasc ann idir Roinn an Aire agus an Roinn Oideachais agus Óige sa chomhthéacs seo. Tá sé scannalach go bhfuil níos mó naíonraí á ndúnadh sa Stát ná mar atá ag oscailt.

As Deputy Kerrane stated, at the heart of this crisis is the childcare workforce. If we want to retain skilled educators and provide high-quality care, childcare workers must be paid properly and given secure pathways. What is needed now is a long-term commitment to

increasing capacity and affordability, supporting workers, expanding the provision of childcare for those with additional needs and delivering a genuinely accessible State-led childcare system.

Deputy Norma Foley: For the information of the Deputy, there was no application made in respect of Kildare. No application came from the area in the initial proceeding.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Childcare has become one of the biggest pressures facing working families. For many parents, finding a childcare place is almost as difficult as paying for it. In Meath, there is a very real problem. Families in growing communities are struggling to secure places for their children, particularly babies under 12 months and younger children. New housing developments have brought significant population growth but childcare provision has not kept pace. Parents are being forced onto lengthy waiting lists, to travel considerable distances or to make difficult decisions about their working arrangements. That is simply unacceptable. Access to affordable, accessible and quality childcare should not depend on where you happen to live or how early you get your name onto a waiting list. I will again make the case for State-led childcare at the Willows, Dunshaughlin. I have made this case repeatedly.

In addition, as my party's education spokesperson, I will particularly highlight the potential to make much greater use of our primary schools for childcare before and after school hours. Where this model is operating, it has been a real success. It makes practical sense. Schools are already located at the heart of communities. They have classrooms, facilities and outdoor spaces that are often under-used outside of normal school hours. It also offers enormous benefits to parents. They can bring their children to one familiar local setting in the morning knowing that arrangements are in place for before the schoolday and after it finishes. It can reduce journeys, ease pressure on families and provide children with a safe and familiar environment. The reality is that this provision remains far too infrequent. It is available in some schools and communities but not in others. Access can be a postcode lottery. We need a much more ambitious approach from Government in relation to this. We should be actively supporting and facilitating schools that want to provide or accommodate before-school and after-school care.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I have said it before and I will say it again here because it is worth saying; access to affordable childcare is absolutely essential. I know from my own experience that access to secure and affordable childcare meant that I could finish college and continue working. It meant that I was able to do my studies, get my degree and progress. Affordable childcare literally changed my life and the life of my family. It changed the prospects my daughter had as she was growing up. It changed what we were able to earn as a family. It really made a huge difference. It was luck more than anything else. It certainly was not any initiative of government that meant I could access that affordable childcare when I was in college.

During the last election campaign, you could not turn the radio on without hearing a member of the Government parties telling us that we would have affordable childcare. Was it €200 per child per month? That was going to happen and then we were going to have a roadmap. We were going to get that within the first 100 days but then, when the Government realised it had absolutely no intention of doing that, it promised a roadmap within the first 100 days. We are

now 700 days on since the last election. That is seven 100s. It is a lost opportunity. I have never heard an apology from anyone in Government for the manner in which it treated parents, for the promise it made, or for dangling the bauble of affordability in front of parents only to withdraw it before the ballots were even counted.

In the area of Dublin Fingal, there are 63,000 children. Some 15,000 of these live in disadvantage, yet we have just 800 community childcare places. There are 24 places for every 100 children in Fingal. It is the youngest and fastest-growing constituency in the State. It is not included in the State-led plan, but there is a real need there. Affordable childcare is important but, as has been said, if you cannot access that childcare, affordability is really not much use to you. In my constituency, we have neither. It is not affordable and not accessible. The people I represent are paying €800 or more per month. They do not know how they are going to benefit from the announcement of the €550 and the Minister cannot tell us how many people are going to be included. I can say with certainty that they will not be paying €550 next September but the Minister cannot tell us how many people will. How is that any way to run a budget? The same people who lecture us all the time about the need to be fiscally responsible and prudent cannot say with certainty how many people are going to benefit from what the Minister herself has said is a key Government initiative.

State-led childcare is the way to go. An Teachta Kerrane has laid out a plan. We did it in advance of the last election and we have not changed from it now. It is a plan to make childcare affordable. It is a real plan; not talk about a plan. It is a plan to deliver affordable childcare for children in this State because not everyone has access to family able to mind their kids. I certainly did not. Those people have to work and they want to work, but they also want to know that they can afford to pay for their childcare at the end of the week.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá an Rialtas i ndiaidh gealltanas eile a bhriseadh chun cúram leanaí a dhéanamh inacmhainneach. Níl san inacmhainneacht ach cuid den fhadhb. I nDún na nGall agus in go leor ceantair eile, níl teaghlaigh ábalta áit a fháil ar chor ar bith. Caithfidh cúram leanaí a bheith inacmhainneach agus ar fáil. Caithfear fosta aghaidh a thabhairt ar an fhadhb mhór a bhfuilimid ag déileáil leis i gceantair cosúil le Dún na nGall, áit a bhfuil go leor de na seirbhísí seo i bhfoirgnimh a bhfuil bloic choincréite lochtacha acu. Níl aon dul chun cinn ar an fhadhb sin.

Childcare remains one of the biggest pressures facing families, and the Government has repeatedly broken its promises to make it more affordable. We are still waiting for the big announcement from Simon Harris to bear fruit that the €200 a month childcare cap will be delivered. It copied a proposal that Sinn Féin outlined clearly before the last election. The difference between us and Fine Gael in this Government is that we would have it delivered by now. We are still waiting to see childcare become affordable for many families. Those families just face mounting bills, and childcare takes a significant share of the household income.

However, as we all know, affordability is only one part of this crisis. In Donegal and elsewhere, families are struggling to find a place at all, and a subsidy is of little benefit to a family or parent who cannot secure a place for their child. This shortage we see is not just in urban areas. It is also very much in rural communities. Parents are left powerless. They are contacting providers. They are joining waiting lists. They are trying to organise work without knowing when a place will become available. I spoke to one childcare provider who told me

they are in the unique position that they are now the first person mothers tell after they become pregnant because they know how desperate they will be to get a childcare space. We know the pressure it puts on families. It forces parents to reduce their hours and, in some cases, it forces them to leave employment.

We also need to address the crisis we are facing with defective blocks, a matter I have raised with the Minister on many occasions. There are childcare facilities in the State, including in my county where it is most acute, which have defective concrete blocks. For example, there is one in Ardara and there are more in Letterkenny. It is estimated that there are up to between 20 and 25 community and private childcare facilities in the county that have defective concrete blocks. What does that mean? It means that they are crumbling. It means they will fall down. It means they will not be safe. There is no plan within the Department to deal with this. Thankfully, Raphoe Community Playgroup was included in the State-led early learning and childcare capital projects, but none of the other facilities have any roadmap whatsoever. This is something that the Government needs to get a grip on. It needs to deal with it urgently and effectively to show communities what the plan is for these childcare facilities that are literally crumbling before their very eyes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Caithfear ár gcostais cúram leanaí a laghdú mar, faoi láthair, tá na costais i bhfad ró-ard. It is clear that the Government does not understand the pressures that people are under because of a wider cost-of-living crisis and that, for many, childcare costs have become the final straw. We have to say that childcare costs in this State are far too high and childcare places are far too hard to come by. As has been mentioned by many speakers, parents were promised a lot during the run-up to the last general election but virtually nothing has changed in their lives. People now find themselves in a situation where many cannot afford to buy a home. They have no security in the private rental sector. We see increasing numbers of young adults - those who choose to remain in the State - living in their parents' home long past the time that they would want to do so. For those who have their own home, the cost of living keeps rising. Families are paying more for petrol, diesel, groceries, public transport, heating and electricity, and all of that is on top of what has now become a second mortgage - the cost of having your child cared for. People have told me that they are working just to pay their childcare bills and are hoping that things will improve at some point down the line, and that, for once, Simon Harris will keep a promise and deliver childcare for €10 per day.

We have to put this debate in the context of a wider conversation on what type of society we want and what we want to provide for our families in order for them to be able to have a good quality of life because, right now, life is not affordable and far too many are working just to stand still. The key question has to be: what are we doing to encourage our young people, young couples, to start families and begin lives? Right now, they cannot afford a house or deal with the cost of living. The Government is making things worse every time and we see the reality of that. In particular, we see the reality of the housing crisis and the failure to provide affordable childcare. We see staggering reductions in childbirth numbers. This is going to have serious implications for this country in terms of future workforce shortages, pressures on pensions, an ageing population and an increased dependency on migration to fill gaps, rather than doing what we should be doing, which is actually supporting people to be able to live their lives and not just live to work. A key component of that is ensuring that people who need childcare spaces can get them and, crucially, that those childcare places are affordable.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: The cost of childcare is affecting families all across this country. My family is one of the families that is paying that second mortgage, and there are so many others who are paying well above €1,000 for childcare. One parent in my constituency who reached out to me is paying close to €3,000 for two kids. That is wild. It is crazy. We should not be putting that pressure on people. We should be building a model that works for everyone, one that delivers affordability for parents who are being forced to decide between going back to work and paying astronomical fees or staying at home to care for their children. We need a model that delivers accessibility across the country, not only in our respective constituencies, so that families are not left on waiting lists with no other options. We need a model that delivers fair wages and conditions for educators who put phenomenal work into helping our children in their most formative years; the most important work that people will ever do. Most importantly, we need a model that really delivers that quality of care for our children.

We cannot speak about childcare and not speak about the failure in the recent budget. The most recent budget was held up as one that would deliver for families on childcare, yet so many families have been left wondering how it will help them. There is a playground beside my daughter's crèche and, naturally enough, all of the kids play there after we collect them. I spoke to parents who told me it was great and it would bring their costs down. However, as the weeks went on they realised that they would benefit and, when it is introduced, they will not benefit from it. Some 77% of providers will not reduce a single fee. That was not in the big headline piece when it came to the budget. Parents were told that they would be paying a maximum of €550 per month on childcare; a figure that is still so far away from the €200 per child per month promise that was made. I am still holding my breath on that, like so many other parents. So many other parents are and will be paying well above that - parents whose children are in childcare providers that are not in core funding, parents whose children receive 50 or more hours of care a week and parents whose children are in first class or above. This Government cannot even deliver these promises to every family, and it will tell us that it chose to focus on this band because it is the most popular.

The promise of €200 a month was something that people spoke to me about on the doorsteps during the by-election. It is something that would have taken a massive strain off families. We talk about the cost of living and bringing down costs on families and introducing payments that could help families. If childcare was at €200 per month, I know how much money would be back in my pocket and other parents' pockets, and it would certainly take the pressure off them. We know that many childcare providers are not offering 45-hour contracts, so those families will not be able to avail of the €550 fee cap. Childcare providers themselves have said that the Government's announcement was intentionally misleading.

Again, it was made for a headline but was not made to be real.

The Government has also chosen to focus on the 45 hour per week contract, because after that subsidies will no longer be provided under the national childcare scheme. The monthly fee for families in this band is over a third higher than the promised €550 per month fee cap. Families not affected by fee caps will only see €16.20 off their bills each week. The Minister will agree that for many families, this is simply not enough.

This budget also did nothing to address the crisis of accessibility in childcare places. Even if we were to see a reduction in fees, this will not matter if people cannot get in the door. There are 46,000 children on waiting lists for childcare spaces, which is a scary figure. This is

because the model the Government is relying on is not capable of delivering affordability, accessibility, fair wages and a high quality of care for our children. Instead, it is a model that funnels State investment into private equity funds and CEO salaries. We have to be honest about that. This is why a public model of early childhood education and care is the only system that will work; a system that is focused on delivering for families, children and educators, not CEOs, bloodsuckers, sharks and equity funds. That is what they are. Simply put, they are there to make profit. A public model would build capacity for a greater direct State provision of early childhood education and care, and strengthen community provision where it matters. It would put capital investment in the development and acquisition of publicly owned not-for-profit childcare facilities. It would ensure educators are paid through the public system, delivering fairer wages and working conditions as well as addressing the crisis of recruitment and retention.

Private providers in Dublin city have a staff turnover rate of close to 40%, while community-based providers have a rate of just under 20%. This is one of the biggest indicators of why the private model does not work and why a community-based not-for-profit model is what we should be striving for. A public model of childcare would also ensure the money this State is investing in childcare does not end up going to private equity profits and CEO salaries. The corporatisation of the industry is something we should all be worried about, and we are not sleepwalking towards it; we are sprinting. We all know it, and we are all accepting it. We had it at the childcare committee last week,. Some of the language used at that meeting has really stayed with me. Describing babies as "loss makers" in an industry whose sole focus is on the highest quality of care for children is absolutely shocking. Babies do not make money;they are loss makers. Is that what we are doing? This is the corporatisation of childcare in one sentence.

Once again, this highlights the need for a public model. It has to be focused on children, educators, quality and accessibility, not profit. We cannot throw money at a burning house. It has been described as the leaky bucket, but throwing money at a burning house is not working. This Government is failing to deliver on its promises for childcare. It is failing the parents, the educators and, most importantly, the children.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Before the general election in 2024, the Government was promising the divil and all with regard to childcare costs. As previous speakers have said, the cost of childcare can be as high as the very high rents in this city or mortgage payments. There was a promise from Fine Gael that there would be a €200 per month cap, which has not happened. There was also a promise to publish a plan within 100 days, and this has not happened. We do not know what that roadmap is going to be, and parents are at their wit's end.

People in Dublin South-Central contact me regularly about this. One couple who contacted me recently are due their baby this week. They contacted 15 crèches and none of them had any spaces between September 2027 and January 2028. The couple said that in one crèche there are no spaces available for the whole of 2028. Their baby has not even been born yet and they cannot get a place for that child in two years' time. They asked whether they were going to have to start planning babies around times when crèche places were available. That conversation reminded me of the issues with enrolment in primary schools several years ago, before the admissions to schools policy came forward. Parents used to ask whether they would have to apply for a place for their child the minute they were born and if they should ring from the maternity ward to say they had the baby and ask for a place in the primary school. If, God

forbid, you moved from somewhere else in the country or from another country, it was very difficult to get a place in the local school. That is what we have now with crèches. We have parents at their wit's end who cannot even get in to pay the astronomical fees, as Deputy Ennis mentioned.

However, childcare is not only about when the child is a baby and a toddler; it is also about after school. What happens to those children whose parents work? We know there was pandemonium among some parents as to what they were going to do during the proposed strike last week. We need quality after school childcare. It is very haphazard at the moment. A parent contacted me to say they have a place in an after-school facility for their child but there is no pick-up from the school to bring the child to the after-school childcare. There is no joined-up thinking.

No conversation about childcare can ever happen without acknowledging that the low pay for some staff members working in crèches and early childhood education is an utter disgrace. These are highly qualified individuals to whom we entrust our children and our babies who do not speak yet at the most fundamental part of their lives and they need to be rewarded properly for the hours they put in.

The last thing I will say is that early intervention classes were so important for children with disabilities. The row-back on that will come back to bite us in the proverbial in the future.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Childcare in Cork is in crisis. There are not enough places and it costs far too much money. I have constituents saying they are paying on average €880 per month for childcare. It is like a second mortgage and is having a crippling impact on families in my constituency.

Since 2020, 130 childcare facilities in the county of Cork have closed, which is extraordinary. One of those is a crèche in Wilton which closed with just one day's notice, leaving children without places, as highlighted by my colleague, Councillor Niamh O'Connor. As a result, more than 20 children in that area have been left without childcare. The closure is understood to be due to staff issues, with the crèche having recently posted advertisements looking for staff. This is another example of why we need that public model of early years education and childcare, which the Social Democrats has campaigned for. We have to ensure that as part of this, there is good pay and conditions for the workers in those facilities.

We know this is having an impact not just on the families, but also on businesses and the economy. A report by Cork Chamber found that two thirds of surveyed members did not consider the Irish childcare system fit for purpose. More than a third of Cork businesses have lost staff due to challenges and shortcomings in childcare, 36% said childcare challenges are directly impacting employees leaving the organisation or declining roles, and 57% said shortcomings in childcare had a moderate or significant impact on the workforce. The Cork Chamber president, Susie Horgan, said, "Cork's economy is growing strongly, but childcare is increasingly impacting on workforce participation."

It is impacting on the participation of women in particular. I spoke to many women during the general election campaign who said they wanted to go back to work and take up a job but could not do so because they could not source childcare. This impacts in terms of the gender pay gap and the pension gap for women, and it is a real issue for gender equality that we do not

have adequate childcare. What good is the economic growth that is being talked about if we cannot have the public services there for people when they need them? It is crucially important that we have those services across the constituency.

Some of the childcare providers I have spoken to have said the childcare sector is at an absolute breaking point and there is no point in pretending otherwise. They said it is all down to chronic underfunding, that it is very sad and not a day goes by that they do not think about closing. We have an absolute crisis in childcare in Cork and right across the country. This needs the Minister's attention. She needs to focus on this and we need a change of policy and direction towards that public model of childcare. Let us provide the public services people in this country need.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I want to start by saying there is no silver bullet for gender equality, but the closest you will get to that would be a public model of childcare. I say that as someone who raised their daughter alone. My daughter will be 26 tomorrow. Several previous speakers have spoken about the double mortgage many people are experiencing right now with the cost of childcare being so high. That double mortgage was in existence 26 years ago when I was paying crèche fees for my daughter. During the general election campaign in 2024 this was an issue in respect of which the Government made commitments that it has since failed to implement, but we also need to point out that successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have stood over a system where people are literally paying twice a mortgage.

The fact that I was paying for that meant that for nine years, I lived in my family home - in my childhood bedroom - with my daughter, because I could not afford a home for myself and my daughter, even in a well-paid job. This is a perennial problem that persists.

The two main points that I want to speak to today are funding and places because they are the biggest issues in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown. Many places in our constituency are pulling out of core funding and even for parents with places in crèches that access core funding, they face ridiculously high costs. Nearly a quarter of eligible services in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown are not part of the core funding scheme and that is the lowest rate in the country. According to Pobal, we have the highest fees for school-age children in the country, as well as the highest fees for early years. Several operators in my constituency have left the core funding scheme in recent years because they could not make it work with their overheads. This has left parents scrambling, as their already high childcare costs tip into unworkable.

For some parents, the cost of childcare is pushing them out of the workforce. For single parents, it presents another insurmountable barrier to providing for their families. Yet, the promise of €200 childcare from the general election has yet to materialise or even get anywhere near it. The work to create a public childcare system in this country is similarly non-existent. This leaves families trapped in a vicious circle where working may actually cost them when childcare is taken into account. That is hardly making work pay, as the Minister's Government is constantly repeating.

On the availability of spaces, even if you can scrape together the money to pay, many parents simply cannot find a place. The huge affordability issues are all academic if, like many parents I have spoken to at the doors and who have contacted my office, there is simply no place available. It leaves parents - mainly mothers - forced to turn down jobs or unable to go back to work. This means lost tax take, lost opportunities for those families, and the loss of choice

in their own lives on whether parents stay at home with their children or enter the workforce. This not only means that parents cannot work; it also means the children miss out on early years education that their peers get to access.

If we want a system that is stable, affordable and can meet demand now and into the future, we need a public model of childcare.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): We are about to go back to the Government side but just before we do, I wish to mention a school that was here a short while ago, St. Conaire's National School, Shannon. The three students who were at the Oireachtas education committee this morning did a fantastic job, led by their teachers Róisín and Audrey. It was great to have them here today.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: As a TD, my party's spokesperson on children but, most importantly, as a mother, I know the importance of high-quality, accessible childcare and that it is not an abstract policy discussion. It is one of the biggest challenges facing young families across Ireland.

Every week, I meet parents trying to balance work, school runs, commutes and general family life. I feel their relief when a childcare place becomes available for them. I see the excitement in communities when a new crèche opens its doors and that is why childcare remains one of the most important priorities for me as a local representative in Meath West and for this Government. We are building a system that is more affordable for parents, more sustainable for providers and more accessible for children.

As a TD representing a growing commuter county, I know affordability is only one side of the equation. Parents also need places. Nothing demonstrates that better than what I have seen locally in my county of Meath. The opening of Cookies Early Learning Centre in Athboy in late 2024 and Zenith Childcare in Robinrath more recently have been hugely welcomed by local families. It has brought relief to parents who were struggling to find places close to home. We are looking forward to the opening of Little Harvard in Trim in the new year, another important addition to childcare capacity in our area. It is worth acknowledging that many of these facilities are being delivered as part of private housing developments. When housing developments are planned, we need schools, community facilities and childcare provision. When that childcare is planned alongside housing, families benefit and communities thrive.

One of the most important developments in this space at the moment is the new national planning approach being introduced by Government. Historically large housing developments conditioned to deliver crèche places were ultimately not delivering them and converting proposed crèches to additional housing. It is something I have highlighted here many times before. We are now taking a much more strategic approach.

Under the new planning framework, the Department of children becomes a prescribed body and will have a much stronger voice in assessing childcare demand as housing developments come forward. It will ensure that childcare places are truly delivered. The intention is simple: if hundreds of new houses are being built, we should be planning real childcare provision from day one. That represents smarter planning and better governance. We cannot keep chasing demand. We must anticipate demand and plan for it.

I wish to take a moment to acknowledge the importance of supporting childminders and to thank the Minister for extending the deadline for registration. We recognise that the vast majority of people entering childminding are women and many have made that choice because it allows to balance their own family lives, to meet the needs of their own children and, more importantly, because they genuinely love caring for and minding children. For many, it is not simply a business decision; it is a lifestyle choice. It is a way of working that fits around their own families and a service that is hugely valuable to other families in their communities.

We also need to recognise that moving into self-employment can be daunting. Registration, regulation, tax, insurance and all the responsibilities that come with running a business can be overwhelming, particularly for someone who has always just seen themselves as simply a childminder. Our job is to bring these people on that journey, not to put barriers in their way; and to provide the guidance, reassurance and practical supports that will give them the confidence to take that next step. If we want quality, accessible childcare, we need to make sure that childminders feel valued, supported and encouraged to be part of our system.

We have made real progress through reduced fees, increased State investment, expansion of childcare places and ambitious reforms for the future. There is more that we can and will do and again, as a Government TD, spokesperson on children and a mother, I want every family to have access to affordable, high-quality childcare close to where they live. That is the direction we are travelling. It is a journey worth continuing because when we support children and families, we strengthen communities and Ireland.

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the investment in reducing fees and increasing subsidies and I say well done to the Minister. I have limited time so I am going to focus on what I think we should do rather than what has been done.

Affordability matters but availability matters just as much because cheaper childcare is of no use to a parent who cannot access a place. The action plan must effectively address delivery. In May 2025, €25 million was announced under the building blocks scheme for around 1,500 places, many expected by the year end. The Minister's June reply to my parliamentary question showed that six services had drawn down €1.57 million from the €25 million, and seven had withdrawn. A further reply in October showed only another €390,000 had been drawn down. Can the Minister tell us how many places have opened? We need to examine whether legal requirements, contracts and approval processes are holding back projects and delivery.

Building blocks, as a scheme, also has limitations. In Tyrrelstown, three centres close together could provide 300 community childcare places but fit-out costs, on top of the purchase costs of around €2 million, put them beyond the reach of most providers. Can the building blocks scheme be extended to cover fit-out costs? Better still, can the unutilised funding from the 2025 programme be redirected to get these and other empty facilities open?

I feel like a broken record when talking about empty and unbuilt facilities in Dublin West but families' lives are being affected. There are 34 places at Balroy Hall in Carpenterstown. At Barnwell Park in Hansfield, there are 49 places. At Castlefield Hall in Clonsilla, a 422 sq. m crèche was never built. What better illustration of a system that is not working effectively than empty or unbuilt facilities in areas where families are crying out for childcare places and providers for units. The longer it takes to reform the 2001 planning guidelines, the more families lose out. There are practical solutions - developer contributions towards larger

facilities on better sites, standard designs and clear technical guidelines. I propose a State purchase guarantee at an open-book price, providing a fallback through State-led funding where private providers do not open facilities. That would be a pipeline of facilities in communities linked to housing.

The Minister announced that the planning authorities would notify her Department, as a prescribed body, about applications creating additional childcare demand. That is really positive but I was informed here in the House a couple of weeks ago that the regulation has not been implemented yet. I wrote to the Minister about Castlefield Hall, where the crèche remains unbuilt.

4 o'clock

Fingal County Council has granted permission for a smaller facility on that site for just 34 children, despite providers locally needing and wanting units. While I welcome the €135 million State-led programme, when will we see those places? Community providers are committing resources while running existing services, and both they and communities want clear timelines. We want those facilities and this experience to be a success on which we can build for the future.

The council owns a crèche in Church Fields, Mulhuddart, planned for 100 children, that remains unused. It has not been included in the State programme. I urge the Minister to consider that facility.

Schools should be required, not simply encouraged, to provide or accommodate afterschool care when it is needed. We should be using State assets-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): I thank the Deputy. We are out of time. I call Deputy Joe Neville.

Deputy Joe Neville: First, I welcome my three guests, Brian Whitney, Faye Haynes and Maisey Kate Wasson, to the Public Gallery. They are students in transition year. They are very welcome today. They are growing up as teenagers in north Kildare, one of the fastest growing areas of the country. That is what I am here to speak about today. The population of County Kildare has grown from 100,000 during my childhood to close to 300,000. With that increase come significant needs. One significant need is access to childcare. Towns in the county, such as Kilcock, are growing. It is among the top ten towns in the country with the youngest populations, as is Maynooth. I am sure Celbridge, Sallins, Kill, Naas, Leixlip and other such towns in the county are close behind. There are not enough childcare facilities to fit the growing population. We have housing developments coming on stream, which is a positive. That is something I pushed forward when I was a councillor, and Kildare County Council is doing likewise. Ultimately, we need the facilities, including childcare, behind that development.

I was disappointed that County Kildare was not nominated in the most recent scheme. Many other counties were nominated but Kildare was not. We need to ensure that is resolved the next time. One of the significant issues we face in County Kildare is that the council does not necessarily own larger, older buildings, which seem to be the locations identified. In the next scheme, we need to look at expanding it to ensure we can get individual locations on board.

At the same time, I have to be positive. I welcome the fact the Government and the Department are working towards the goal of capping childcare costs at €200 per month, as put down by Fine Gael in our most recent manifesto and agreed in the programme for Government with Fianna Fáil. That is positive. I thank the Minister for the reductions she secured and for the hard work both she and her team are doing to deliver as per budget 20207 and into the future.

Nevertheless, not all parents have benefited from one of the recent reductions that capped childcare costs at €550 per month, given that it stretched only to families who fall under band E of the core funding scheme. Unfortunately, the majority of families in my constituency fall under the higher band F of the core funding scheme as they are commuting parents, as I have outlined. While the population is growing in north Kildare, it is commuter centric. People leave for work earlier and return later. That has caused the difficulty. I appreciate the response of the Minister to a parliamentary question I submitted in which it was stated that approximately 23% of services are expected to lower at least one fee from this date next September. However, the majority of my constituents will not necessarily fall into this bracket. I hope to ensure the rest, the other 77%, is delivered.

I also want to talk about the State-led programme and what the Minister's programme is for doing for it. I am aware that €1.5 million has been spent on this scheme so far this year. I would ask that the Department increase the spend for the coming year to allow for more premises to be introduced. As I outlined, in north Kildare, we have difficulties with the lack of buildings.

Another issue that constituents have raised with me in the context of childcare comes from childminders themselves. They have outlined the delays in Garda vetting for childcare staff. I strongly agree that the vetting process must be in place, particularly when it comes to the care of children. We have all seen the risks in that regard. However, I ask that the Department liaise with the Minister for justice and the Garda to look into the possibility of a separate Garda vetting scheme dedicated to childcare.

It is not lost on any of us in the House that childcare issues mostly affect women, particularly mothers who are looking to return to work. I hope the State-led childcare programme will reduce this.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the recent announcement that Gorey will be the location for one of the new State-led, not-for-profit childcare facilities. This will cater for 100 children in the area. I welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring this happens. She knows north Wexford quite well and will appreciate it is one of the fastest growing areas in the country. Between the 2016 and 2022 censuses, the population of the area grew by over 14%. We anticipate that a similar level of growth will be recorded when the census is carried out next year. It is critical to ensure we have sufficient and quality childcare places in all of those rapidly growing areas.

I know the Minister enormously values the work and incredibly important role childcare providers and childminders carry out in all of our communities. I have spoken to many of the childcare providers in my hometown of Gorey and the surrounding areas. My mam used to manage the preschool unit at St. Aidan's Services in Gorey. I have been very involved in Gorey Youth Needs Group, which offers an excellent service through Little Daisies. When it comes

to childcare groups in my area, given that I have mentioned Little Daisies, I should mention the other groups with the word "little" in their names. We have Little Acorns Montessori, Little Crickets, Little Ducklings Playschool, Little Lambs Creche and Montessori, Little Oaks Early Years and Little Rascals Preschool. Perhaps "little rascals" would be an appropriate childcare facility name for some of the operations that happen here in this Chamber. There are many others as well, such as the naíonra in the Gaelscoil and Higgy's House. We have Montessori provisions locally, as well as DaddyDay Care and Ballymoney Steiner Kindergarten. The danger, of course, is that once I start, I have to name them all. They are all critical to our community.

On their behalf, I ask the Minister to look at two things. First, service providers want to ensure that they comply with all the regulations and that grant allocations are spent properly. However, a common refrain relates to paperwork. Could someone in the Department look at some kind of exercise to simplify the paperwork and remove some of the burden placed on providers, some of which are small? They are owner operated and community led, and a lot of time is spent on paperwork.

The second issue relates to valuing childcare workers. It continues to be the case that graduates with childcare qualifications are among the lowest paid of all graduates. If we are to continue to attract good people into childcare, we have to recognise the importance of that qualification. I praise the Minister for keeping the costs down for parents, but we need to look at how we support the providers as well.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I was listening to Deputy Byrne talking about Little Rascals, little grasshoppers and whatever else. For childminders listening in, they would say "little progress". The Government has announced that the registration deadline to register with Tusla will move from September 2027 to 2030. That reflects the fact that, out of approximately 16,000 to 17,000 childminders in the State, just 160 have registered and are signed up to those regulations.

Childminders play a crucial role. Obviously, it is a challenging job, but it is really important. For many families, it is the solution that works for them. It works for the childminders as well. Progress to date has not been anywhere near what we should have seen. We have been warning the Government about this. It needs to be resolved. At least there is a recognition of reality in this regard but it is certainly not a solution. That needs to be addressed.

Regarding the sector as a whole, the issues have been well summarised by other Deputies. At the end of the day, this is a huge challenge for us as a society and State. We have to start treating this as a public good and public service. It is something people rely on. While I have been aware of this for many years, it was brought home to me again recently when a childcare provider closed suddenly and unexpectedly. From speaking to the affected parents, their entire lives for those few weeks were going to be upended. Parents build their lives around the arrangements they make. It might be a mix of childminding, grandparents and neighbours. It might involve taking a day off work and different things like that. Different families have different arrangements and they arrange their lives around them. When a piece is taken away, however, everything is upended. It has huge impacts on people's ability to work. The lack of spaces, particularly for babies under one year of age, is a huge obstacle, particularly for women getting back to work. That is profoundly wrong, and that is aside from the cost.

As other Deputies acknowledged, childcare costs per child full time in Cork city is still €800 or €900. That is a huge amount of money, particularly if you are renting. If you are renting and paying childcare, that is almost two thirds of your income gone straight away for someone on an ordinary income before you look at anything else.

I want to briefly acknowledge the planning issue. We see time and again where planning is granted but ultimately it is not followed through. People are promised a childcare facility but it does not come to pass.

Deputy Mark Ward: Childcare costs and access to places is one of the main issues coming into my constituency office in Dublin Mid-West. Childcare services are often oversubscribed in my area while nationally there are 50,000 children on waiting lists. Fine Gael, and in particular Simon Harris, copied the Sinn Féin policy of €10 a day childcare in the lead up to the last general election but has it been delivered? No. Two years on, it is just another failed promise. Sinn Féin proposed the €10 a day childcare first and we costed it. We would have delivered it and not broken our promise.

I also want to take this opportunity to speak about Simon Harris's recent comments on social welfare when he was punching down.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Stick to the debate.

Deputy Mark Ward: I am sticking to the debate. Does he realise that lone parents who want to go to work cannot afford the cost of childcare or cannot find childcare places? They have no choice but to stay at home and mind their kids. The Tánaiste's comments were shameful and show how out of touch he is with ordinary people.

Childcare facility operators and educators also contact me about issues with the core funding scheme that is not working for them and this has a knock-on effect on parents. One of the many parents from my area who contacted me said that she had just received an email from her children's crèche to say it was pulling out of the State core funding scheme and will subsequently increase fees. She said they have two children in childcare and that the fee increase will see their annual childcare bill increase by many thousands of euro, which is not acceptable. She said they cannot afford it nor can they afford for either parent to leave their job and said this was going to affect roughly 100 families in the area and wanted to know what was going to be done about it. She said Fine Gael promised a cap of €200 per family per month in the last general election but instead their family will be paying hundreds of euro more per month. She signed it "Yours in desperation".

Parents are absolutely desperate to get childcare places at an affordable cost. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in government promised to deliver that at the last general election but they have not done that.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome that the Minister is with us today for these statements on childcare. I also welcome the fact we are having these statements given its importance to so many people. The Labour Party is on the record as being the first party to advocate for a €200 monthly childcare fees. However, the question is: how far are we away from that policy which has been adopted by this Government? It is very worrying to hear some of the Government

TDs asking what benefit has come through the latest budget announcements in recent weeks and questioning how many families it will help. Maybe the Minister will give us a reply to that. It is a question I have asked her before because it seems only a very small number of families who will benefit. Again, I stress it seems to be a worry for some Government backbenchers too.

The Minister will know I carried out a survey in Kildare South which shows that increasingly it is women, unfortunately, who are impacted by the crisis in our childcare. Many families are having to reduce the hours of work or are giving up careers entirely. As I said, it is mainly women who must take this on. As I have said to the Minister previously, those jobs being given up are the OTs and other specialist jobs, which our healthcare system needs. Again, it is because of childcare that we are losing those people who carry out those essential services.

Kildare has the lowest level of community childcare provision in the State, at just 4%. That is only eight providers. That is why I continue to call for towns like Newbridge and Kilcullen to be prioritised for the State-led public childcare project. These communities have seen a number of very welcome housing developments but the infrastructure is not there to support the many working families who have come - and who are welcome - to make Kildare their home. My office continues to engage with the Department to advance projects in towns across Kildare South but the shortage of community providers and sites makes this extremely difficult.

We are also engaging with the Kildare County childcare committee, as the Minister and I have discussed before. I am glad to tell her that one proposal is already with the Kildare County childcare committee for the Kildare area. I hope the Minister will look at it when she is considering the next round of public childcare places.

Of course, some of the families we speak about rely on grandparents to provide childcare. I want to use this debate to commend the many grandmothers and grandads without whom many working families would struggle given the chronic shortage of places. These grandparents and relatives are essential. I am sure the Minister will agree their importance in the childcare area is often overlooked but without them, this State would have a much bigger problem.

I want to talk to the Minister about the small and medium providers and put on the record again that since 2019, 977 early years service providers have closed. In that time, 579 have opened with a net loss of 400 service providers. The issue with that is that many of those small and medium providers are located in rural areas, which is having a huge knock-on effect in rural communities across the State.

The Labour Party has a different vision for early childhood education and care. We view the sector as an integral part of Ireland's education system and would fully integrate childcare into the public education system. That begins with recognising and valuing our educators by paying them a professional wage, which is reflective of their key role in education. We believe consideration should be given to the State paying the wages of educators who work for a provider opting into a public system. The State should also develop new pay scales similar to those of a primary school teacher, which recognises graduates, those teaching through Irish and other factors. We would also radically reform the funding of this sector to an enhanced capitation system for registered providers who opt into the public system, with core funding

being phased out over a number of years. We also want to remove commercial rates for those providers who opt into our public model.

There is a situation now where large corporate providers have a stranglehold on the sector. At recent meeting of the joint committee, it was confirmed to my colleagues, Deputy O'Donoghue and Senator Cosgrove, that one of the major corporate chains in Ireland is backed by a private equity firm. As we all know in this House, these firms are only interested in one thing and that is profit. They are not interested in quality or affordable childcare or decent pay for educators. They are only interested in profit. The taking over of childcare by corporate entities has to be a concern for every one of us here. We have already seen the impact of this where two smaller providers were bought out by a corporate chain and now the two settings have experienced multiple room closures.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I attended the children's committee meeting last week and what emerged was telling about the state of our early years sector. There are three main groups representing the sector. SIPTU was able to give me the number of people it represents. The Federation of Early Childhood Providers gave me figures, although I would question some of those. The one group that could not give me figures was Childhood Services Ireland, CSI. However, CSI has five seats on the joint labour committee, JLC. What has become glaringly obvious, both at the committee and the JLC process, is that community and not-for-profit providers, who represent 24% of this sector, have virtually no voice. Why is there no dedicated community provider representation on the JLC? Why are the voices of a quarter of the sector being overlooked while two other provider groups have six seats at the table?

In my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, just 6% of childcare services are community-based, the second-lowest figure in the country. Not one of these has been selected for a State-led service. There are options in there. This raises questions about the decisions being made and whose needs are actually being prioritised.

I was also struck by comments from the chair of the Fingal county childcare committee, who has held that position for 15 years and has recently sold her services to an equity fund. She told the committee there are places for public childcare in rural and disadvantaged communities where private providers will not go because they cannot make a profit. She also agreed that public services should go into public spaces but apparently because community services do not make money, people prefer private services.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): The Deputy should be careful of mentioning people outside the Chamber.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: What does that tell us about the mindset shaping childcare provision in Fingal? What chance do communities like mine have when even those in positions of influence appear to accept that public provision is only necessary when private operators cannot make money?

I have met community childcare providers who are thriving. They reinvest in their staff, services and communities. They have no shareholders, no equity funds and no obligation to deliver a return to investors. I strongly disagree that only private providers are sustainable.

Approximately 10% of our childcare services are now owned by equity funds. If that business model fails, as we have seen in other countries, who picks up the bill? We have seen it before with Quinn Insurance and, for those old enough to remember, the Private Motorists Protection Association, when the public ultimately footed the bill.

The Labour Party has a costed roadmap towards a public early childhood education system, one that supports small and medium-sized independent providers, grows our own public and community services and puts limits on profits extracted from corporate and equity-backed operators.

We are sleepwalking into an aggressive corporate takeover of the childcare sector. We are investing €1.65 billion this year. We will spend this money one way or the other. The question is whether we spend it on a sustainable public system or continue to subsidise a model that puts private profit ahead of public need.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Childcare is an issue very close to my heart, having only recently gone through the rigmarole of trying to secure a place for our youngest. It has taken us five years and our second child to get an offer of a place in the crèche near our home. We are not unique in this regard. Childcare places are at a premium, as are prices. Labour wants to change this and we have a costed plan to move us to a public system of childcare. I ask the Minister to engage with us in good faith on our plan rather than just tinker around the edges of the existing failing system.

Of course, we welcome the €200 cut in fees for eligible early years facilities in October's budget. We welcome that progress, but that fee reduction does not come into effect until next September. A lot of the children in families currently using early years services may have aged out of those services by then. As I have said before, a major issue with this is that those facilities outside core funding are not catered for or included. There were no targeted supports for families whose providers do not participate in the programme. They will not benefit from the fee reduction, nor is there any sort of cap placed on their fees in the first place.

I raised the case of families in a facility in Firhouse in my constituency here in the House last week. The scale and frequency of the fee increases that these families have seen in just the last three years have put enormous financial pressure on many of them. In January 2024, those families had a 28% fee increase. This was followed by a 3% increase and then a 4.5% increase the following year. They have recently been told there will be another increase this coming January.

I should add that these families are already paying almost €1,600 a month before the NCS. One of the parents who contacted me has two children in the facility and is paying €2,500 a month in childcare fees. These are exactly the parents we are talking about when we say that for too many people childcare is like a second mortgage.

When I raised this case here last week, and the broader issue of fees for families outside of core funding, the response I got from the Minister who was present, Deputy Burke, was essentially that the Government's plan is to encourage more providers into the core funding regime. That is just not good enough. It effectively amounts to just hoping for the best. These parents need support now.

If it were the case that parents had so many options available to them that they could actually decide for themselves whether to choose a facility that was in or out of core funding, or if they had some option in relation to pricing, that would be different. The reality is that parents do not have a choice. I know that myself as a parent. Parents are desperate to get any space they are offered, so they will take whatever is available before they even ask what the fees are.

Invariably when responding to issues around core funding, the Minister points to the 93% participation rate nationally among providers, but that situation is different in Dublin. In Dublin South-West, participation in core funding is just 89%. That means approximately one in ten providers is not catered for under the current system. The average participation rate in core funding across Dublin is 85%. In Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, it is just 80%. That means two in ten childcare providers are not in core funding.

Many of the providers with the greatest capacity have withdrawn from the programme too, so I would query the actual number of childcare places that are covered by core funding. The answer to all these questions is a public model.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: This issue goes to the absolute core of the standard and quality of living in Ireland and the reality people face across the country when trying to build a life here and raise a family.

We have serious issues in Ireland across all levels of education, from early years to third level. The crisis in childcare is broad. It is about availability, cost, whether a provider stays in operation and, critically for us, the poor pay and conditions and severe lack of job security experienced by those working in the early years sector. We cannot solve Ireland's childcare crisis without addressing the crisis these workers are going through.

In Cork city, we are seeing the consequences every single day. Cork has been reported as having the second-highest early years staff turnover rate in the country, at approximately 31.7%. Providers across Cork are reporting extensive waiting lists, with some operating at full capacity. They want to expand and provide more places, but they simply cannot recruit and retain enough qualified educators.

Families are struggling to find places and, for some parents, that means being unable to return to work. I know parents who have been through three providers in one calendar year. Meanwhile, providers are under enormous pressure from rising operating costs, administrative demands and staffing shortages.

My colleague Councillor Ciara O'Connor has raised these concerns locally, including through a motion at Cork City Council seeking a city-wide assessment of early years and school-age childcare capacity, to identify the areas of greatest need and ensure that childcare is properly considered in development planning, particularly in growing communities such as Ballincollig in my constituency.

The first six years of a child's life are fundamental to his or her emotional, social, language and cognitive development. Children need consistency. They need familiar, trusted educators who understand them and provide security. High staff turnover disrupts those relationships, particularly for babies, toddlers and children with additional needs.

SIPTU highlighted this very issue before the Joint Committee on Children and Equality last week, pointing out that some educators earn just €15 an hour. Employment regulation orders have brought improvements, but minimum rates are not the same as professional salaries, career progression or recognition of qualifications.

We would not expect a primary school teacher with a level 8 qualification to work without an appropriate salary structure. Perhaps the Government would, given the public sector pay agreement, if I may say so in jest. Why should early years educators who carry such responsibility for our youngest children be treated differently?

We must value our early years workers. The Labour Party believes the State must fund professional salary scales that recognise qualifications, experience and responsibilities. We have a costed plan to move the sector to a public system that would save the State money. In 2002, the Labour Party publicly proposed a funded model of childcare. In 2020, we published our plan to roll out a universal public childcare service, the first such plan produced by any party in this country. I am asking whether the Government will commit to introducing a State-funded national pay scale for early years educators comparable to those of other education professionals. I am saying that as a former teacher. We cannot downgrade the position of early years educators in this country.

Childcare is a fundamental State service and essential social infrastructure. Our children deserve stability, our families deserve affordable and accessible places, and our educators deserve professional recognition and a decent wage.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: The childcare sector provides a vital service in our communities, offering a range of childcare options to give parents and guardians choice and flexibility in selecting the service that best meets their needs. However, challenges relating to childcare places and capacity, affordability for families and staffing have persisted across the sector.

As a member of the Fine Gael committee on children, I have met a range of childcare providers to better understand the current landscape and work towards addressing these issues. Affordable and accessible childcare is essential to give children the best possible start in life while enabling parents to work, study and balance family responsibilities.

Affordability alone is not enough. Families must also be able to access childcare when and where they need it. As a result, a key focus has been on increasing capacity and creating more childcare places.

Budget 2027 outlined a number of new measures to support families. It will reduce the maximum annual cost of childcare by more than €1,800 for families. The maximum monthly cost will fall from €735 to €550 for children up to senior infants attending childcare for 45 hours per week. Tax relief for childminders will increase from €15,000 to €20,000. These changes will take effect in September 2027.

While these measures provide important support for families, it is equally important that childcare providers be supported to continue delivering this essential service. Recruiting and retaining staff remain crucial. Between 2022 and 2025, the number of people working in this sector increased by 23%, rising from nearly 34,500 to over 42,000.

Childcare providers go above and beyond for the children in their care and we must ensure that they have the resources, staffing and capacity needed to continue providing the high-quality service that is so vital to communities and families throughout the country. I put on record our thanks to all those in the early education sector for all the work that they do.

Families in Longford need childcare that is both affordable and accessible. These supports help parents to work while ensuring their children have access to a safe, nurturing environment in which they can learn and grow during their early years. We must continue to build on the progress that we have made in this sector and deliver a childcare system that adequately supports both those working in the sector and the families who rely on these vital services.

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome the increased investment in childcare and the Government's commitment to progressively reduce childcare costs to €200 per child per month. Budget 2027 represents another important step towards that goal. However, for families in Fingal, cost is only half the problem. Affordability means very little if you cannot find a place. I know that personally. I have nine-year-old twins and despite wanting childcare for them, I was never able to find childcare places for them. I had to pivot my career. I was fortunate to do so but so many families do not have that option. That means women in particular are taking a step back from their careers. That impacts our economic development. This is not just about a social right or equality, even though it is about both of those. This is also about our economic success. We have to make sure that we are supporting families who want to return to the workplace to help Ireland's economic future.

I am particularly disappointed that none of the seven locations announced under the State-led childcare programme are in Fingal. Fingal is, as I have mentioned many times, one of the youngest areas in the country. Even though the programme will produce about 600 much-needed childcare places and, critically, they will be operated by not-for-profit providers, we need to see that investment in Fingal. Only 6% of providers in Fingal are not-for-profit and that is simply not good enough when considering the town of Balbriggan, which is the youngest large town in the country and is rapidly growing. We have to see not-for-profit childcare.

Fingal itself is rapidly growing and we need to see childcare delivered right across it, not only in Balbriggan but in Rush, Lusk and Skerries. Too many families are struggling to secure childcare and after-school places. I know the Department acknowledges that demand exceeds supply in parts of the country and is developing a forward-planning model, but that model needs to be delivered urgently and translated into actual places. The €135 million State-led programme is intended to create new capacity where it is needed and it is needed in north Fingal. We have to see north Fingal in the next phase of that scheme. The Department has to make it easier for community organisations like family resource centres to establish and operate childcare services. That means having a model that can be given to any not-for-profit provider in any part of the country to make it easier with regard to regulatory, corporate and legal compliance and a sustainable funding stream. This needs to happen with urgency. We need to see the Department of children move with much greater urgency.

My ask here today is straightforward. Identify the areas of greatest unmet need. Prioritise them for investment. Give Fingal a fair share of that new State-led and not-for-profit childcare and rapidly accelerate places so that we have certainty, which we and families need. Providers

are so unclear about what model will be proposed. We need to see phase 2 of the roadmap for childcare published urgently.

Deputy John McGuinness: I support the public provision for childcare. It is the way forward but it requires the level of funding to deliver at a rapid pace and it requires a significant amount of bureaucracy to be removed. On that issue alone, I want to raise a matter in the name of Mick Kenny of Urlingford Community Childcare Centre. He raises the issue of the building blocks scheme and the attempt that the people there made to provide an extension and improvement for their childcare facility, only to be met with delays in construction. Arising from that, they then made an appeal to have the date for completion and the drawdown of the funds and so on, but that was refused. They made an appeal under *force majeure* which was refused. The delays and problems they had were not of their making. They provide an exceptional service and I believe it is support they should have received in the context of any intervention from the Department. I ask again that the Minister look at the refusals. I understand that she has the full details. I ask that she ensure that support is given to work through the problems and the financing and to ensure that that project is delivered on time and with the full support.

A second project that I looked at in Kilkenny had similar issues with bureaucracy. The timeframe for dealing with the issues does not move at the same pace as the need to deliver the childcare facilities in a community such as Freshford, or in the case that I have just raised, Urlingford Community Childcare. Much reform is needed in that area. As I said, the public model is one that I would support. I urgently ask the Minister to look at what I have just raised.

I also mention the name of Martina Cody, who has a pension issue arising from Tusla. I understand it is on the Minister's desk. I raised it here before. It has still not been dealt with. It has dragged on for ten years. The woman is suffering many health issues. I have her permission to mention her name and to bring it to the attention of the Minister because she is familiar with it. I ask that the Minister look at those two specific matters and reply to me in due course.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): That might be more suitable for a parliamentary question.

Deputy John McGuinness: I will look up the Standing Orders.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I fully agree with the ambition to reduce the cost of childcare for working families but we cannot ignore concerns about how the model operates, particularly in small rural communities. If we cap what parents pay, we must also provide enough funding to providers to keep their doors open, bills paid and their staff paid properly. Core funding may be working for many but smaller rural providers are telling me the model is becoming harder to make work. They cannot spread staffing, governance and fixed costs in the way that a bigger operator with more children can. Fee controls, rising staff costs and the huge level of paperwork mean the system is just not working for some.

I know of one local facility that has walked away from €80,000 in core funding because the level of oversight associated with the scheme made no business sense, was affecting service

quality and contributing to staff stress, burn-out and departures. We need to take that seriously. In large towns, the loss of one provider from core funding reduces choice. In rural communities, unfortunately, it can mean losing the service completely. Parents also need clarity about what happens under future phases of shaping the future where the provider is outside core funding. They should not lose access to NCS or ECCE supports simply because their local provider has stepped outside the scheme. Those parents should not be disadvantaged in accessing childcare supports funded through general taxation. Withdrawal from core funding should not translate into the loss of local childcare capacity or higher costs for parents.

We also need to know about the providers outside core funding. How many are in rural areas? How many are the only childcare providers in their communities? Why are they choosing to leave? This ensures when we can spot problems early, especially in rural communities, they can be dealt with.

The Government is right to try to make childcare cheaper but cheaper childcare is meaningless if there are no childcare places available locally. Affordability, availability and sustainability must all move together. That is the balance we need to get right, especially for rural communities.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on early learning and childcare. I thank the Minister, Deputy Foley, and her officials for securing yet another record budget to invest in this sector. Listening to some in the Chamber earlier, it might be forgotten that investment in early learning and childcare has more than doubled since 2022.

Core funding rises to €658 million next September, which is very welcome. It will reduce the weekly cost from around €180 to €137 for children covered by a place in a core-funded facility. Clearly, that matters in Dún Laoghaire, where parents pay some of the highest fees in the country. I was delighted to welcome the Minister to Shankill in September where she announced Shanganagh Castle, one of the first new State-led facilities. Shanganagh is one of the fastest growing communities in Dublin and the site is well placed and will have a massive impact for parents when it opens. Increasing supply of funded places is a big challenge.

There are four points I would like to raise. The first is staffing. We know one in four early years staff leaves their job every year. That is three times the rate for HSE care assistants. One factor is the pay rate - just €15 an hour. I know the new pay order is out for public consultation and I hope it will be finalised and implemented as soon as possible.

The second issue is Garda vetting. An educator who moves to a new crèche must be vetted again and this can take weeks. Rooms stay closed or cannot take on extra children while they wait. We need one vetting certificate that follows the person, like a tax clearance certificate. Britain and Northern Ireland already do this.

The third issue is childminders. I welcome the decision to give childminders until June 2030 to register. I also welcome the increase in the childminding tax relief to €20,000. I support bringing people into the system and establishing basic standards but we need to be reasonable. Tusla needs to show flexibility and avoid overly burdensome red tape. Childminders are also worried about their details being published online. A childminder's workplace is also the family home. In England, a childminder's address is published only with their consent. I ask the Minister of State to set out the rationale for publication.

The fourth issue is fees. A service open in 2021 is frozen at 2021 fees while a new service down the road can set its own. Fewer services in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown are in core funding than anywhere else in Dublin, so more of our families sit outside the new caps. I ask the Minister to examine these issues. I am grateful to her and her officials, particularly on Shanganagh Castle.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Serious pressures face the early years sector in Waterford city and county. In Tramore, Dungarvan and communities across the county, parents are struggling to secure places for their children, services are oversubscribed, waiting lists are growing and providers are leaving the sector, some of them closing their doors altogether. The Minister of State has heard it here already but Government needs to tackle this crisis at three levels: affordability for parents, which was promised but not delivered; viability for providers, the lack of which is forcing them to leave; and proper pay and recognition for early years educators. These are skilled workers, deserving of proper recognition and a living wage. The responsibility for delivering that rests with the Government and it is past time for a sustainable plan that addresses all three challenges.

Tá ról fíorthábhachtach ag naíonraí maidir le tús maith a thabhairt do pháistí san oideachas. Tá an t-éileamh ar oideachas trí Ghaeilge ag fás. Tá níos mó tuismitheoirí ag aithint an luach a bhaineann leis. Tá naíonraí den scoth i nGaeltacht na nDéise agus ar fud Chontae Phort Láirge. Tá foirne gairmiúla díograiseacha ag oibriú iontu. Tá tacaíocht chuí tuillte acu. Caithfear spás a chur ar fáil dóibh chun freastal ar an éileamh méadaithe seo. Tá dul chun cinn déanta maidir le spáis bhreise i Scoil Gharbháin ach tá spáis bhreise de dhíth ar Naíonra Garbháin, atá comhshuite leis. I dTrá Mór, tá Naíonra Philib Barún ag feidhmiú i gcóiríocht mhí-oiriúnach le blianta fada. Tá feabhas práinneach ag teastáil leis seo. Ní mór don Rialtas tacú leis na seirbhísí seo agus infheistíocht a dhéanamh iontu.

I want to raise the commercial rates issue affecting early years providers in Waterford. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is aware of this as I have raised it with her multiple times. Since January, Waterford childcare providers have been contacting my office following the Tailte Éireann valuation review, with some facing proposed annual bills in excess of €12,000. It is a serious threat to the viability of services in communities, including Lismore, Abbeyside, Lemybrien, Kilmacthomas, and Tooraneena. I understand the Minister referred this to the Attorney General for advice and is engaging with the Minister, Deputy Browne, on the matter but it is important we know what conclusions have been reached and what advices received from the Attorney General. Services cannot be left facing these unsustainable bills, adding to the pressure childcare providers are already under. I understand the Government is waiting for answers from the Attorney General but it is time for Government to act and, if necessary, make legislative changes to ensure public-provided services are not subject to humungous rates bills.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is hard to see how any system other than public and State provision of childcare will work. We have to see this as the good and the absolute necessity for families to be able to have children, bring them up and have decent lives. Within the constraints of a cost-of-living crisis, this is even more difficult. Most of us have met many who have to avail of childcare, some in our own families. They are paying the equivalent of a mortgage and we are a long way from the promise of €200 per child per month. We need to see delivery of that but there is not much point in delivering that while people cannot access

the necessary supports. There is a logjam in Louth like everywhere else, particularly in relation to babies and very young children.

We have had a huge number of people on to my office, and I have spoken to many people, absolutely distraught about the fact they have to leave jobs. Some of those jobs are in healthcare and some are working for State utilities. We have all heard this story before but we have also heard from those operating these systems about the issues in relation to core funding. This was sent to the Minister, Deputy Foley:

> I am writing to you in absolute desperation regarding the current funding model for early childcare education and care in Ireland. The current system is fundamentally broken and as a provider on the ground, I am in dire financial straits. I operate two childcare services. Both of my services are completely full. I proudly employ 35 dedicated staff members, who rely on me for their livelihoods. Despite operating at maximum capacity, the books do not balance. I have many awards for the services and value a quality setting.

She talks about mounting debt, personal financial depletion and severe personal toll. I read this out last week among childcare providers at the children's committee and they agreed that is the situation. Many of them also spoke of their fear of private equity financing; one even spoke of coming across that industry looking for roadkill. We do not need providers to be in this situation. We need a system and framework that works.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The State has to get its act together on childcare. The three main issues are cost, availability and workers' terms, conditions and pay. There is a massive issue for young parents in County Laois in terms of being able to work and rear children. Many are commuting to work as well. The cost for a day service in Laois averages out at €800 per month. Some pay well in excess of that. That is a long way off the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael promise of €200 per month. It is putting a heavy burden on working parents and household budgets, along with the costs of mortgages, rent, transport, energy and so on. Many low- and middle-income workers cannot keep up and cannot afford it.

Another pressing issue is the lack of availability. According to the Laois childcare committee, there are shortages in all parts of the county, particularly for younger children - not just in the larger towns of Portlaoise, Mountmellick and Graiguecullen, but also in Durrow, Rathdowney, Mountrath and Ballylynan. Laois is projected by the Government to have 33% population growth in the next seven years. If we are going to have population growth, we need to have services.

The pay levels and conditions for workers also need to be addressed because young workers, who are mainly women, just cannot get by on the €15 per hour they are getting. I welcome the Government's programme for direct, State-led childcare centres but it is a small start of €135 million over four years. There will be seven State-run centres to start with. I note none of them are in County Laois but that may change. The programme has to be expanded and in the next phase it has to grow significantly. While the current private provider model does a good job it is a broken system in how it is funded. With County Laois designated as a high population growth area it is essential the Government takes that on board and that some of those centres are located there. I look forward to expressions of interest in those from the county going into the Minister of State.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I raise again the issue of the crèche at Technological University Dublin, TUD. It is set to close at the end of the year. It will be an absolute disaster for the staff and the students who have children there. Some of the students will have to drop out of college. The correspondence suggests this is a decision of TUD to effectively repurpose a building that is currently being used for the crèche for other purposes. If any public money was allocated to fit out this room to make it suitable for a crèche, then the State absolutely has to intervene and say it is not acceptable for them to have taken that money and then simply repurpose the building and leave parents in an absolutely desperate state.

On the general point, the bottom line is that the whole system is broken. We have a privatised model of childcare that is largely running on the basis of public funding but is massively distorted as a result of the process of privatisation. It is broken for the parents struggling to find places for their kids. It is broken for the workers who are massively underpaid. It is broken for the small providers who are struggling with a mountain of paperwork and so on. The only ones it is working for are the big multiple-chain private providers who are making huge amounts of money and can centralise their administrative tasks.

I want the Minister of State to look at research done by Dr. McCormack and Dr. Garrity. It is a case study into existing multi-site, non-profit early childhood education providers. It is very interesting. They look at the example of Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, CNNG, and StartBright Early Learning Centres. These are existing multi-site non-profit providers that are providing high-quality childcare at a lower and more accessible cost that otherwise would not be available to people. There are a whole series of recommendations about how we can encourage those sorts of providers and move away from the privatised model towards the public model of childcare we need.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: We have made real progress in childcare policy over the past number of years. As Minister for children, I made reducing childcare costs a priority and over the course of my time in government we managed to cut them roughly in half for parents. The reality for so many parents accessing childcare was overwhelming costs. Through expanding the national childcare scheme, we began to change that reality. Families across the country saw substantial reductions in their childcare bills, with many parents saving thousands of euro each year. There is still so far to go but those reforms demonstrated what can be achieved when governments treat childcare as essential public infrastructure and not simply a private cost borne by families.

While we succeeded in reducing costs for parents we also learned an important lesson. A sustainable childcare system cannot be built on affordability alone. It also has to work for the professionals who provide this vital service every day. That is why the next phase of childcare reform has to be about strengthening the workforce. The Green Party has proposed that the State should be planning for a model where childcare professionals are paid directly by the State. This would represent a transformative change in how we support this system. For budget 2027, we proposed an initial allocation of €300 million, invested directly to fund the wages of childcare workers and ensure the reduced costs for childcare providers are passed onto parents as a starting point in changing the model of provision. By progressively moving towards direct public funding of wages we could improve pay and conditions, move childcare professionals towards parity with teachers, support recruitment and retention, provide greater certainty for providers and help deliver consistently high-quality care and education for children.

Deputy Charles Ward: Parents pay some of the highest fees in Europe. Educators are forced to accept inadequate salaries. They are not treated with the respect they deserve. They are early educators and the work they do is invaluable. In Donegal alone there are more than 1,500 children under the age of three on waiting lists due to ongoing staffing challenges. We urgently need to reform and move away from this marketised model towards a public system of early years educators to support them in any way we can and provide places for children. Some 76% of providers in this country operate on a for-profit basis despite the fact that international evidence has consistently shown the negative impact of early childhood education shifting from the child to profit. It simply does not work and thousands of children are falling through the cracks.

While we speak about cracks let us speak about the 25 childcare facilities in County Donegal that house thousands of children every day in buildings that are not fit for purpose. These buildings are dangerous and we are putting children and early educators into these buildings every day with no plan. We have Letterkenny Community Childcare and Ardara Community Childcare. Raphoe is currently on a pathway but there is no plan in place. There is no plan A or B. These facilities contain children who go into them every day and have to deal with cracks and mould and there is no plan A or B. We have been telling the Government for years but there is still no plan. When the facility comes down around their ears the Government will be first up there saying it will do this and that but it has nothing in place, which is shocking. Multiple childcare facilities face closure. The Government needs to come up with a plan and a scheme for childcare facilities so that when the children have to move they can move to somewhere. Right now in Ardara, they have nowhere. In Letterkenny, they have nowhere. There are 25 of these facilities with no plan.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: A lot of people will be watching this debate enraged. There is not enough anger in here at all. People will be enraged we are having "statements" on childcare. What the hell? Childcare was meant to be a huge issue. Someone said it earlier. I was paying nearly €1,000 for my child 20 years ago. This has been going on for years and years. It was a huge issue in the general election and the Government has done absolutely nothing.

If we want a public model, can we start planning for it? We need the likes of training colleges to train enough early years educators. What about the public buildings? How many public service employments have crèches? Why does every single one of them not have childcare facilities just like the Houses of the Oireachtas does? Also, schools are a massive resource. There are thousands of them around the country. Why are every single one of them not providing preschool and after-school childcare? There is a huge demand in my area. I have had loads of parents write to me because some principals cannot or will not - they probably do not have the space - provide space for private childcare businesses like Tigers Childcare and all of these but the State should be doing this. We have the buildings. We have the resources. We cannot keep subsidising a private model. It is simply not sustainable now for somebody to pay insurance costs, rent, electricity and all of these costs and to give their workers decent pay. Of course, they are women workers so they are treated like absolute crap and have to fight and battle for their wages to be increased. It is time for a little bit of action in here and not more statements. It will be an absolute disgrace if we are making more statements about this in a few months' time.

Deputy Seamus Healy: There are huge challenges facing the childcare sector and some of these are serious issues and deficiencies in capacity. Thousands of children are on waiting lists. Some parents are paying up to €1,000 per month in childcare costs. There are poor pay and conditions for staff and serious problems in the recruitment and retention of staff. The current situation is untenable and the only solution is the roll-out of a publicly funded and delivered service.

This is increasingly the view of those working and operating in the sector and those observing it, like the citizens' assembly and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and Together for Public, an alliance of over 40 organisations including the National Women's Council, trade unions, academics, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and others. Childcare must be seen as a right and not a commercial service.

5 o'clock

This means a public childcare service very much like our primary schools. There should be a guaranteed legal right to affordable, accessible and universal early education for every child and better pay and conditions for early educators, who should be paid directly by the State.

Public childcare is also a key issue for equality. We know that where the public system operates, women are much more likely to participate fully in society. One of the biggest obstacles to single parents entering the workforce is the high cost and limited availability of childcare. A public childcare system would address all these issues. The sooner we do that, and start planning for it, the better.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: During the last general election, while canvassing in Kildare North, one of the top issues coming up was childcare and the lack of childcare places. My wife was heavily pregnant at the time and we welcomed our son the following February. We struggled to get a childcare place for him, like many parents and young families in Kildare and the greater Dublin area. One of the most common issues coming into my office is the challenge and difficulty of getting a childcare place. That is the experience of friends, family and people I know. There is a significant waiting list in Kildare, with 3,423 children still on waiting lists.

While that is factual, we also need to consider the other facts. Childcare fees have fallen by 36% since 2022. Enrolments at the same time have increased by 25% between 2022 and 2025. The workforce has increased by 42,000 people. More than 4,600 providers are participating in core funding and the national childcare scheme has increased significantly as well. That is having a huge impact. We have seen at first hand the cost of childcare, but we are just so thankful to have got a place for our son that we are willing to pay, and are in the fortunate position of being able to pay, the childcare fees. Where providers have withdrawn from core funding, this has meant an increase in fees for many families. We want to avoid that as much as possible.

I acknowledge the work of the Minister and the Minister of State, and the hard work that the providers do looking after our children day in and day out. I also acknowledge organisations such as Early Childhood Ireland, with Teresa Heeney as CEO. There is a point here. Organisations such as Sherpa Kids provide after-school care. There is a particular niche there. We have to open our schools and buildings, particularly after school hours, to allow for

after-school care because so many parents are working and childcare finishes early, both for children who are not yet of school-going age and those who are.

I encourage the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Foley, to continue on this path. I ask for more prioritisation for Kildare North, naturally, and for Maynooth, Kilcock, Naas and Clane, which are under severe pressure. We are taking a huge amount of the country's housing growth, but we need the resources. Families need resources. They cannot simply move into communities and not have childcare. We need to prioritise that and increase the prioritisation.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mór agam é labhairt ar an gceist seo maidir le cúram leanaí. I begin by thanking all the professionals and early years educators working in the childcare sector, both in Dublin Mid-West and around the country, for the service they provide in offering a home away from home for many children whose parents rely on them for care each week. I have three boys, all of whom are in childcare. I have seen at first hand the results of significant investment in childcare as costs have fallen over the lifetime of the three boys. What we are paying for my youngest is markedly different from what we paid for our eldest six years ago. I particularly recognise that significant investment because it has made a difference to affordability. Quite rightly, however, our constituents lean on us and want us to continue driving forward towards the target of €200 per month. I fully support that.

I welcome the €550 monthly cap. It is a welcome development, but we do have an issue regarding those families relying on 50-hour contracts as well. This means that the effective cap for them is €750, and the additional hours of care they receive are not covered by the national childcare scheme subsidy. That is something we have to pay attention to, especially in the constituency where the Minister of State and I come from, where we have commuter families who do need those extra hours of childcare for their families.

I also draw attention to the fact that we have many early years educators in our childcare sector who, on paper, work for private organisations but who provide a very public service and are motivated by a strong ethos of public service. While I welcome the roll-out of public community childcare facilities, I also draw attention to the very hard-working professionals in childcare and early years education facilities right across Dublin Mid-West who do care and are not motivated by profit, as some people in the House might suggest, but by the welfare of the children in their care. It is important that we call that out. We entrust those people with the care of our children each week. They do it very well, regardless of whether they are in the public or private sector. It is important that we call that out too.

We have to continue making progress in providing more spaces and reducing the administrative burden for early years educators, drawing on what already exists in the primary education system and applying it to childcare settings as well. We have to continue to invest to make sure we have a mixed model that provides the multiplicity of places we need, with a particular focus on baby rooms, to ensure both parents in a home can go to work when their careers require it. We must also recognise that the burden of care still falls far too unfairly on women. The only way to address and solve that is through having an equitable and well-resourced childcare system.

Deputy Peter Roche: I welcome and acknowledge this debate today. I thank the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Foley, for this opportunity to express our views. Childcare

is where family life, work and a child's earliest years meet. When it works, parents can work, children get a good, strong start and communities thrive. When it does not work, the impact is felt across the entire household. I welcome the progress that has been made. There is no question about that. More than 190,000 children now benefit from the national childcare scheme. Fees will fall again next September. Supports for children with disabilities are being extended to children under three. Additional investment has been made in expanding capacity, and I welcome that.

The reality, however, is that the reduced childcare fees mean very little to a parent who cannot secure a childcare place in the first instance. I hear about this issue right across County Galway and in my constituency of Galway East. Parents find themselves on waiting lists for months and sometimes longer trying to secure a place for their child. It is a complex situation. For many families, this is not simply an inconvenience. It has a direct impact on their ability to return to work, their household income and their day-to-day lives.

Progress has been made on affordability, there is no doubt about that. We need to see the same progress on access. An empty room with no staff is a lost childcare place just as much as a room that was never built. Those who care for our children, whether in early years services or as childminders, are at the heart of the sector. We need pay, conditions and career opportunities to attract people into the profession and to keep them there.

I ask the Minister of State for three things: a clear plan for additional childcare places; a commitment that new capacity will be targeted at the communities facing shortages, including rural areas such as Galway East; and a workforce strategy capable of attracting and retaining the educators on whom the sector depends. Cheaper childcare is welcome but for the families on waiting lists, the question is much simpler: is there a place available?

Deputy Albert Dolan: I begin by acknowledging some of the tremendous work undertaken by the Minister and the Department in making childcare more affordable and accessible for families across Ireland. We have made enormous progress in recent years. More than 277,000 children now benefit from the national childcare scheme. Childcare fees have fallen by an average of 36% since 2022, and budget 2027 will deliver significant further reductions for families. That is real and meaningful progress for those families and it is making a tangible difference to household budgets.

I believe we have to focus on a few critical issues to develop our childcare system further. The first and foremost is availability. There is little benefit in making childcare more affordable if, at the end of the day, parents cannot secure a place.

In Galway East, which I represent along with my colleague Deputy Roche, towns like Athenry, Loughrea, Tuam, Headford and Gort are growing rapidly as they having growing economies and many people move there to commute to Galway city. These towns are facing a challenge of capacity. It is important to recognise the Government's decision to directly invest in and develop childcare facilities itself for the first time, through the State-led childcare investment scheme. Over €135 million has been committed to 2030. That is a real and tangible investment in State-led childcare facilities.

I welcome that the State is leading out on acquisitions but there is space for direct builds. I will highlight to the Minister of State a case in east Galway, a fantastic rural community called

Caltra. On community land right now, they have full planning permission for a dedicated childcare facility with potential space for over 70 students. It is already a community-run creche. It has a board in place which has met the Minister, Deputy Foley. The site also has full planning permission, so all that is outstanding is the funding to build out the project. It would serve a much wider region adjacent to Ballinasloe where there is significant pressure for childcare currently. This site in Caltra has planning permission, is community land and is already the home of a community creche; it is not feasible to extend the existing premises so the building blocks scheme is not a runner for them. This could be a huge opportunity. As I said, they have met the Minister. For Caltra, it would be a huge project.

Another area we need to support is childcare providers and their staff. Childcare professionals do extraordinary work. I welcome the additional funding provided to improve pay and conditions. However, smaller independent providers face considerable pressures including staffing, administration and regulatory requirement costs. We must ensure the core funding model remains sustainable and providers are supported to expand their services rather than discouraged from doing so.

I also want to talk about inclusion and flexibility. I particularly welcome the extension of the access and inclusion model, AIM, to children under three from September 2027. We must also recognise the needs of working parents, in particular those working shifts or irregular hours or commuting significant distances. Our childcare system must be capable of responding to the realities of modern family life. Childcare is not simply a family support; it is fundamental to the economic infrastructure of our country. To support and underpin working families, childcare is the crucial pillar that keeps them going. It allows parents, in particular mothers, to participate fully in the workforce, supports local enterprise and gives every child the best possible start in life.

As I said at the outset, I commend the Minister on the progress achieved. I look forward to the next phase of reform with a particular focus on capacity, sustainability and equal access for families in every part of the country.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Parents and early educators want to see action on childcare. People understand the Government cannot fix every issue fully immediately. Sometimes it takes time to develop a plan and, of course, to implement it. What frustrates people is when delays persist far beyond what is reasonable, when it takes Government far too long to recognise an issue, come up with a plan and do anything about it. That is very much the case when it comes to childcare. What galls people in particular is when, despite years of inaction, Government figures can suddenly be spurred into action on the eve of an election and then deliver little to nothing for them in the aftermath. That has been the case with childcare.

My party colleague and Sinn Féin spokesperson on childcare, Deputy Kerrane, published a fully costed plan well in advance of the previous election, outlining how Sinn Féin proposed to achieve childcare capped at €10 per day. I welcome that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael lifted that policy; it is just a shame that they saw no way to carry it through and did not implement it. Instead, the Tánaiste, Simon Harris, delivered a plan that did not happen in the 100 days promised. What we have largely seen since is tinkering around the edges. While the Government celebrated the policy announcement reducing childcare from €750 to €550 per month, many parents already paying more than €750 were left wondering what about them.

There is also still the unaddressed lack of capacity in the sector. Even those reductions, for what they are worth, are meaningless to a person who cannot secure a place for their child. There remains an issue in pay for early years educators which is part of what drives staff turnover - up to 40% in some counties. Parents and early years educators and children deserve better. The Government needs to do better and follow through on promises it made at the previous election.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: There is a growing crisis facing families across the commuter belt of south Wicklow and north Wexford. For a family with two children in full-time childcare in Wicklow-Wexford, costs can reach between €1,000 and €1,800 per month, often comparable to or higher than a mortgage repayment. Parents are placed on lengthy waiting lists for childcare places, with over 1,100 waiting for places in County Wicklow and up to 1,200 in County Wexford. Families are being forced to put the names of the children down before they are even born in the hope of securing a place. It is a direct result of Government failure to properly plan for growing communities. Towns such a Arklow, Riverchapel, Gorey, Courtown in the commuter belt and other towns have seen significant population increases but childcare capacity has not kept pace. For many families, the lack of childcare means one parent is forced to reduce their working hours or perhaps leave the workforce altogether.

At the same time, childcare providers are struggling to recruit and retain staff because pay and conditions remain poor. Our proposals in Sinn Féin would provide childcare at an affordable rate, roughly €10 per day or €200 per month, accessible to every family. We have consistently called for a reduction in childcare costs through increased State investment, expansion of public childcare provision and improved pay and conditions for childcare workers to help to address the staffing crisis.

Childcare is not a luxury; it is essential infrastructure that allows parents to work, supports children's development and strengthens local communities. The Government cannot continue to approve new housing developments while failing to provide the necessary childcare facilities families there will need. Parents across south Wicklow and north Wexford deserve better. They deserve action now.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Government regularly points to the amount of money it is investing in childcare but investment and sustainability are not the same thing. The real question is whether childcare providers can remain viable under the current system, especially in rural Ireland. Providers tell us they are under severe pressure and are struggling to keep their doors open. Many providers feel trapped. They remain within the core funding scheme because they have no practical alternative, not because it meets their needs. Rising electricity, insurance and staffing costs and everyday operating expenses continue to place enormous strain on businesses that provide an essential service for families and communities.

I have met many providers who have devoted years of hard work, commitment and sacrifice to caring for children and supporting working parents. Some are now questioning whether they can continue. Others use income from elsewhere simply to keep their childcare facilities operating. That is not a sustainable model. It is certainly not the sign of a healthy sector.

At the same time, parents face an increasing difficulty securing places for babies, toddlers and preschool children. Government statistics show increased spending but families need access to childcare places; that is the measure that matters. There is also clear unfairness in the system with providers operating under similar circumstances receiving different levels of support because of historic fee structures. That issue must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In the run-up to the previous election, families were promised childcare costs of no more than €200 per month for many parents across the country. That promise remains far from a reality. Parents are still struggling with costs while providers are struggling to survive. That should concern every Member of this House. The Government must stop measuring success solely by how much money is allocated. Success should be measured by whether providers can stay open, whether educators can be retained and whether families can access childcare places they need. It is time to listen to the people on the ground, work with providers and deliver the reforms necessary to secure the future of childcare in this country.

This is the problem. People are not listening to the people on the ground who are delivering the service. They are certainly not listening properly if they think they are. It will not work the way they are doing it. I meet a lot of childcare providers from time to time and we get a lot of advice from childcare providers. Sometimes, if the wife is running the business, it is the husband's income that is keeping the door open. That is outrageous and should never be allowed. These women work hard enough independently and have brilliant staff. They deliver a fantastic service. All they need is the respect from the State and for it to understand that. I listened to the former Minister, Roderic O'Gorman, here earlier who was saying how great he had the service when he was there. It was equally a disaster and it was even worse because he had closed his deaf ears completely to the people who were struggling at that time. It is not good enough to say today he ran a better service when he was there. It is not ran well. They are desperately and poorly treated by the State. That has to stop and has to be turned around. The Minister has to listen to the people out there. If we do not, we will have a disaster system here where a lot of operators will go bust.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Promises, promises. I do not know whether the Minister of State is familiar with this or not but there is a saying that was said to me when I was first elected. Somebody contacted me and said "Richard, you have talked the talk. Now, see can you walk the walk." The Government has talked the talk but it has not walked the walk. It has provided nothing for the people. It sends funding which will not fix this. The Minister of State should look around her and see how many people are actually having children and how many children they are having. Look at how the size of families has changed in a decade. Just look at it. Why are they making the decision not to have children? The Government still cannot cope with the number of children they are having. Why? The services are not there but the Government talks about it and comes in here and says all of this will be in place and we will have maximum childcare costs of €200 a month. How many years down the line are we saying that? It is a good thing the internet is there because you can play it back and see the times and dates these things are said.

Deputy John Lahart: It sure is.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: When it comes to action, that is what we want. I am from a family of 11. If we go five decades forward, the maximum size of families at the moment is two, if you are lucky. Why? The cost of living, trying to put a roof over their head and childcare. Some of these people cannot go to work because they cannot get childcare. These people want to work and they would work if they could get childcare. Just because it works in one small area, the Government thinks the job is fixed. One glove does not fit all hands and this is what we are trying to say to the Minister of State. If you are coming up with a realistic plan, it has to work.

The Government's plan has not worked to date. Nothing has worked to date. Now, we have people in Ireland who cannot go to work and say they cannot afford to have children because there is no affordable childcare. There are people in this House like myself who, in two decades time, might want those people to look after us when we get older. It is all down to not providing affordable care for children in this country to allow people to have children. That is what it is down to. History will repeat itself. When the population is rising and the people who will care for us are diminishing, the Government can look at all of the things it has tried to implement all of these years. It has actually stunted it and provided no supports for people who want to provide for future generations and existing generations.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Childcare is enormously important. So high is the cost of living crisis at the moment that both parents in most families must work, but the cost of childcare sometimes means that one of those parents cannot afford to work. As a result, they are pushed into poverty and cannot pay for the daily issues we have to deal with. Childcare is also important because people should have the right to work anyway. That is important to put on the record.

I also want to put on the record that many parents would love to say at home and mind their child for a year or two at the start of the child's life. They should also get paid to do that and it should be the same amount of money they would get if they were sending their children to childcare. It seems that, in this country at the moment, anybody can get paid to mind a child except the parents themselves. Why not create a choice or an option whereby people can actually drawn down the money they would gain if they were sending their children to a childcare service and make the choice to stay at home for a period to raise their children?

There is no doubt in my mind that the massive collapse in the demographics of this country is happening in part because there is no affordable childcare at the moment. It is incredible. The figures have fallen in about 20 years from about 75,000 children being born in the State to about 55,000 children. I thank RTÉ for finally shining a light on it with its recent programme. Aontú has been practically the only political party that has focused on this demographic change. It is a massive, damaging demographic change that is happening and nothing is being done about it at the moment. It will have significant effects over pensions and the ability for the healthcare system to work in the future as well. It needs to be focused on. Right now, people are not having children because this is no country in which to have a young family, and that needs to be changed.

We in this Chamber have this big debate on whether it should be public or private. In fact, the reality for most people is that there is none. The core funding system that is in place has led to 1,000 services closing in six years. The Government is putting a cap on what people are

allowed to charge but the core funding is not enough to deal with the costs that are increasing within the system. That has to change as well. I have spoken to so many services across the country where people have put blood, sweat and tears into the development of their small businesses to be able to provide this key service. They are not even drawing down proper wages to keep their businesses on the go, yet they are being pushed into debt and closure because of the system that is there. The care for our young, old and disabled is some of the most important work that exists, yet the cohorts of people who are charged to mind these individuals often get the lowest wages within society, barely over the minimum wage. That shows exactly what this Government thinks of those individuals who work in such an important area and how it values them.

I appeal to the Government to increase the core funding to a level that would make it sustainable for these small businesses to function in the future and, in addition, for it to broaden out the public investment in this sector so that there is a bigger public sector cohort as well.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I acknowledge that some progress has been made on childcare and State investment has increased noticeably. We have to be honest about that. I welcome the likes of the access and inclusion model helping children with disabilities and additional needs participate fully in preschool. Of course, the national childcare scheme has reduced costs for families who can access it. Core funding, to some extent, recognises that childcare is a social need and should not be left to the market but, in many areas, it regrettably still is.

Funding has increased - not by enough, we would argue - but, as other Deputies have said, additional expenditure on its own when costs are rising and there is an historic deficit is not enough. Parents want to know two things: can they get a place in the first place and can they afford it? In the constituency of Dublin Mid-West which I and the Minister of State share we have an enormous problem because there simply are not enough places in Lucan, Adamstown, Clondalkin, Newcastle, Saggart and Rathcoole and parts of Citywest. They have all experienced huge population growth but childcare has not kept pace. Land for lots of houses has been rezoned but not enough facilities and infrastructure have been tied in. A subsidy is no use if you have nowhere to send your child or the only place available is miles away and it involves congested journeys or, if you do not have a car, public transport that often is not reliable.

We also need to listen to the established providers. Many of them have left the service already; the ones who historically kept the fees reasonable but were locked into lower levels while their wages, insurance, energy, rent and regulatory costs rose. We should not disadvantage the stable early providers who did their best to keep childcare affordable.

They are still saying they are going to have to leave because they are not getting the supports they need. I am not saying the Minister should abandon core funding or fee controls but she should fix the anomalies and ensure the funding reflects the genuine cost of childcare, including decent pay and career prospects because staff retention is another major issue. It cannot be left to providers alone. There is a deficit so we need an additional hybrid model with State-run childcare facilities to meet the deficits in our growing areas.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I welcome the steps the Minister and the Government have taken to bring down the cost of childcare. The relief announced in the budget will make a real difference to a lot of families. Anyone who has two or more children in a crèche at the same time will know well why it is called a second mortgage. There are a couple of groups I would like to highlight. One is parents whose crèche has not signed up to core funding. They might be very happy with the care their child is getting in that crèche, and it might be the only crèche nearby that has a place or can provide the hours they need. Moving to another provider is not always possible for these parents. I would welcome anything we can do to help them benefit from the work under way to bring fees down. The other group I want to highlight is families who use childcare part time. For parents who might use a crèche only three days a week, the cost can still be a sizeable portion of their take-home pay. We need to make sure these families get some relief as well. I know the Minister is familiar with both these issues.

Childcare is essential for many families. Parents need it so they can go to work and provide for their families. Not everyone can turn to grandparents to mind their children. The cost and availability of childcare is putting enormous pressure on household budgets. Affordable and accessible childcare for every family must be the standard. We have made welcome progress towards this goal and we must build on it and deliver further improvements for families, including increasing the number of childcare places.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the opportunity to speak on childcare and I will begin by acknowledging the progress that has been made in recent years and compliment the Minister on it. There are two sides to this coin in my constituency of Dublin South-West. More than 250,000 children now benefit from the national childcare scheme. Costs have come down for many families and budget 2027 will see them decrease further. It will reduce costs and extend supports to even more parents, which is very welcome.

As the Minister knows, for many parents childcare is not just another household bill. It determines whether a parent can return to work, increase their working hours, pursue education or simply make ends meet. Families in my constituency of Dublin South-West could be paying hundreds of euro more every month than another family just a few streets away, not because they earn more or need more childcare but because their local provider is outside core funding. This is one issue I want to focus on today. Again, I acknowledge that we have made significant progress in reducing childcare costs, but these benefits do not reach everyone equally. I know Deputy Foley is a listening Minister. I regularly hear from parents who see announcements about reduced childcare costs, but when they receive their monthly bill they are still paying far more than they can reasonably afford. The only provider available to many parents in my constituency is outside the core funding scheme.

That leads me to the next issue I want to raise, which is choice. There is no choice. The real test of childcare policy is not what is announced in the House; it is what appears on a parent's bill at the end of the month. If parents cannot access the supports that exist, then affordability remains out of reach. I know that 93% is the figure quoted for providers in the childcare scheme but I suspect that the bulk of the remaining 7% are providers in my constituency and some of the other constituencies on the southside of Dublin. We need to place a greater focus on understanding why providers remain outside core funding and what can be done to bring them back in. If it is the administrative burdens, we should reduce them. If it is because of operational concerns, let us address them. If there are barriers preventing

participation, then we should remove them because every provider we bring into core funding means more families can access lower fees. Every provider we bring in means greater fairness.

Parents do not spend their time debating schemes and funding models; they want to know whether they can they afford childcare and whether they can get a place. These are reasonable questions. As we continue to improve childcare affordability, we must make it a priority to ensure more providers are supported to join core funding. We also need more State-led childcare. I welcome the developments that have been made but we need them in mature areas where new families are setting down roots, in areas that traditionally had older families. These include areas in my constituency such as Rathfarnham, Perrystown, Kimmage, Greenhills and Templeogue.

I fought for ten years to get a commitment into the Fianna Fáil manifesto that we would co-locate preschool and childcare facilities with every new primary school that was built. If we had started doing this ten years ago, there would be eight preschool facilities co-located on site with primary schools in my constituency. It has never happened. The response we get now from the Department of education is that this is a locally devolved issue, even though it was in our manifesto and is an objective of the programme for Government. This would be one way of assisting in the long term. Every primary school built should have a co-located preschool childcare facility alongside it.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I commend the Minister, Deputy Foley, on her leadership in pioneering a State-led model of childcare. Moving towards publicly delivered facilities is a landmark reform that will give families some long-term certainty. However, as we build that future, we must protect the vital services and families operating on the ground today. From fast-growing towns such as Shannon and Tulla to rural communities across Clare, young families are moving into new housing developments but childcare infrastructure is struggling to keep up. It is not keeping up.

The most acute crisis is the chronic shortage of baby-room places. Every week, I receive a couple of emails from parents seeking to return to work, particularly moms after maternity leave, telling me they are hitting a brick wall. When a mother cannot secure a place for her baby, she is effectively locked out of the workplace. Six months into maternity leave, there is a crisis point as to whether she should return to work at all, whether her husband or partner should take leave or what will happen. Invariably, if a family cannot secure a place, somebody will not go back to work. This puts a huge financial strain on young households.

This brings me to a major problem in east Clare. I recently received correspondence regarding Leapfrog Crèche and Montessori in the village of Tuamgraney. The director has taken the stark decision to withdraw from core funding. She stated that she has no intention of returning and outlined severe burnout among early years staff who are overworked, buried in administrative paperwork and underpaid. As she rightly put it, they are educators, not babysitters, and their pay and progression must reflect their qualifications and experience. Crucially, because Leapfrog has stepped outside core funding, local parents now face a looming cliff edge. Under proposals in phase 2 of Shaping the Future, parents using services outside core funding face losing access to the national childcare scheme and ECCE subsidies. For Tuamgraney families this means weekly fees increasing to more than €263, an impossible burden during this cost-of-living crisis.

While we rightly encourage providers to participate in core funding, parents and children cannot become collateral damage when a provider makes a commercial decision to opt out. East Clare simply does not have spare capacity to absorb all of this and cater for children without places. I ask the Minister to streamline paperwork for early years educators, incentivise baby places across Clare and ensure no family are stripped of their NCS or ECCE supports while we transition towards State-led childcare.

I trained as a primary school teacher in Mary Immaculate College 20 years ago. Some of the lectures were just for teachers but very often we were combined in larger lecture halls with people doing the early years degree. We did the same modules, exams and assignments but our career pathways were entirely different thereafter. I cannot remember what the starting salary for a teacher was 20 years ago but it was quite good. It was incomparable to the pittance on which those with early years degree qualifications were entering the workplace. I cannot say things have caught up because the gap has widened significantly over the years. They deserve to be paid for what they do. They are early years educators. It is a very niche role and we need to acknowledge that once and for all.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I acknowledge the Darndale childcare centre we visited today with the Minister, Deputy Foley, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the hugely successful access and inclusion model, which is really worth supporting. I look forward to the Government supporting it. I thank the facility there for all the work it does with children locally.

Like other speakers, not a week goes by that somebody does not get in touch with me who is looking for a place for their child but cannot get one. Supply is a huge issue. Like many other areas, north County Dublin seems to be particularly affected, with families often going into expensive arrangements because they have no alternatives. It has reached a point where the parents I talk to are not only looking for providers far beyond their local area, but are also trying to knit together little arrangements involving family members, part-time places, help and support from relatives, and leave just to get the cover they need. Rearranging arrangements like that is just difficult. Parents should not have to burn through annual leave because they cannot get a local childcare place that works for them. We should be making it easier for families to raise children while working. That is absolutely vital.

I welcome the prioritisation of the northside under Government plans to develop State-led childcare facilities. The most recent Pobal report on the early learning and care sector shows that 61% of services within Dublin city and 56% of services in Fingal, the two local authorities covering our area, have waiting lists. This points to sustained pressure across services and a lot of demand for extra places in those services.

On the core funding side, all services in receipt of core funding should be required to provide a mix of options to parents. There should not be just one offering, but a mix of flexible options. The national childcare scheme is designed to fit around the needs of families and yet we get regular correspondence stating that it is just not there in the offering for their children that parents experience. I know that a lot of these are private businesses and run their services as they see fit but they are getting a lot of money from the State, over €480 million a year. If providers are getting that support, families should get some reasonable flexibility in return.

It is essential that phase 2 of Shaping the Future is published as soon as possible. The actions it contains will shape the sector from next year to 2029. Families and providers need

and deserve to know what is coming next. I understand from the responses to a few parliamentary questions I have raised that this report is expected before the end of this year. I urge the Minister of State and the Minister to prioritise its publication. Families in north Dublin need more places. Supply is key in our area and always has been. It is not going to happen without a significant step change in our approach.

Deputy Martin Daly: Much has been done. I pay tribute to the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, and to the Minister of State for being assiduous in bringing focus, determination and urgency to this task. A lot has been done. There has been a reduction of fees under core funding. The national childcare subsidies have been increased. Average fees are down by 36%. Some 25% of families are paying less than €200 a month. The number of staff has increased to 42,000. All of those things are good and need to be welcomed. Most important is the early learning and childhood capital programme, which fits with the ethos of the State becoming more involved in directly providing preschool and childcare to families up and down the country.

I pay tribute to the commitment the Minister gave in respect of childcare in Boyle. There was a very successful campaign. A very successful committee identified the need and campaigned for it. Funding has now been committed to buy a school in Boyle, where there are no other preschool or childcare opportunities. I pay tribute to the Department for that.

To take a wider perspective on this, we really do need to stop seeing childcare as a cost or burden to the State. We really have to see it as an investment in our society. Childcare is one of the fundamental blocks in encouraging couples to have children or to have more children. To put it simply, our birth rate has fallen by 18% in the last ten years. Our ageing demographic, people over 65, will comprise 1 million by 2030 and 1.6 million by 2046, which means that we are not replacing our population. That is going to have a major economic downside for our society, in terms of not just pensions but also the ability to afford healthcare as we all grow older. We need available, accessible and affordable childcare. It needs to come at zero cost to families and to be part of a suite of measures to encourage couples to have children and families to have more children. We know the cost-of-living crisis has fed into that. We know that the cost of rent and the ability of people to own their first home is also a factor.

This is an international problem. Many other countries are taking significant and radical steps to encourage couples to have children and to have more children. That is absolutely important. It would be a massive investment but it would be in the State's economic self-interest. We need to be more radical about it. We should be providing a State-led childcare and preschool programme. It should be based in our national schools and it should be free at the point of use.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Early education is in crisis across the country. We all know that. We are all experiencing it every day of the week. On what the Minister has recently done as regards the childminding regulations, these were brought in two years ago and only today we have heard that they will be extended because practically nobody has signed up to them. That is because they were simply unworkable. Everybody told the Minister and the Government that. The whole sector was telling them but it was ignored until now. It is welcome that there is to be some change in that regard but we still have a very serious issue. The reality is that many people around the country who have children need to have a second income in the

household to be able to afford their rent or mortgage. That is the society we have developed. If we are going to develop such a society as we move on, we have to ensure it will provide the services for people to be able to continue in that respect.

The reality is that we have a huge problem facing the country. The previous speaker alluded to this. In fact, Miriam O'Callaghan recently presented a documentary about the ageing population at one end and the falling birth rate at the other. When she talked to families around the country, they said they cannot afford childcare and the other costs of having children. They fear the future because of that. In other jurisdictions and countries around Europe and in other places, particularly the Nordic countries, an awful lot has been done to assist with that. One of the big things these jurisdictions have done is make big investments in childcare. They have ensured that childcare and early years education are available for people from the time their children are six months of age, or younger, and right the way through. They have ensured it is affordable and accessible to everyone.

One of the big issues we have is that, while the price has gone through the roof, many people simply cannot get childcare at any price. That is a huge problem. The Minister talks about reducing payments and bringing fees down from €750 to €500. Most people are paying far more than that. The question of why they are being left out is an issue. We really need to look at where our society is going and what the solutions to this are. One of the primary solutions is for the Government to invest in human beings. It is going to have to invest in society and in ensuring that people have options.

This is not just an issue in urban Ireland. It is an issue across rural Ireland as well. Everywhere we go, we see more and more people struggling to make an income and to pay their way during this huge cost-of-living crisis. The first or second thing they talk about is the price and availability of childcare. I have an example from my own constituency. Fenagh Childcare in the small village of Fenagh in south Leitrim, which has a childcare facility at the moment, is looking to build a new one. It has applied to the Department for funding. It keeps being put off and delayed. It simply wants to ensure a service is available in the community so that families can continue to sustain themselves. As we know, in many small rural communities, populations are declining. We need to arrest and address that. The only way to do so is to ensure we have services for people. While employment opportunities may be present in some cases, the rate of pay is not as high as it would be elsewhere and the availability of childcare is a huge issue. I have raised the issue of Fenagh Childcare with the Minister before. I hope we will get good news soon. The company has a site and is prepared to apply for planning permission. It has all the plans done up and has everything in place. It has done all of the studies and has everything ready but it cannot seem to move forward. I hope the Minister will address this issue and the hundreds of other similar cases around the country.

The capital building blocks programme also needs to look at buying existing buildings where available. They are not available everywhere, but where they are, the Department needs to do that. My understanding is that this is not happening but it needs to. There is so much that needs to be done in this sector. If we are going to have a properly functioning society, we will have to ensure that more children are coming on stream. I am the oldest of five in my house. I was at a funeral today in Carrigallen. I went to school with some of the Cooke family. There were ten in that house when they were going to school. Today, most families have two

or three children at most. That is a problem for the future because we are not going to be replacing our population.

One of the biggest issues is that because of the society we have developed, people cannot afford to have children because they cannot afford the costs. We need to ensure that we put the services in place. That is a big responsibility for the Government. We acknowledge that there will be a cost, but it is more than that, it is an investment. It is a huge investment in the future, and the Government needs to put that investment in place in all parts of the country for everyone to ensure that people can not only have affordable childcare but quality childcare, and that the early years educators employed in that sector are properly remunerated for the work they do because that is another big issue. So many people who have got degrees and worked hard in this sector find themselves hugely underresourced and underpaid. There needs to be a recognition that the Government has an awful lot more to do in respect of childcare services.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Irish childcare is at breaking point. This is nowhere more evident than in community and voluntary childcare services, such as Naíonra Chaisleáin Nua and similar facilities across the country. The centres are not simply providing childcare. They are providing early years education supporting children's development - very important development during the most important years of their lives - and enabling thousands of parents to go to work. Without childcare workers, many public and private sector workers would not be able to go to work, yet the people delivering these essential services remain among the most undervalued people in society. Many are paid poor wages that do not reflect their skills or responsibilities and have no access to a pension or the career structures available elsewhere in the education sector. The reality is stark. Staff are leaving the childcare sector in growing numbers because they can no longer afford to stay. Services are struggling to recruit and retain qualified workers, and we are going to end up in an awful situation. I was a founding board member of Naíonra Chaisleáin Nua. Tá litir agam ó Helen Nic Craith, the driving force behind Naíonra Chaisleáin Nua. She is begging and pleading with Ministers and has written to all her TDs to urge them to do something to retain the staff. We have excellent staff and management there under Mary Lonergan Walsh, and they are great people to work, but we need support immediately. It is beyond crisis point.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I acknowledge the work that has been done on the national childcare model, but thousands of young people throughout this country are working, want to work and want to do more, yet the cost of childcare is so enormous. In the county that I represent, County Kerry, I deal with it every day of the week, and despite the fact businesses are up and running, people are trying to provide childcare and people are using the other childcare centres, it is just enormously expensive. If we want to continue with a work ethic and want to continue to help those people to go to work every day, we really have to do more with regard to childcare. I acknowledge the moves that have been made and the work that has been done, but my goodness, if there ever was a case of a lot done, more to do, we have a lot more to do. I do not want to eat into anyone else's time.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm labhairt ar na ráitis maidir le cúram leanaí. I was delighted recently to visit the Little Minds preschool in Edenderry. I have visited many more

across the county, but this one was the most recent. It is very impressive. People work very hard and the staff are to be commended, but there are huge waiting lists for these preschools. They need more help and support. In the case of Little Minds, it needed practical support. It was trying to get an extension to their preschool because of the level of demand but was being held up. That is wrong. Preschools need every support possible at practical and financial levels. Preschool providers do fantastic work, as do their staff, and if they are not there, the places will not be there. It is as simple as that. We have to support our preschool providers around the country.

Another issue is catering for children with special needs. The preschools I have visited told me they need more supports in catering for children with special needs as there is an increasing number all the time. There are massive waiting lists. Over 46,000 children are on waiting lists for childcare places nationwide, and unfortunately, we have service closures. Nearly 1,000 childcare services have closed over a six-year period due to rising insurance costs, operational overheads and regulatory pressures. Ireland remains one of the most expensive countries in the OECD for childcare relative to wages. I do not believe that subsidies will resolve the supply issues. While the national childcare scheme supports roughly 277,000 children and has cut out-of-pocket costs by 36% since 2022, subsidies only benefit families who already have a place. To resolve the placement issue, we need to ensure our providers are supported in all they do. I commend many of our preschools, including those in County Offaly.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: For families already trying to make ends meet with the ever-increasing costs of living, childcare is like another mortgage in some instances. In many families, one parent has to either cut down hours or give up work altogether to mind their children. On Miriam O'Callaghan's programme, it was very disappointing to see that the size of families is being cut way down because of the cost of having children. To get a place in a childcare facility is very hard because many of these places are closing and they are losing workers because they are not being treated with the same conditions as teachers and other staff who deal with children can have. They are not paid during the summer holidays or any holidays. They have to draw social welfare. That is very unfortunate and unfair and it is not a level playing field. I again say to the Minister of State that something will have to be done to allow people to work because they have to work due to the cost of building a house or getting a mortgage. Something will have to be done. That was promised in the programme for Government but very little has been done.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I acknowledge the progress made on childcare and again thank the Minister for visiting the childcare centre in Darndale today. It is a brilliant example of the access and inclusion model. Thousands of children across Ireland are now availing of this. I know it is a big issue for the Minister of State that children with disabilities are now receiving those supports. I thank the Government for that.

I also want to critique and offer some other solutions to what is happening. I welcome the additional expenditure, but it is not a single measure of success. For parents across my constituency the questions are simple. They want to know if they can get a childcare place and if they can afford it. The Department accepts that the demand still exceeds the supply in parts of the country, and even where supply exists, providers are still under serious pressure from staffing costs, recruitment difficulties and financial sustainability.

I thank the Minister of State, the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Department for the work done on Moatview Early Education Centre in my constituency. I have been working with the service to address serious sustainability and funding difficulties, so I am raising it again on the floor of the Dáil to see if the Department can engage with all stakeholders to help this vital childcare centre stay properly resourced.

Parents do not measure childcare policy on how many millions of euro are announced. They measure it on whether they can find a place and afford the bill. As nearly all the Deputies have said, it is like a second mortgage. I know this does not include all parents who have a childcare place, but it is a test of Government policy that has to be met. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go ndéanfaimid an méid is gur féidir linn leis an rud seo. Bhí sé an-tábhachtach i rith an toghcháin agus tá sé an-tábhachtach go fóill go ndéanann an Rialtas an méid sin. I look forward to working with the Minister of State and finding a resolution to this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before the Minister of State makes her closing remarks, I want to acknowledge the group in the Gallery who are here as guests of Deputy Ward. They are from the Clipper international sailing race and Waterford Chamber of Commerce. The group includes Sir Robin Knox-Johnson, the first man to sail solo around the world, and Enda O'Coineen. They are very welcome. I am sure Deputy Ward is looking after them well.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): Céad míle fáilte to our guests. I thank Members for their contributions to today's discussion. The debate has reflected a genuine commitment across this House to improving the experience of children, families, educators and practitioners, providers and childminders throughout the country. A number of themes have arisen repeatedly during the course of this debate and more broadly on early learning and childcare.

6 o'clock

These include topics such as affordability, the availability of places, the pace of expansion, the Government' s commitment to reducing fees and the need to ensure that early learning and childcare infrastructure keeps pace with population growth. These are legitimate issues on which the Government is acting.

On affordability, I fully recognise that for many families the cost of early learning and childcare remains a significant expense. That is precisely why the Government has prioritised investment in childcare in successive budgets. Budget 2027 provides record current funding of €1.65 billion for early learning and childcare. That funding is being directed towards measures that will make a tangible difference for families on the affordability front. From September 2027, the universal national childcare scheme subsidy will increase from €2.14 to €2.50 per hour. The lower income threshold for the maximum subsidy will increase from €34,000 to €38,500, meaning many more families will qualify for the highest level of support. In addition, enhancements to the multiple-child discount will provide additional assistance to larger families. Some Members have questioned whether these changes go far enough and I accept that further work remains to be done. However, it is important to recognise affordability is improving and will continue to improve. I also welcome the personal testimonials shared by TDs and parents here today.

Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report published last December, sets out measures to achieve key programme for Government commitments on the affordability, quality and accessibility of early learning and care and school-age childcare. A central objective of Shaping the Future is to reduce parental fees to a maximum of €200 per month over the lifetime of this Government. The action plan adopts a phased approach that enables actions to be taken in 2026, while allowing adequate time for a broad public consultation and analysis on long-term actions.

Families need not only affordable early learning and childcare but also accessible early learning and childcare. They need access to more places. I fully acknowledge there are areas where demand exceeds supply, particularly for younger children and in rapidly growing communities like my own. This challenge is not unique to Ireland. Demand for early learning and childcare has increased substantially as participation increases and more parents seek access to employment, education and training opportunities, which we need to encourage. The response to that challenge must be sustained, strategic and long term. That is why the Government is investing in capacity on an unprecedented scale.

Since Government announced €135 million in capital investment through the State-led early learning and childcare programme, the first locations have been identified. Additional projects are being progressed and further phases of development are under consideration. Many Deputies here today spoke of the need for their locality to be considered in that, such as Deputy Dolan, Deputy Boland who referenced the need in Fingal, Deputy Ó Murchú in north Dublin and Deputy Stanley in his constituency. I encourage Members to work with local organisations and, more importantly, their own city and county childcare committees, which shape the expressions of interest under this State-led early learning and childcare programme.

Budget 2027 builds on this commitment further by providing €38 million in capital funding to continue the roll-out of State-led provision and to support further expansion through the building blocks extension scheme. Across both phases of the extension scheme, approximately 1,800 additional places are expected to be delivered. The State-led programme is now moving from policy design to implementation. Sites are being assessed, projects are being developed and additional opportunities are being identified. The momentum behind this programme will continue, and I look forward to the Minister, Deputy Foley, announcing further progress on projects that reach the necessary stages of development.

I understand Members have concerns regarding the pathway towards more affordable early learning and childcare and the Government's commitment to delivering €200 parental payments over the lifetime of this Government. To be very clear, the measures announced in budget 2027 are not the end-point; they are part of a broader programme of reform. In recent years, we have introduced core funding, expanded subsidies, strengthened fee controls and improved supports for inclusion, and I acknowledge those who spoke specifically about AIM today. We have increased investment in the workforce which is also very important. Together, these reforms have laid the foundations for a stronger, more accessible and sustainable system. We need to look at affordability, availability and sustainability.

Phase 2 of Shaping the Future is in development and will be published in the coming months. It will set out actions to deliver on key programme for Government commitments from next year and through to the end of 2029. In parallel, the new implementation plan for 2026 to 2028 is currently being finalised for First 5, lreland's whole-of-Government strategy

for babies, young children and their families. This will bring renewed focus to a systems-based approach to early childhood. It will also be strongly aligned with phase 2 of the Shaping the Future report. Input for both policies was gathered during the national conversation on education and the first five years and school-age childcare. It is expected that both documents will be published before the end of the year.

Both the Minister and the Department are committed to ensuring early learning and childcare infrastructure keeps pace with housing growth and demographic change. As communities grow, early learning and childcare must be recognised as essential social infrastructure. We cannot simply build houses; we must also build communities. This is something I agree with as a local TD. I represent a growing constituency. A number of my constituency colleagues spoke today, including Deputies Moynihan and Gogarty, on really constructive ideas that I will absolutely pass onto the Minister, Deputy Foley. For that reason, work is progressing across Government on planning matters relating to early learning and childcare provision. This includes ongoing work on updated planning guidance to ensure early learning and childcare needs are properly considered in the development of existing and new communities, which is very important. Deputy Murphy raised a particular concern regarding TUD taking the decision to close a service on its grounds. I assure the Deputy that the Department is engaging through Pobal with TUD on this, as well as the south Dublin childcare committee.

Alongside investment in physical infrastructure, we should not lose sight of the importance of our workforce. None of our ambitions for affordability, capacity or quality can be achieved without the commitment, passion, compassion and professionalism of the people working in this sector day in day out. Ultimately, they share the same objective as us: to build an early learning and childcare system that gives every child the best possible start in life and provides families with access to high-quality, affordable and inclusive services regardless of where they live or their circumstances. This is a long-term undertaking, requiring sustained investment, careful planning and ongoing partnership across the sector.

While significant challenges remain, the progress achieved in recent years provides a strong foundation for the next phase of reform. The Government's approach has been guided by a commitment to evidence-based policymaking, meaningful engagement with stakeholders and a focus on outcomes for children and families. Through record levels of investment, the expansion of the national childcare scheme, the establishment and growth of core funding, investment in the workforce and the development of a State-led capital programme, we have put in place the foundations for a more accessible, affordable and sustainable system. The publication of Shaping the Future, together with the successor strategy to First 5, are two documents that will provide a clear framework for continuing that progress in the years ahead.

I welcome the constructive engagement of Members across the House on these important issues today. While there will always be differing views on the means of achieving our objectives, I believe there are shared objectives and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children, supporting families and strengthening the services upon which they rely.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2026: Vote 32 - Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

Media Regulation Bill 2026: From the Seanad

The Dáil went into Committee to consider amendments from the Seanad.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad amendments Nos. 1 to 7, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 1:

Section 2: In page 6, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

" "Act of 2009" means the Broadcasting Act 2009;".

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Dáil for making time today to discuss this important Bill and the amendments from the Seanad. The main purpose of the Media Regulation Bill is to implement the European Media Freedom Act, EMFA, in Irish law. This is a landmark piece of EU legislation and I am pleased we have been able to make good progress on its implementation during Ireland's EU Presidency. The Bill will further strengthen our already robust regulatory framework for media, introducing new protections that will increase transparency of State advertising and modernising our existing media mergers regime. These changes will help to ensure we continue to enjoy a high level of media freedom and diversity.

Since we last discussed this Bill over the summer, the Bill has completed its passage through Seanad Éireann. On Committee Stage in the Seanad, the Government tabled amendments to the Bill to give full effect to Article 20 of the EMFA, which relates to the right of users to customise devices and user interfaces providing access to media. These amendments were made in the Seanad and now form part of the revised Bill that Deputies are asked to consider today. Enforcement measures for Article 20 were not initially included in the Bill, as this article has a later date of application than most provisions of European Media Freedom Act and we wanted to avoid any delay in implementing the other important provisions of the Bill. The intention was that Article 20, with its later date of application, would be implemented through other legislative means. However, as consideration of the Bill was paused due to the summer recess, Government approved the drafting and tabling of these amendments on Committee Stage in the Seanad.

Article 20 of the European Media Freedom Act provides users with the right to easily change the default settings of devices and user interfaces giving access to media services. This is a response to commercial practices which seek to incentivise users to choose certain media offerings over others. Relevant devices and user interfaces would include those which guide users in their choice of media service, for example, connected televisions, remote controls or car audio systems. Manufacturers, developers and importers must ensure that any devices or user interfaces placed on the market include a functionality enabling users to change their

configuration at any time. The EMFA also requires that member states take appropriate measures to ensure compliance with the provisions of Article 20.

The amendments to the Bill amend the Broadcasting Act 2009 to provide Coimisiún na Meán with appropriate powers to monitor compliance with Article 20 in Ireland. Seanad amendments Nos. 3 to 5, inclusive, amend Part 8B of the Broadcasting Act 2009. A failure by a manufacturer, developer or importer to comply with Article 20 will now be a contravention under Part 8B and Coimisiún na Meán will be empowered to use its existing powers to conduct investigations and impose administrative financial sanctions. Seanad amendment No. 6 amends the Broadcasting Act 2009 by inserting a new Part 16 to provide an coimisiún with further powers to ensure compliance with Article 20. In cases of a contravention, but where a full investigation under Part 8B of the Act may not be proportionate, an coimisiún may issue compliance notices to manufacturers, developers or importers. The new Part 16 also establishes a complaints procedure, whereby individuals may make a complaint to an coimisiún where there has been a failure by a manufacturer, developer or importer to comply with Article 20. The remainder of the amendments, Seanad amendments Nos. 1, 2 and 7, are consequential amendments.

I am happy to discuss any of these amendments in further detail and look forward to completing the passage of this important Bill through the Oireachtas.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 2:

Section 37: In page 37, line 4, to delete "Broadcasting Act 2009" and substitute "Act of 2009".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 3:

New section: In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

"CHAPTER 2

Amendments of Part 8B of Broadcasting Act 2009

Amendment of section 139ZG of Act of 2009

38. Section 139ZG(1) of the Act of 2009 is amended—

(a) in the definition of "contravention" by—

(i) the deletion of "or" where it thirdly appears in paragraph (c),

(ii) the substitution of ", or" for ";" in paragraph (d), and

(iii) the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (d):

"(e) a failure by a manufacturer, a developer or an importer to comply with Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA;",

and

(b) by insertion of the following definitions:

" 'developer' has the meaning assigned to it by section 203;

'importer' has the meaning assigned to it by section 203;

'manufacturer' has the meaning assigned to it by section 203;".".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 4:

New section: In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

"Amendment of section 139ZK of Act of 2009

39. Section 139ZK(1) of the Act of 2009 is amended—

(a) in subparagraph (i) of paragraph (a), by the substitution of ", designated online service, manufacturer, developer or importer" for "or designated online service",

(b) in paragraph (g), by the substitution of "a hosting service provider, a designated online service, an intermediary service, a manufacturer, a developer or an importer" for "hosting service provider or a designated online service or an intermediary service",

(c) in paragraph (n), by the substitution of ";" for ".", and

(d) by the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (n):

"(o) in the case of an investigation where the suspected contravention falls within paragraph (e) of the definition of 'contravention' in section 139ZG, require any person who has relevant equipment in his or her power or control to supply without payment that relevant equipment or sufficient samples thereof for testing, examination or analysis.".".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 5:

New section: In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

"Amendment of section 139ZW of Act of 2009

40. Section 139ZW of the Act of 2009 is amended—

(a) in subsection (1), by the insertion of "or (e)" after "paragraph (a)", and

(b) in subsection (4), by the substitution of the following paragraph for paragraph (b):

"(b) be set with a view to deterring the inquiry subject from committing a contravention and—

(i) where the inquiry subject is a hosting service provider or a provider of broadcasting services, audiovisual on-demand media services, designated online services or intermediary services, with a view to deterring other such providers from committing a contravention, or

(ii) where the inquiry subject is a manufacturer, a developer or an importer, with a view to deterring other manufacturers, developers or importers from committing a contravention.”.”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 6:

New section: In page 37, after line 25, to insert the following:

“CHAPTER 3

Insertion of Part 16 into Broadcasting Act 2009

Insertion of Part 16 into Act of 2009

41. The Act of 2009 is amended by the insertion of the following Part after Part 15:

“PART 16

RIGHT TO CUSTOMISE MEDIA OFFERING

Interpretation (Part 16)

203. In this Part—

‘developer’ means a developer referred to in Article 20(2), 20(3) or 20(4) of EMFA;

‘importer’ means an importer referred to in Article 20(2), 20(3) or 20(4) of EMFA;

‘manufacturer’ means a manufacturer referred to in Article 20(2), 20(3) or 20(4) of EMFA.

Compliance notice (Part 16)

204. (1) Where a person authorised by the Commission under subsection (2) is of the opinion that a manufacturer, developer or importer has infringed Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA, that person may direct an authorised officer to serve a notice (in this section referred to as a ‘compliance notice’) on the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned.

(2) The Commission may authorise any Commissioner or member of its staff for the purposes of subsection (1).

(3) A compliance notice shall—

(a) state the contravention to which it relates,

(b) state the grounds on which the person authorised under subsection (2) is of the opinion referred to in subsection (1),

(c) for the purpose of ensuring compliance by the manufacturer, developer or importer with the provision which is the subject of the contravention, require the manufacturer, developer or importer to do or refrain from doing anything specified in the notice by a date specified in the notice, and

(d) contain information regarding the bringing of an appeal under subsection (7) against the notice, including information specifying the manner in which an appeal may be brought.

(4) An authorised officer may withdraw a compliance notice at any time.

(5) An authorised officer may amend a compliance notice by notice in writing to the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned to substitute any later date for the date for the time being specified under subsection (3)(c) or this subsection.

(6) A date specified under subsection (3)(c) or (5) must be later than the date by which an appeal under subsection (7) may be brought.

(7) A manufacturer, a developer or an importer may, not later than 14 days after the service on it of a compliance notice, appeal against the notice to the District Court.

(8) An appeal under subsection (7) shall be brought in the manner specified in accordance with subsection (3)(d).

(9) The authorised officer and the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned shall be entitled to be heard and to adduce evidence at the hearing of an appeal under subsection (7).

(10) The District Court shall, on an appeal under subsection (7) against a compliance notice, do one of the following:

(a) affirm the notice;

(b) cancel the notice;

(c) cancel the notice and require the manufacturer, developer or importer, as the case may be, to comply with such directions as may be given by the court.

(11) A manufacturer, a developer or an importer on whom a compliance notice is served who fails to comply with the notice by the due date shall be guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a class B fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or both.

(12) The due date for the purposes of subsection (11) is as follows:

(a) where no appeal is brought under subsection (7), the date for the time being specified in the compliance notice in accordance with subsection (3)(c) or (5);

(b) where an appeal against the notice is brought under subsection (7) and the court affirms the notice, the day falling immediately after the expiration of the period of 14 days from the date on which the court affirms the notice.

(13) Nothing done under this section prevents or restricts the taking of any other action for the purpose of ensuring compliance with Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA.

Complaints (Part 16)

205.(1) A person (in this section referred to as a ‘complainant’) may make a complaint to the Commission, in the manner and form specified by the Commission, that there

has been a failure by a manufacturer, a developer or an importer to comply with Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA.

(2) The Commission may request a complainant or the manufacturer, developer or importer the subject of the complaint, or both, to provide further particulars to it in writing in respect of the complaint within such reasonable period as is specified by the Commission.

(3) The Commission, having considered the complaint made under subsection (1) and any further particulars received upon request under subsection (2), may take any of the following actions:

(a) serve on the manufacturer, developer or importer concerned a compliance notice under section 204;

(b) investigate the complaint in accordance with section 139ZI(1);

(c) dismiss the complaint where the Commission finds—

(i) the complaint is frivolous or vexatious or was not made in good faith,

(ii) the subject matter of the complaint is trivial, or

(iii) the subject matter of the complaint is not relevant to Article 20(2) or 20(3) of EMFA;

(d) take such other action in respect of the complaint as the Commission considers appropriate;

(e) take no further action in respect of the complaint.

(4) The Commission shall notify the complainant and the manufacturer, developer or importer the subject of the complaint made under subsection (1) in writing of its decision under subsection (3) and the reasons for that decision.”.”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 7:

Title: In page 5, lines 9 and 10, to delete “to give full effect to Article 24 of that Regulation and, for that purpose, to amend section 34 of the Broadcasting Act 2009;” and substitute the following:

“to give full effect to Articles 20(4) and 24 of that Regulation and, for those purposes, to amend the Broadcasting Act 2009;”.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendments reported.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Agreement to the Seanad amendments is reported to the House. A message will be sent to Seanad Éireann acquainting it accordingly.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 6.15 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.19 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.15 p.m. and resumed at 6.19 p.m.

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2026: Motion

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2026,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on the 9th October, 2026.

The horse and greyhound racing industries have deep historical links to Ireland's economy and cultural heritage. Both sectors play an important role in balanced regional growth, offering substantial economic and social benefits to rural communities. By supporting jobs and local economies, they ensure balanced growth across the country. Successive Governments have recognised this importance through supportive legislation and policy.

Exchequer funding via the horse and greyhound racing fund sustains these sectors and drives their development, ensuring this vital public investment continues to yield an excellent return and leads to a flow of income right through the economy, thereby providing widespread benefits for society.

The horse and greyhound racing industries receive financial support from the State through the horse and greyhound racing fund under section 12 of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001. Payments are made from the fund to Horse Racing Ireland, HRI, and Rásaíocht Con Éireann, RCÉ. Since 2001, a total of €1.9 billion has been paid from the fund to the horse and greyhound racing industries in accordance with the provisions of the Act. The cumulative upper limit on payments from the fund provided for under the relevant regulations has been reached. To give effect to the provisions of budget 2027, this cumulative upper limit must be increased by regulation. The Estimates for my Department, passed by both Houses as part of budget 2027, include an allocation of €102 million for the horse and greyhound racing fund. This will be distributed in accordance with section 12(6) of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001, with 80%, or €81.6 million, going to HRI, and 20%, equating to €20.4 million, to RCÉ.

The proposed increase in the fund this year is linked to the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Indecon report in respect of both equine and greyhound welfare and integrity. This will form part of my Department's overall animal welfare package and is in line with the programme for Government commitments on equine and greyhound welfare. It is also worth pointing out that this approach is consistent with the strategic plans of both RCÉ and HRI. To allow my Department to provide the moneys allocated in budget 2027, it is necessary to comply with the technical requirement under section 12(13) of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act to increase the cumulative limit on the amount payable from the horse and greyhound racing fund by €102 million to just over €2 billion. This is achieved by way of the regulations submitted to the House today.

Turning our attention to specific sectors, I will begin with the Irish horse racing and breeding industry, a vital pillar of the country's rural economy. A 2023 Deloitte report on the social and

economic impact of Irish thoroughbred breeding and racing revealed that the thoroughbred sector generates an annual economic impact of €2.46 billion, marking a substantial 34% growth since 2016. Furthermore, this horse-racing sector sustains over 30,000 direct and indirect jobs, predominantly distributed across rural communities.

Ireland has a globally recognised reputation in both breeding and racing excellence. Sustained government backing has been essential to maintaining this competitive edge, helping the industry draw more than €550 million in foreign direct investment, FDI, annually. Irish racing has again demonstrated its ability to compete and succeed on the international stage. It has consistently dominated elite fixtures across the UK, France and the USA. No fewer than ten stables from six different counties - Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Kildare, Meath and Westmeath - represented Ireland in Keeneland, Kentucky, USA, at the Breeders' Cup World Championships at the end of October. These achievements also demonstrate the cumulative value of sustained investment in bloodstock, facilities, people and international relationships. Sustaining this premier position requires continuous effort and a continued focus on human and equine welfare in line with Horse Racing Ireland's current strategic plan. HRI is committed to maintaining the highest standards of care and welfare, both on and off the racetrack. This includes providing supports for organisations, including the Irish Horse Racing Regulatory Board, IHRB, to ensure the health and welfare of all horses. My Department will continue to back both HRI and the IHRB in these efforts.

I will now turn to the greyhound racing industry. Greyhound racing across the country has a valued heritage and a deep sporting and cultural history in Ireland. The greyhound racing industry supports significant economic activity nationwide. This funding underpins economic activity in what are, in many instances, highly rural areas. The greyhound industry continues to support considerable direct and indirect employment across the country. For owners and participants, it remains a central part of daily life, delivering vital economic support and building strong, lasting social connections. The industry's future relies on a strong governance platform and upholding the highest standards of integrity and welfare supported by a robust regulatory system. A strong commitment to improved animal welfare in the greyhound racing sector is set out in the programme for Government, which requires Rásaíocht Con Éireann to continue to provide financial support for the Irish Retired Greyhound Trust, IRGT, and contribute to rehoming greyhounds.

RCÉ recognises the crucial importance of ensuring the highest integrity standards across every area of the sport. This is highlighted by the increased number of inspections. A total of 2,636 inspections were carried out in 2025. The industry maintains a zero-tolerance approach to any breaches, demonstrating its commitment to the highest standards. Income from the horse and greyhound racing fund is used by Rásaíocht Con Éireann to uphold the highest standards of greyhound welfare and integrity. It continues to operate an ever-expanding care and welfare programme, working towards the implementation of the highest possible welfare standards at kennels and racing facilities throughout the country and to rehoming activities.

The Greyhound Racing Act 2019 established a robust modern foundation under which RCÉ continues to update and amend key regulations for the sector. This active regulatory framework ensures RCÉ remains firmly focused on its priority objective: achieving the highest standards of greyhound care and welfare. These evolving regulations, enhanced traceability, expanded veterinary supports, rehoming partnerships and education initiatives remain at the forefront of

the industry's ongoing reform. Over the past year, RCÉ has continued to strengthen the programmes and accountability that underpin public confidence in the industry. The industry meets the highest possible regulatory and welfare standards. It will continue to be proactively governed by my Department.

As affirmed in the programme for Government, there is ongoing commitment to supporting rural communities where these two industries continue to contribute significantly to economic activity and employment. The two industries are key to balancing regional economic growth. Both continue to provide a range of benefits for many rural locations. These benefits must not be overlooked. The horse and greyhound racing fund has played a key role in providing this investment. It has been instrumental in the shaping of these industries and the many livelihoods they support. I commend this regulation to the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Kenny. Is he sharing time?

Deputy Martin Kenny: Yes, I am sharing my time with Deputy Ní Raghallaigh. We all recognise the renowned place that the Irish horse has across the world. Irish horses and breeding horses are known everywhere. They are a major part of our agricultural sector as well as the sports sector, which we are talking about here in the context of thoroughbreds and all of that. We have a job of work to do to ensure the industry remains vibrant and safe for those who participate in it. Unfortunately, we have had many incidents of jockeys losing their lives as well as other incidents, without talking about animal welfare at all. We have a lot of issues around all of this.

Sinn Féin will be supporting this motion. We recognise the importance of the horse and greyhound racing industry across the country and that it contributes to the economy. At the same time, we also have concerns as to how this fund is spent. That needs to be refocused on. We would like to see more regulation and governance around horses and greyhound racing. We believe the industry should be supported by the Government, but we would like to see the funding include the wider horse sport industry because it is not just those in the thoroughbred sector who need support. Other sectors, which are much larger and have an awful lot more people involved in them, need to be properly funded and looked after.

We are committed to achieving the highest standards in animal welfare. We all need to recognise that there are a minority of people out there who treat their animals poorly. Often, there are incidents around the country where we see people taken to court for cruelty to animals, but many others engaged in such activity do not end up in court or prosecuted and it does not happen. There is a huge vacuum when it comes to ensuring the regulations put in place are properly applied.

We also have a situation where so much of the money involved, particularly in the horse-racing sector, goes into prize funds. We see the wealthiest people in the country usually picking up these prize funds. That does not sit well with the general public. Certainly, it does not sit well with those who are on hospital waiting lists or told they cannot get an appointment because of a lack of funding to have a specialist in place or whatever. They see what is, in effect, a transfer of State and public money into that particular sector. It grates with people and it needs to be re-examined urgently. We need to look at how this whole industry works and is developed because, for many people out there, it is an elitist group of people who are involved in it. We

need to recognise that. The Minister is shaking his head, but that is how the people I represent see it. Maybe the Minister does not see it like that in Kildare but, certainly, that is how we see it where we are. We need to recognise that having a large volume of State money and public funds going into an industry is something that needs deep and continued scrutiny.

That is particularly the case with regard to how the workers - the stable hands and the others who work in the industry – are treated and how they are paid. All of that needs to be brought to the table. I am sure every Deputy in the House hears stories of people who are very poorly treated in this industry, which has a reputation of being very wealthy. That needs to be reflected. If that wealth is there, it should be shared with everyone.

We need to see an improvement in governance across the board in the horse and greyhound industries. There are issues of animal welfare, as I said. Many of these are not being addressed properly and they need to be addressed properly. With whatever funds are put in place we need to have full traceability of how that money is spent and proper reporting of it. In relation to the greyhound sector, we need to ensure the animals there are treated properly. We hear stories of animals that are not treated properly, including a lot of dogs which are dying on the racetrack. We need to ensure that is kept to an absolute minimum and that there is no place for abuse or cruelty in anything that is considered a sport. I am sure the Minister would agree that is paramount. We need firm rules and regulations which need to be applied and there must be penalties for those who breach them. Some people I have spoken to in the horse racing sector, and indeed the greyhound sector, are also complaining that they see things being done that should not happen and that there is not the level of scrutiny on them as there ought to be.

While we will support what is happening here, it is with a very guarded welcome for the money being put into this industry. We need to have deep scrutiny of it to ensure that whatever is spent is spent properly and that there is full traceability of all the funds that go into these industries.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: It is imperative that the greyhound industry presents a credible economic case to justify the public moneys supporting it, as is required of other similar bodies in receipt of State funding. This is standard. There is no reason the greyhound industry should get a free pass when it comes to demonstrating value for taxpayer money. It is a fact that the industry is in decline and that State funding is the only thing preventing collapse. We need an independent report now. This should not be controversial. I have raised it with the Minister here on a number of occasions. Last week GRI was before the public accounts committee and the best justification it could provide was, basically, that the Government supports its funding. That is not good enough. Without any warning, the Minister, Patrick O'Donovan, cut funding for RTÉ last month due to his dissatisfaction with what he called the broadcaster's progress in implementing promised reforms. Whether these particular cuts are justified or not, I certainly believe that at a minimum the Minister for agriculture should be questioning GRI about its value for money and about standards in animal welfare. Currently the industry is assessing its own value. Employment figures are overestimated, with only 23% of the 4,150 jobs verifiable by payroll. The contribution figure misleadingly includes value generated from coursing as well as greyhound racing in the North. We simply cannot take at face value the facts and figures as presented by those with a vested interest. That is common sense. All of this money - €20 million - is handed over, with very few questions asked, to prop up a sport that we know has a shocking track record on animal welfare. The Parliamentary

Budget Office found that 70% of dogs born in 2022 that stayed in Ireland and stopped racing had died by January 2026. In 2024 and 2025, respectively, 202 and 197 greyhounds were killed racing on Irish tracks. That means four dogs die every week on our tracks.

Many people are concerned that dogs are overbred, abused and then discarded. This is not to disparage the many individual owners who genuinely love and care for their dogs. Their affection for their animals does not negate the fact that cruelty is embedded in the structure of the industry itself. Personally, I believe that funding for greyhound racing should be decoupled from horseracing revenue until further evidence of the greyhound industry's economic viability is produced. Enough special treatment has been afforded to this sector. It is time we focus on the treatment of the dogs themselves and hold the sector accountable to the Exchequer.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Social Democrats will not be supporting this motion tonight. We did not support it last year, nor the year before, nor the year before that, because the greyhound industry is one with systemic animal welfare issues. Of the 12,766 greyhounds born between 2021 and 2024, 8,414 are dead. Last week I had a discussion with the Minister at the agriculture committee where I asked him if he was concerned about the high mortality rate in greyhounds. That is a very simple question - I just asked if he was concerned. I did not ask him if he supported the greyhound industry or whether he wanted to continue its funding; I just asked if the Minister was concerned about the thousands of greyhounds that die each and every year in this industry. As Minister for animal welfare, I would have thought he could at least have said "Yes" to that question but he did not. He deflected. He spoke the clock down. Is he concerned that two thirds of the greyhounds that were born between 2021 and 2024 are dead? Would he like to answer that? I am happy for the Minister to respond to that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Well I am not because it is not a question and answer session.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Because the Minister does not actually want to respond to it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Deputy will have a closing statement.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, Minister. This is not a question and answer so conclude your three minutes.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Deputy will have a closing statement.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is not a question and answer session. The Deputy should continue.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am taking notes of the points that are made.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Minister would not answer me last week. A "Yes" or "No" answer in his response would be absolutely fantastic. As Minister for animal welfare, is he concerned about the incredibly high mortality rate? Does he believe that, as a State, we should be pumping €20 million into an industry where we are seeing that level of deaths? He is

Minister for animal welfare and I really wish that he would behave like it. He is not just Minister for agriculture; he is not Minister for sport or for gambling. This is an industry where money is more important than anything else. Gambling profits are more important than anything else.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: There are some people in the industry who love their dogs and look after them but I would really appeal to them to speak out. There are people in the industry who are bringing the whole thing into disrepute.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. You are taking time from your colleagues.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Will the Minister please answer that question for me?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ennis.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: You have to wonder where this Government's priorities lie when it comes to spending public money on sport. Deputy Whitmore has mentioned the clear animal welfare issues - they are black and white – but let us look at the money compared with other sports. Greyhound racing has just been allocated €20 million in this year's budget. Let us play that out in numbers. For every €20 this Government gives to greyhound racing, it gives roughly €4 to League of Ireland academies, €1 to hurling and camogie academies and just 50 cent to women's and girls' rugby. That is €4 million, €1 million and €500,000 respectively. The respect the Government has for sports that are keeping our communities alive and keeping our children on the right track is crazy. This year's allocation comes on top of €380 million provided since the fund was established in 2001. Imagine how well our communities would be doing if grassroots clubs got a fraction of that. We would not have children falling prey to drug gangs and being groomed into crime as young as eight. We know the importance of sport as a lifeline to young people. Frankly, this is an insult to those young people and to the coaches and volunteers who give up their time week in, week out. There is €20 million for greyhound racing while a pittance is given to League of Ireland academies and grassroots clubs. It is absolutely shocking and it shows where the Government's priorities lie.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The Parliamentary Budget Office report entitled Ireland's Costly Love Affair with Greyhounds has brought into question the long-term sustainability of the industry. It is absolutely disgraceful that the Government gives more money to horse-racing and greyhound industries than it does to combating gender-based violence in this country. That is an absolute disgrace.

The reality is 8,414 animals have died over a number of years. Go to any dog shelter and you will see the amount of greyhounds which have been discarded by the industry. Apparently they make lovely pets. I do not have one but lots of people in my neighbourhood do. If this industry is so viable, although the numbers are decreasing year-on-year, then the Government

should stop funding it and let it be viable by itself. We cannot have a situation where we have animals suffering so that people can go and watch it, and then the Government props it all up.

It is absolutely not acceptable at all. Money in this country should be spent on appropriate things. To echo what Deputy Ennis has said, in Dublin 8 in my constituency we literally do not have enough sports facilities. A sum of €20 million would go such a long way towards making sure we have facilities like sports pitches and public pools rather than having money going into a dying industry.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I see the Minister of State has just walked in and started smirking.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I did not smirk at all.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It was the Minister of State. He walked in and smirked over at us. I will tell the Ministers what I do not smirk at-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should just continue.

Deputy Niall Collins: I did not smirk at the Deputy, so he should not start at that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Collins.

Deputy Niall Collins: He does not know what he is talking about. I did not smirk at him.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gannon should continue.

Deputy Niall Collins: He does not know what is going through my mind.

Deputy Gary Gannon: He will not smirk at this: 8,144 dogs have gone missing or been killed since 2021. Does the Minister know what is an absolute joke? He can laugh at this because it is laughable. Two weeks ago, he launched an animal welfare strategy for 2026 to 2030. He did not mention the word "greyhound" once in it. He comes in here and states we are going to give €20 million of public money over to an industry that is literally slaughtering dogs *en masse*. We can use a nicer phrase, such as "put to sleep", or say “they died on a racetrack”, but we are slaughtering dogs *en masse*. The Minister is telling us that the industry is getting €20.4 million of public money for this. Some parties on the left are going to vote for it with a heavy heart and other parties are going to have a review.

If we are calling this an industry, let us call it what it is. It is a despicable industry. I accept fully that there may be people involved in greyhound racing who love their dogs and treat them well. However, am I supposed to avert my gaze from the fact that dogs are being killed *en masse* because they simply do not run fast enough? The Minister is going to rock in here and tell us that the industry brings a significant boon to the Irish economy when the Parliamentary Budget Office has shown it for the farce that it is. This is ridiculous expenditure of public funding built on cruelty.

I could not give a rat's who stands up here and tells me that I do not understand the matter because it is rural. It involves the mass murder of dogs and the Government is giving €20 million every year to the industry. It is not only farcical but also cruel. The Minister has launched an animal welfare strategy that does not mention the fact that thousands of dogs have been killed in the last three or four years. I do not know how the Government members justify it. They should certainly not come in and smirk at me about it.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "Dáil Éireann":

"notes that:

— while it is acknowledged that the horse and greyhound racing sectors do not qualify for sports capital funding, they are unique in Irish sport in that they are supported by the State through their own ring-fenced statutory fund;

— payments into the fund have increased from €68 million in 2015, up to the €102 million proposed for 2027, and that the total allocated to the fund since 2001 will exceed €2 billion;

— there is a question as to the continuing appropriateness of the indexation formula that is intended to provide a floor for Exchequer payments into the fund, linked to receipts from excise duty on off-course betting;

— while up to 2009 the statutory indexation formula was followed, the Minister for Finance has confirmed that the formula was abandoned in 2009, without any enabling change in the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001, and that the approach since then has been for a unilateral decision by Government on the amount to be provided to the Fund in each year;

— a significant amount of the fund is used for prizes, which seems to benefit those who are most successful, and no independent economic or social impact analysis has been carried out to determine the best use of this resource; and

— although in the intervening years there have been serious animal welfare concerns in both sectors, there is a lack of clear statutory conditionality that would make any State financial support conditional on rigorous animal welfare criteria being satisfied, nor are any conditions related to workers' rights in the sector attached to the funding;

believes therefore that:

— the funding model under section 12 of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001 is in urgent need of comprehensive review and replacement, beyond the scope of the most recent Indecon Review of the Governance of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund, and calls on the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to carry out such a full and independent review of the fund, including in particular with recommendations on:

— how best to support these sectors, its economic value, those involved in it and rural communities;

— measures needed to ensure the highest standards of animal welfare are implemented and complied with;

— how the rights of workers in the sector can be improved and an employment regulation order introduced to set minimum rates of pay and conditions; and

— whether and how funding for these sectors and other sports should be aligned; and

— the review to be laid before both Houses within six months, with a view to amending legislation being in place well before the anticipated date of any further presentation of draft regulations under this section for the approval of the Houses; and".

I do not accept that concerns about the future of these industries or questions about how they are funded can be reduced to a simple urban versus rural argument. There are complexities here and those of us on this side of the House recognise them, regardless of where we come from. However, recognising the heritage and livelihoods does not mean we should avoid asking difficult questions about the model of State funding. That is what this debate is about. We are not being asked to vote on whether horse racing or greyhound racing should exist, but we are being asked to consider whether the current funding arrangements are appropriate, sustainable and defensible in the context of everything we know now.

The legislation underpinning this fund dates back to 2001. By 2027, more than €2 billion will have been allocated to the two sectors. The allocation proposed for 2027 is €102 million. That is an extraordinary level of funding provided by the State.

Horse and greyhound racing are unique in Irish sport for having their own ring-fenced statutory funding arrangement. They do not qualify for sports capital funding in the same way that other sports do. I get that, but they receive substantial direct support through this fund and we have to ask why.

There are communities across the country involved in countless other sports. There are volunteers trying to maintain pitches, clubs struggling with facilities and young people who cannot access proper sporting infrastructure. Consider dance, for a start. There is basically no State funding for that. None of these sports benefits from a comparable dedicated statutory fund.

For years, Labour has called for an increase in the betting levy to help fund investment in communities and sports facilities. We believe it is time to consider the wider public interest and ask whether the resources available to the State are being distributed in the fairest, most effective way.

There is also an important question about how this fund actually operates. Successive Governments have effectively decided unilaterally how much funding should be allocated each year. That raises legitimate questions about transparency, accountability and the proper operation of the legislation.

We also need to examine how the money is spent. A significant proportion of the fund goes towards prize money. We need to understand whether that is the most effective use of public resources, particularly when so much of the money can end up benefiting those who are already the most successful within the industry.

Where is the independent economic and social impact assessment demonstrating that this is the best possible use of €100 million of public money? There was no meaningful public consultation. There was no engagement with animal welfare organisations, community groups or workers' representatives. Have we examined international best practice or properly considered whether this funding model remains the right one?

I am not arguing that these industries have no economic value. They support employment, rural businesses and associated industries and they are important to many local economies and communities, but public investment must come with public responsibility.

That brings me to animal welfare. There have been serious, well-documented concerns about the treatment of greyhounds. We need stronger independent oversight, meaningful targets and robust enforcement. There have also been serious questions in relation to horse welfare.

Labour has consistently called for a comprehensive equine traceability system that follows an animal through its entire life, from birth, through its racing career and beyond. We cannot simply celebrate the economic contribution of an industry while failing to take full responsibility for the welfare of the animals on which it depends. If the State is providing millions of euro in annual support, there must be clear and enforceable conditions attached to that funding. Animal welfare cannot be treated as an optional extra or something to be addressed after problems emerge.

There is another issue that deserves far greater attention, and that is the treatment of workers within these industries. There should be a wider examination of employment standards across the sector. How can the State continue to invest millions of euro in an industry without ensuring that people working within it are treated fairly, paid properly and afforded basic employment rights? There should be a full examination of working conditions, including the introduction of an employment regulation order setting minimum rates of pay and conditions for workers in the sector. That is not an attack on the industry; it is about protecting workers and ensuring that public investment supports decent employment.

Our amendment is not about dismissing the contribution of horse and greyhound racing or setting urban communities against rural communities, and it is certainly not about disregarding the families and workers whose lives and livelihoods are connected to those industries. It is about recognising that the world has changed since 2001, that the scale of public investment has grown substantially and that expectations around transparency, animal welfare and workers' rights have also evolved.

We have now sought a comprehensive review for four consecutive years. We are asking the Minister to go beyond another internal governance exercise and commission a genuinely independent assessment of the fund and its future. That review must examine the economic and social value of these industries, how best to support the communities and people involved, the standards of animal welfare required, the rights and conditions of the workers and whether funding for these sectors should be considered alongside funding arrangements for other sports.

We are also asking that the review be completed within six months and brought before both Houses with a view to having replacement legislation in place well before any further regulations are presented for approval. That is both responsible and necessary. We should not

be afraid to examine how public money is spent simply because particular funding arrangements have existed for more than two decades.

Respecting heritage does not mean avoiding scrutiny. Supporting livelihoods does not mean overlooking exploitation. Recognising the economic contribution of these industries does not mean compromising animal welfare. The question before us is whether the current model can be justified and whether it is delivering the best possible outcome for the public, the industries, communities and, most importantly, the animals involved.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There seems to be an epidemic of illiteracy in the Cabinet right now because a very important report came out from the Parliamentary Budget Office and nobody in the Cabinet seems to want to read it. Has the Minister read it? I have it here. He is the Minister responsible for the horse racing industry. He is refusing even to look up as I am speaking, but I am assuming his answer is that he has not read the report.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I have read it. We contributed to it.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: He has read it. Great. There is no need for the sarcastic tone either because-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: It was not a sarcastic tone.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Okay. It is an independent report.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am taking a note here and the Deputy is giving out to me.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is an independent report with no skin in the game and it is absolutely damning.

It could not be clearer that it is a cruel sport and there is no justification whatsoever for more public money to be shovelled into it. I inadvertently use the word "sport". It is not a sport in my view. A sport is something that a human being voluntarily takes part in for enjoyment, competition, fitness, health or so on. Other people have already listed the sports that get very little money from this Government, yet here it is, going to give €20 million to the greyhound industry. Does the Minister know how the 8,414 greyhounds that have been mentioned died? Has he investigated that? I watched some of the questions at the Committee of Public Accounts and I was shocked to see that the head of an industry that is given loads of money and a €4 million welfare fund could not answer why these greyhounds had died and had not bothered to investigate it.

I want to take up one issue, which is this idea that this is a great rural tradition. How is it a great rural tradition to have nobody in a stadium where greyhounds are running around and it is being televised for an online audience? I do not know where they are. It is possibly Asia or Britain. I have no idea. Taxpayers pay money for that. We are encouraging gambling, which one in ten people who gamble have problems with. One in four 16-year-olds had gambled, which I find very worrying. We are propping up the gambling industry. A few people have interest in greyhounds. I constantly hear how people have an interest. I have an interest in

loads of stuff. Many people I know are interested in stuff. They are not asking the taxpayer to give €20 million to keep it going. This has to stop now. End the funding of this.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The clock is ticking on the greyhound racing industry. Attendances are down 45% in a decade. Half of the people who are there are not paying for it. They are there because they are part of this industry. Even the claimed figures in the nonsense Power reports are all down. If you compare them year on year, the claim of economic impact, of jobs and of owner spending is all down. The only thing that is up is the public money, the money that the Government votes to give them every single year. I have no doubt that ultimately Ireland will join most of the rest of the world, including Scotland, recently, Wales and Australia and say no to this cruel so-called sport based on the torture and killing of animals. There are two questions. How many thousands of dogs are going to be killed because they are not fast enough before that happens? How many hundreds of millions of euro of taxpayers' money is going to be handed over to keep this industry on a life support machine before that happens?

Two things stood out for me at the Committee of Public Accounts last week. The one which a number of people have referenced was the fact that of the 12,766 greyhounds born from 2021 to 2024 who were no longer racing or trialling still on the island of Ireland, 8,414, or 66%, have been reported dead. The biggest issue about that was that the head of Greyhound Racing Ireland did not really think it was a problem. He literally did not think that was an animal welfare issue. There was lots of guff about traceability and so on but the fact that three times as many dogs are being killed as are being rehomed did not seem to be an animal welfare problem for him. I would pose the same question as Deputy Whitmore. Is the Minister concerned? Does he think this is an animal welfare issue? The second thing that came across was to underline the point that the Department has never done any independent analysis of what has happened to this money.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Gorman is next.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I had another 30 seconds. The Department has never, ever done an independent report. It gets the figures from GRI. GRI pays an economist to produce a report. It produces the terms of reference. It is a nonsense report. It includes the North, coursing and so on. It gives it to the Minister and he relies on it. He needs to do an independent report.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: We are being asked today to give another €20 million to the greyhound industry, an industry that is dying and is taking thousands of dogs with it. Thanks to the work of the Parliamentary Budget Office, we know more clearly than ever that this is not a viable industry without huge State subvention. People are voting on their feet on the issue of animal exploitation. The horrendous cost of this State-sponsored life support needs to be made crystal clear. It is measured in the death of dogs. Of the greyhounds born in 2022 that are no longer racing which are still in Ireland, 70% are reported dead. They died at between four and a half and five and a half years. The lifespan of a greyhound is ten to 14 years. An even greater number, some 20,000, are exported. We have no clear information on their ultimate fate. Why should the taxpayer continue to fund an industry knowing that while this happens money continues to be funnelled away from welfare? Out of almost €20 million given to racing in

previous budgets, over €8 million went straight to prize money. Less than half of that went to welfare of the dogs themselves.

Recent reporting has raised serious governance issues about Rásaíocht Con Éireann. We know that executives and board members have used tens of thousands of euro on hotels, food and travel. Many members of the public have expressed real disquiet to me about the disparity between the behaviour of management and the conditions that so many dogs are experiencing. Meanwhile, we know attendance has dropped 45% since 2015. The public are actually leading on this issue. One stadium attracted barely three attendees per meet in 2023. There is a wider question here about the use of public money. Every euro allocated to this fund is money that cannot be invested elsewhere. At a time when there is so much demand for public funding, we have a real obligation to ensure that State money is used in the most effective way.

The evidence available to us raises serious questions on both counts. We have an industry that is increasingly dependent on State support, where attendances continue to fall and where there are glaring unresolved animal welfare issues. We are being asked to approve cash for cruelty and no industry should be insulated from public opinion, from economic reality or from a moral imperative to care for animals.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Horse racing and greyhound racing are enormously important to both rural and urban Ireland. In my own constituency of Cork North-Central, we have the great Mallow racetrack, which is doing incredibly well and going from strength to strength. We have the Curraheen Park Greyhound Stadium as well in the neighbouring constituency, which is one of the finest racetracks in the country for greyhound racing. I have seen first-hand how breeders, trainers, stable staff, farriers, vets, hauliers, pubs and hotels benefit from that. I have seen the tremendous work that goes into that. There is a lot of talk about greyhounds here tonight and the enormous cruelty. Of course, all of us share concerns about any sort of animal cruelty in any industry. Among the families I know who rear and race greyhounds, I have seen people with real affection and love for their animals. That is the truth. Maybe some people in this House do not see that. Of course there is going to be the rogue, the bad actor, just as we have seen with puppy farms and in the Traveller community. Nobody is mentioning the Traveller community and how they are treating their horses. I can show you plenty of examples in Cork North-Central, in Spring Lane.

Then I hear foxes before babies over here, where Deputies will quite happily put the fox or a greyhound before a child. They talk about cruelty to animals. What about the cruelty to the 10,600 children in this country that were aborted?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is not what we are discussing.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I do not hear the Deputies talking about cruelty there, because that is real cruelty. That is human life that is destroyed but, of course, that is their idea all the time. They would rather put foxes before babies. That is what you do. You know what? That is fine, but admit it, at least.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Did you get your La-Z-Boy yet or are you still waiting for it?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: What about your colleague's €12,000 so he could pay for his car? If you want to go back and forth, we can go through a lot of stuff with you, Paul.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please address your remarks through the Chair.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I think there are some very good people in the greyhound industry. There are some very decent people. I have great faith in Tim Lucey, who is the chairman of the organisation. I had the great pleasure of working with Tim when he was a county manager and a city manager. One could not find a more decent and more honourable individual. We have to be honest about things and we have to call things out. We have to call out where real cruelty is. I applaud making the worming of animals available through vets and through licence, because it is a good idea. I accept there are challenges with it.

7 o'clock

Members come into this House and talk about an industry that is regulated, that allows bets on-site and that people watch, while totally ignoring some of the elephants in the room when it comes to animal cruelty in this country and picking and choosing their fights for a headline. They would want to take account of that.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I believe commercial greyhound racing is on its way out and I say "good riddance" to this inherently cruel and economically unviable industry - an industry, not a sport. I oppose these regulations in good conscience. Equally, I cannot support the Labour Party amendment because after decades of reviews, reports and controversy, calling for another review is basically looking at votes in certain rural constituencies and taking the easy way out rather than doing the right thing. It should listen to its voters nationwide, rather than a few keynote constituencies.

In 2006, I described the extraordinary level of State support for horse and greyhound racing as a scandal. We were spending huge amounts on horses and dogs rather than humans in sport. Twenty years later, we are still being asked to approve an ever-growing ring-fenced fund. It is not just about the money and never has been; it is about whether greyhound racing as currently constituted could ever operate without the unacceptable risk of injury to the hounds and without the wider culture that includes the cruelty of hare coursing and the extensively documented dog welfare issues that have not been addressed. If greyhound racing cannot operate without these problems, and I do not believe it can, then we should have the courage to begin an orderly phase-out of this industry rather than repeatedly demanding better regulation of something cruel and unworkable.

That does not mean abandoning greyhounds or the workers and people in communities who see this as a traditional pursuit. I agree with my rural comrades that greyhounds are magnificent animals. There are alternatives in other countries, though these are non-commercial. There are owner-led sight hound events where the owner calls the dog over a distance. There is straight-line artificial lure racing, where the dogs run and chase without using live quarry or having any gambling associated with it. Greyhound owners know their dogs do not need long walks but do need short bursts of exercise. This is a way of respecting the animal's nature without abusing it.

Unfortunately, the whole thing is tied up with dirty, grubby money. That is the bottom line. If people want to put the hounds first, we should explore these alternatives under proper veterinary and welfare standards. Instead of allowing greyhound stadiums to become derelict as the industry declines or selling them to developers, the Government should set up a greyhound community transition fund and put the existing State funding, over a period of time, towards animal welfare, rehoming the animals, finding alternative work for those involved in the industry and developing safer greyhound pursuits. Equally important, as I have said in previous contributions, is converting suitable stadiums into community sports, recreation and amenities facilities. That could be done and would keep rural stadiums alive and give people their pursuits. These regulations are, for want of a pun related to greyhounds, flogging a dead horse. Let the greyhound industry die and be resurrected in a different form with proper supports. After 20 years, we need to plan for something better than keeping this cruelty going.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I have raised the issue between Horse Racing Ireland and the horse and pony racing association several times. In the most recent budget, HRI received €81.6 million and I request that €150,000 of this funding be earmarked for horse and pony racing. HRI has in the past raised concerns around governance, accountability, safeguarding, welfare and regulation in respect of horse and pony racing. The horse and pony association is willing and able to work within the appropriate remit and meet the standards required. In view of the massive funding the Government and taxpayer have allocated, I call on Horse Racing Ireland to engage with the IHPRA. If Horse Racing Ireland has any respect for the Government and the massive funds we allocate year on year, it must meet with the association at the earliest date. All the top national hunt jockeys and flat jockeys started out in horse and pony racing. Race meetings such as Dingle races, the Ballyheigue races, the Ballybunion races and the Cahersiveen races are hugely important to our local economy in Kerry.

This request is straightforward. I ask for Horse Racing Ireland to reopen engagement with the Irish horse and pony racing association, meet with it and give it an opportunity to demonstrate it can meet the required standards. This is in the interests of this great sport and, more important, the health and safety of all involved.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Let me be absolutely clear: I am proud to stand up for Irish horse racing and greyhound racing and make no apologies for that. Coming from rural Kilkenny, I have seen at first hand the benefits they have brought to rural Ireland. Over 30,000 people work in the horse racing sector and over 4,500 people in the greyhound sector and they contribute billions of euro to the economy. I have also seen the enjoyment of hundreds of thousands of people at fixtures of both codes every year Our horse racing is world renowned and our greyhound racing deserves the same respect. Behind it all are incredibly hard-working people: breeders, trainers, owners, jockeys, handlers, including Willie Mullins, Danny Mullins, Rachel Blackmore, Paul Hennessy, Peter Cronin, Eddie Scally in Gowran Park and Pat Loughlin in Kilkenny Greyhound Stadium.

Of course, animal welfare must be paramount. We have to recognise also the people who work tirelessly to care for these animals. Since being elected, I have had an awful lot of trainers and owners on to me from both codes who are worried sick about their future because when they hear the likes of the social media democrats, the People Before Profit and the Green Party

talking about banning greyhound racing, they know where it will go. It will start off with greyhound racing-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Maybe they should stop killing the dogs then. How about stop killing dogs?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: -----and then go to horse racing. This is coming from a party which has not got a bull's notion about rural Ireland. Not a continental do they know about it and they have probably never gone to a track in their lives. The Social Democrats is a party with a permanent superiority complex and a bottomless supply of moral lectures it is preaching from its ivory towers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, time is up. I call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: So, if I can conclude-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, you cannot. Your time is up.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I am proud of Irish racing and the people behind it. Irish horse racing and greyhound racing are worth protecting.

Deputy Gary Gannon: So are the dogs.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: It is worth supporting and by God it is worth fighting for.

Deputy Gary Gannon: So are the dogs.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too proudly support this great industry and I am delighted the coursing is on in Clonmel every year and that the funding goes towards that. It is well-regulated and proper order. I have no truck with anyone who wants to neglect dogs. We do not look at all where we should look and where people are killing the hares. Kilsheelan coursing could not be held this year because a so-called electric fence killed all the hares and left the rest of them out in the road to be killed.

I welcome the funding and ask anyone here to visit Limerick Junction race track. I was fortunate to be there last Friday with the Tánaiste. It is a world-class development and will be the second biggest arena in the world, with lighting and an all-weather track. It is spectacular. The investment there secures future jobs in Tipperary and the region. The jobs in the greyhound and horse racing industry must be supported.

Certain Deputies want everything to be banned. I do not know what kind of a country or dystopian State they think they will have. They want to protect the animals but they want abortion up to the full limits of gestation. I cannot understand what kind of thinking they have in their heads that they would destroy little babies and want to protect the hares, which are protected anyway.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister, the Minister of State, the Department and the Government for their steadfast support of these important industries, the greyhound and horse industries. I have listened intently to the speeches in opposition to this proposal. It baffles me when I hear people talking about cruelty. They obviously do not know this industry. They obviously do not have a clue what is happening on the ground. They have never visited the people involved in the greyhound industry. I deal an awful lot with that industry and with horse racing people in County Kerry. I see how much they love their animals, the care they have for them and the investment they put into them.

I have a message to the people here who are trying to stop this money. This industry will continue into the future in spite of every one of them, with their horribleness and everything they are after saying.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, your time is up.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is crazy. Kill the babies but worry about everything else.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I fully support the horse and greyhound industry. It is despicable of the parties over here on the left. They have nothing constructive to say at any time.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Hear, hear.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is despicable. They know nothing about rural Ireland. I think it was Deputy Paul Murphy who talked about "mining turf" one day. That said it all for me, as someone from a county that has a proud tradition.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I did not.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: You did.

Deputy Carol Nolan: That is the phrase he used. It is on the Dáil record. That will tell you what they know.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I did not.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do not interrupt. Allow Deputy Nolan to contribute.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It was a metaphor.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Carol Nolan: That sums it up. I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2026, which provide a total allocation of €102 million in 2027 under section 12 of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001. When debates on this fund take place in this House attention naturally focuses on counties with major

racecourses or greyhound stadiums. While Offaly does not have a commercial racecourse or greyhound inside the county boundary-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae is next.

Deputy Carol Nolan: -----anyone who is familiar with Offaly knows that both sectors are deeply embedded in the county.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Deputy Nolan, your time is up. I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister for continuing to provide this important fund for the horse and greyhound industries. I know how hard these people work. I know what they put into their dogs and horses and how much this means to rural life. I was in a house the other night visiting a certain man and his wife said her husband was still at the dogs. It was half past nine in the evening. That shows the dedication and work these fellas and their families, working together, are doing to see after the dogs and ensure they are seen after properly. I hate what these people said here, condemning the sports that we have in rural Ireland and what keeps the people happy. This has been their tradition for years and they are trying to break that tradition by stopping the funding. Shame on them. They do not know what they are talking about. They should not be talking about it and giving out about honest, hard-working people. This is very important.

An Ceann Comhairle: Your time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I support moneys being given to pony and horse racing, as well as point-to-point racing, because they give great enjoyment to people and families in rural Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Niall Collins): In order to allow the Department to provide the moneys allocated in budget 2027, it is necessary, to comply with the technical requirement under section 12(13) of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001, to increase the cumulative limit on the amount payable to the horse and greyhound racing fund by €102 million to just over €2 billion. This is achieved by way of the regulations submitted to the House today.

The importance of these industries has been acknowledged by successive Governments. Together with significant annual funding to both sectors, they are supported through legislation and policy initiatives. The world-class reputation for excellence in horse racing, greyhound racing and breeding that Ireland enjoys has been enabled by the support provided through public funds.

It is widely acknowledged the funding for the sectors is especially important for rural Ireland. Government funding for these industries presents an excellent opportunity to yield a high return for its investment, leading to a flow of income through many levels in the economy,

thereby providing widespread benefits for our society. The sectors are also crucial for driving a geographically balanced economy throughout our country.

Enormous progress has been made on animal welfare in these sectors and this is linked to the provision of Exchequer funds. Both Horseracing Ireland and Rásaíocht Con Éireann have made substantial investments in integrity, animal welfare and traceability, which have been enabled by our funding. Horseracing Ireland is committed to maintaining the highest standards of care and welfare both on and away from the racetrack. Rásaíocht Con Éireann uses the funding to uphold the highest standards of greyhound welfare and integrity. It continues to operate an ever expanding care and welfare programme, working towards the implementation of the highest possible welfare standards at kennels and racing facilities throughout the country and through rehoming activities. It is thanks to the support of both sectors that they have made such significant progress on animal welfare in recent years and both continue to strive for the highest possible standards in welfare.

Taking economic challenges into account, including that Ireland is an open economy subject to the volatility of global economic headwinds, makes it difficult to predict what the outlook for these sectors will be in the future. Therefore, it is important that these two valuable industries are supported to allow them to navigate through any challenges presented in 2027.

The horse and greyhound racing fund has been crucial to shaping the development of both the thoroughbred and greyhound racing industries. I believe this €102 million allocation for 2027 is a vital investment, underpinning thousands of jobs and providing essential economic and social support to communities, particularly across rural Ireland. Ireland stands as a global powerhouse in the equine breeding and racing industry and its international superiority is widely acknowledged. Economically, Ireland is the second largest producer of bloodstock by value sold, after the USA. We also have the world's third highest number of thoroughbreds foaled each year, after the USA and Australia.

An important pillar of Government policy is to ensure greyhound racing industry achieves its maximum potential and in doing so contributes to economic and social development over a wide geographic distribution. The future of the industry is dependent both on a strong governance platform and on the industry continuing to have the highest standards of integrity and welfare founded on a strong regulatory system. As the Minister, Deputy Heydon, stated in his opening address, section 12(13) of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001 provides that a draft of these regulations has been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and a resolution approving the draft has to be passed by each House. We are asking the House for its support to ensure Horseracing Ireland and Rásaíocht Con Éireann receive funding through budget 2027. We commend the regulations to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. The question now is that the amendment be made.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister said he would answer a question as to whether he is concerned about 8,000 dogs dying.

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

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister said he was going to answer.

An Ceann Comhairle: The question is that the amendment be made. Is that agreed?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Is he concerned?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Sit down.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies in favour say "Tá"-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Are you concerned?

An Ceann Comhairle: Hold on, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister, Deputy Heydon, said he would answer at the end of the debate. He said he was taking notes and would answer at the end.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you are out of order. Resume your seat.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Nobody told the Ceann Comhairle. The Minister told the Leas-Cheann Comhairle he was going to answer. Minister, will you tell us if you are concerned? You said you were taking notes and would respond at the end.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, resume your seat.

Deputy Paul Murphy: A Cheann Comhairle, check with the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. He will confirm the Minister said he was going to respond.

An Ceann Comhairle: If you want respect, earn it. Sit down and I will entertain you. You cannot carry on like that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister said he would give a response.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Stroke politics.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will ask the Minister. Is Deputy Murphy going to keep this up or will he give me an opportunity?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Have a bit of respect for the Chair.

An Ceann Comhairle: This House has to operate and this is not how it operates. Does the Minister wish to respond? I have moved on and put the question.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We have had a full debate on this and I will be in the Seanad tomorrow. I was at the committee last week debating this. I am happy to debate it.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Minister will not respond. It is incredible.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a "No".

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 51; Níl, 106; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Brady, John.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Brian.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brennan, Shay.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brophy, Colm.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Browne, James.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Colm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Burke, Peter.	
Cullinane, David.	Butler, Mary.	
Daly, Pa.	Butterly, Paula.	
Devine, Máire.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Cahill, Michael.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Calleary, Dara.	
Gould, Thomas.	Canney, Seán.	
Graves, Ann.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Healy, Seamus.	Chambers, Jack.	
Kelly, Alan.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Clendennen, John.	
Kenny, Martin.	Collins, Michael.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Collins, Niall.	
Lawless, Paul.	Connolly, John.	
Lawlor, George.	Cooney, Joe.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Crowe, Cathal.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Cummins, Jen.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Cummins, John.	
Nash, Ged.	Currie, Emer.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Daly, Martin.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Devlin, Cormac.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Dillon, Alan.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Dolan, Albert.	

O'Rourke, Darren.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Fleming, Sean.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Foley, Norma.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Gannon, Gary.	
Smith, Duncan.	Geoghegan, James.	
Stanley, Brian.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Wall, Mark.	Grealish, Noel.	
Ward, Mark.	Harkin, Marian.	
	Hayes, Eoin.	
	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
	Hearne, Rory.	
	Heneghan, Barry.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kyne, Seán.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lawless, James.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McEntee, Helen.	
	McGrath, Mattie.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	McGuinness, John.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Murphy, Paul.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	Nolan, Carol.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Flynn, Ken.	

	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Robert O'Donoghue and Duncan Smith; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Question put: : "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 136; Níl, 24; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Boland, Grace.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Cummins, Jen.	
Brady, John.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Brennan, Brian.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Brennan, Shay.	Gannon, Gary.	
Brophy, Colm.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Browne, James.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Buckley, Pat.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Burke, Colm.	Hearne, Rory.	
Burke, Peter.	Lawlor, George.	
Butler, Mary.	Murphy, Paul.	
Butterly, Paula.	Nash, Ged.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Cahill, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	

Callaghan, Catherine.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Calleary, Dara.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Canney, Seán.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Smith, Duncan.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Carthy, Matt.		
Chambers, Jack.		
Clarke, Sorca.		
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.		
Clendennen, John.		
Collins, Michael.		
Collins, Niall.		
Connolly, John.		
Conway-Walsh, Rose.		
Cooney, Joe.		
Cronin, Réada.		
Crowe, Cathal.		
Crowe, Seán.		
Cullinane, David.		
Cummins, John.		
Currie, Emer.		
Daly, Martin.		
Daly, Pa.		
Dempsey, Aisling.		
Devine, Máire.		
Devlin, Cormac.		
Dillon, Alan.		
Doherty, Pearse.		
Dolan, Albert.		
Donnelly, Paul.		
Ellis, Dessie.		
Farrell, Mairéad.		
Feighan, Frankie.		
Fitzmaurice, Michael.		
Fleming, Sean.		
Foley, Norma.		
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.		
Geoghegan, James.		
Gould, Thomas.		
Graves, Ann.		
Grealish, Noel.		
Guirke, Johnny.		
Harkin, Marian.		
Healy-Rae, Danny.		
Healy-Rae, Michael.		
Healy, Seamus.		
Heneghan, Barry.		
Heydon, Martin.		

Higgins, Emer.		
Kelly, Alan.		
Kenny, Eoghan.		
Kenny, Martin.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Kerrane, Claire.		
Kyne, Seán.		
Lahart, John.		
Lawless, James.		
Lawless, Paul.		
Lowry, Michael.		
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.		
Maxwell, David.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		
McCarthy, Noel.		
McConalogue, Charlie.		
McCormack, Tony.		
McEntee, Helen.		
McGettigan, Donna.		
McGrath, Mattie.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
McGuinness, Conor D.		
McGuinness, John.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Mythen, Johnny.		
Neville, Joe.		
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.		
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.		
Nolan, Carol.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Flynn, Ken.		
O'Hara, Louis.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Reilly, Louise.		
O'Rourke, Darren.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Broin, Eoin.		

Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.		
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.		
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.		
Quinlivan, Maurice.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Stanley, Brian.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Tóibín, Peadar.		
Troy, Robert.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		
Ward, Mark.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Jennifer Whitmore and Gary Gannon.

Question declared carried.

European Union Regulations: Motion

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

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

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) and repealing Regulation (EU) 2018/1727,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 23rd July, 2026.

I am seeking the approval of the House to exercise the opt-in relating to the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, which is sometimes referred to as Eurojust, under Article 3 of Protocol 21. The proposal was published in all languages on 9 September 2026 and, therefore, Ireland's deadline to opt in under Article 3 is 9 December. I am conscious that Opposition justice spokespersons previously expressed concern about not having adequate time

to prepare for these opt-ins. For that reason, I wrote to Deputies Carthy, Kelly and Gannon once a decision had been made in respect of this opt-in. I did so early last week in order that they would have a bit of notice in respect of this debate. I have done the same in respect of another opt-in for which I obtained Government approval yesterday. Hopefully, that will provide them with some further time in advance of these motions in the Dáil, because they had indicated concerns in that regard previously.

The proposal before the House is a recast of the existing legal basis for Eurojust, which, as Deputies may recall, Ireland opted into in 2019. An Article 3 opt-in would enable Ireland to participate fully in the negotiations on the proposal and contribute to shaping the final text of the regulation. Given that the proposal repeals and replaces the existing legal basis for Eurojust, an Article 3 opt-in would also bring early clarity in relation to Ireland's continuing membership of Eurojust.

Eurojust plays an important role in supporting co-operation between prosecutors, judges and other competent national authorities across the European Union in the investigation and prosecution of serious cross-border crime. It helps to co-ordinate prosecutorial and judicial action across jurisdictions and facilitates effective co-operation between member states in complex criminal cases relating to serious offences such as terrorism, organised crime, drug trafficking and human trafficking.

In July 2025, the European Commission published an evaluation of Eurojust which identified a number of structural, governance and operational limitations affecting its effectiveness. The proposal before the house seeks to modernise Eurojust's legal framework while at the same time addressing the shortcomings identified in the 2025 evaluation. It aims to strengthen Eurojust's role in facilitating prosecutorial and judicial co-operation among member states by improving its governance, internal functioning and operational effectiveness, while enhancing co-operation with EU partners and third countries. It also proposes that Eurojust's mandate be expanded to reflect developments in serious and organised crime. In particular, its mandate would be expanded to include cybercrime, gender-based violence and violations of European Union restrictive measures. In addition, it would enhance Eurojust's analytical capabilities and support a more proactive approach to identifying links between investigations and facilitating co-ordinated prosecutorial and judicial action across member states.

This proposal would improve the internal structure and governance of Eurojust, providing for more efficient and streamlined decision-making. It would also facilitate closer co-operation with EU agencies and bodies, particularly Europol, the European Public Prosecutor's Office and the European Anti-Fraud Office, and expand and simplify Eurojust's ability to engage with third countries, including through the negotiation and implementation of working arrangements, the posting of liaison prosecutors and the provision of financial support for operational co-operation. While the proposal aims to strengthen Eurojust, it does not diminish the role of member states and their national authorities. In Ireland, decisions in relation to investigations and prosecutions have always been and will continue to be matters for the Garda and the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, respectively. Eurojust's role will continue to be one of facilitating co-ordination and co-operation; the proposal simply seeks to enable it to perform that role more effectively. The proposal does not create any new criminal offences in

Irish law, oblige participation in EU measures that Ireland has not opted into, nor does it alter the functions of the agencies in our criminal justice system.

Ireland has been a member of Eurojust since its establishment in 2002. Like other member states, Ireland is represented at Eurojust by a national member supported by an Irish national desk. In 2025, the Irish desk was involved in 120 new cases, nine co-ordination meetings and seven joint investigation teams. In July of this year, a Eurojust-supported joint investigation team involving the Irish and Latvian authorities and Europol led to Ireland's first convictions for human trafficking for the purposes of labour exploitation. That is a significant body of work that demonstrates the practical value of Ireland's participation and reflects the extent to which Irish authorities utilise Eurojust to facilitate co-operation. Eurojust provides an established framework through which Irish authorities can engage effectively with their counterparts across the European Union.

By opting into the proposal before the House, Ireland would continue to benefit from its membership of Eurojust in a context where the challenges posed by serious and organised cross-border crime continue to evolve and make effective co-operation more important than ever. Therefore, in operational and policy terms, it is considered desirable that Ireland exercise an Article 3 opt-in in respect of this proposal. The views of the Attorney General's office on the proposal were sought, and the legal advice confirmed that there are no legal or constitutional obstacles to Ireland opting into this proposed regulation. Officials in my Department will continue to chair negotiations during the Irish Presidency and will then continue to participate in the negotiations at Council working party meetings and engage with criminal justice agencies to ensure the final text of the regulation works well for Ireland and the EU as a whole.

By opting into this measure, Ireland can play a full role in strengthening judicial co-operation across the EU in responding to the challenges of serious and organised crime. I am pleased to commend the motion to the House and ask Deputies to support its adoption.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Ireland has been a member of Eurojust since its establishment in 2002. Eurojust, as has been outlined, facilitates co-operation between judicial and prosecutorial authorities in tackling serious cross-border crime, including organised criminality, human trafficking, child sex exploitation and terrorism. Criminals engaged in these kinds of activities exploit borders. We know that. It is crucial that member states of the European Union co-operate in the fight to combat them. While presented as a modernisation of Eurojust's legal framework, the proposal before us will expand the agency's mandate, strengthen its analytical capabilities, enable it to identify links between cases on its own initiative, become involved at earlier stages of investigations and support co-ordinated prosecutorial strategies.

While the proposal does not transfer investigative or prosecutorial powers from member states to the EU, it does expand Eurostat's role and envisages closer co-operation with the European Public Prosecutor's Office, EPPO, a body in which Ireland does not currently participate. I know the Minister intends to bring forward legislation to facilitate Ireland signing up to the EPPO and this is a discussion we should have first. Signing up to it is a significant step given that Ireland originally declined to join on the grounds that it represented a departure from our common law system of criminal investigation and prosecution. As I have said on a number of occasions, Sinn Féin has serious concerns about the broader direction towards greater EU involvement in criminal justice matters at domestic level and the gradual erosion of

domestic competence through incremental expansion of EU justice structures and the undermining of the sovereignty of states.

People will recall that there were lots of debates and discussions on the Lisbon treaty. During the discussions leading up to those referendums, assurances were provided to the Irish people, including and particularly by way of Protocol 21, regarding Ireland's autonomy in justice and home affairs matters. Clearly, contrary to the wishes of the Irish people in the Lisbon treaty referendum, there is an ongoing drift towards the State signing up to greater EU involvement in justice matters. Protocol 21 was designed to preserve Ireland's right to decide on a case-by-case basis whether participation in individual justice and home affairs measures is in the national interest.

I want to say clearly that Sinn Féin strongly supports robust action against cross-border criminality, including gangland crime, human trafficking, child sexual exploitation, online abuse and other serious offences that increasingly operate across borders. Effective co-operation between member states is essential in addressing these threats. However, enhanced co-operation should not result in any diminution of the investigative, prosecutorial or judicial powers exercised by national governments within their own jurisdictions.

The proposal's stated objective of creating a more cohesive EU criminal justice architecture and positioning Eurojust as a central hub for judicial co-operation raises legitimate questions about the long-term trajectory of EU justice integration. While each individual proposal we are asked to consider might appear insignificant in isolation, the Oireachtas has a responsibility to consider the cumulative impact of successive measures on national competence in criminal justice matters. We only need to look at the number of Protocol 21 motions we have been asked to consider since the Minister took office, particularly Article 3 motions, which lock us into provisions before we know their full detail.

I ask the Minister to outline, before Ireland opts in, exactly what new powers and obligations we are accepting, what effect they will have on national competence and what legislative changes he will introduce as a result of the decision to opt in. Crucially, he needs to outline whether, rather than this rushed approach to an Article 3 opt-in, he has considered an Article 4 opt-in whereby we know precisely what it is that we are being asked to join. These are serious questions that I believe demand honest answers.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I want to make a particular point this evening about the importance of practical co-operation between An Garda Síochána and law enforcement authorities in other EU member states. Organised crime does not respect national borders. The people organising the importation and distribution of drugs, running criminal networks and exploiting vulnerable people are increasingly operating across jurisdictions. In many cases they use borders to aid their work and hide their crimes. Our response has to reflect this reality.

We see the consequences every day in communities throughout the State, including in Waterford. Drug dealing, gangland activity and the intimidation and violence associated with organised crime are causing enormous harm to families and communities. We cannot expect An Garda Síochána to tackle international criminal networks in isolation. We need properly resourced gardaí, properly resourced investigations and effective co-operation with police forces and judicial authorities in other European countries. This means effective intelligence sharing, co-ordinated investigations, the ability to follow criminal networks and their finances

across borders through sharing expertise and information and making full use of the existing mechanisms available.

Eurojust has an important role in facilitating co-operation between national judicial and prosecutorial authorities. Ireland has been a member since 2002 and this co-operation is valuable. We should recognise its importance and ensure the existing arrangements are working effectively. However, supporting European co-operation in tackling serious crime does not mean we should automatically support every proposed expansion of EU powers in the area of criminal justice. The responsibility for criminal investigations, prosecutions and decisions within this State must remain with our national authorities. We have a particular legal system and constitutional arrangements and we must protect our national competence in these matters. Co-operation does not always mean integration.

The Minister needs to explain clearly what additional powers and obligations the proposal entails, what its implications are for Ireland and why an immediate Article 3 opt-in is preferable to an Article 4 opt-in, which would allow the final legislation to be examined before a decision is ultimately made. We can and must co-operate with our European partners to tackle organised crime. Much of this functionality already exists. This co-operation is essential for apprehending, prosecuting and convicting those criminals who cause such havoc in communities throughout the State. However, it must be effective, properly scrutinised and respectful of the powers, responsibilities and sovereignty of the State.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Social Democrats will support this motion. We have always been supportive of international co-operation when it comes to tackling serious crime. It is increasingly obvious that the challenges we face in Ireland today cannot be addressed by Ireland acting alone when it comes to crime and gang-related violence. The criminal networks responsible for drug trafficking, money laundering, human trafficking and other serious offences are not confined to any one country. Our response to these crimes obviously cannot be confined to one country either.

We have spoken in the House previously about Eurojust. Only a number of weeks ago we supported two motions aimed at strengthening co-operation and information sharing between European authorities. We did, however, oppose a separate motion relating to the EU counter-terrorism directive. It is important to explain this distinction briefly. Our opposition was not to international co-operation or tackling terrorism; it was because we had serious concerns about the potential implications for fundamental rights, particularly the right to peaceful protest and freedom of political expression. We had opportunities during the passage of the relevant domestic legislation to introduce stronger safeguards but these opportunities were not taken by the Minister.

I made the point then, and I will make it again today, that we cannot legislate on the assumption that every future Government will exercise the powers we give it responsibly. We need only look at what happened in the United Kingdom, particularly in relation to Palestine Action, to understand why these safeguards matter. I raise this because the same principle must apply whenever we consider expanding the powers of any criminal justice agency, whether at national or European level. We can support stronger co-operation in tackling crime while also insisting on the strongest possible protection of people's fundamental rights. These two positions should not be contradictory.

Turning to the proposal before us, a number of developments are welcome. The expansion of Eurojust's capacity to include crimes such as cybercrime and gender-based violence is vital. So too is the proposal to strengthen co-operation between national authorities and to allow Eurojust to identify connections between criminal investigations. This is particularly relevant when we consider the impact of organised crime on communities throughout Ireland. As the Minister knows, we have spoken repeatedly in the House about drug-related intimidation and the devastating impact it has on families, particularly in communities that have already experienced generations of disadvantage.

We have families living in fear because of debts owed to criminal organisations. Young people are being exploited and drawn into criminal networks, and communities bear the consequences of an illicit drugs trade that is international in its operation but very local in its impact. The people directing and profiting from these organisations do not live in the communities where the greatest harms are experienced. This is precisely why international co-operation matters. If we are serious about dismantling these networks, we need effective co-operation between police forces, prosecutors and judicial authorities across Europe. For these reasons, we support the motion. We need to be able to follow the money, identify those directing criminal operations and ensure people cannot evade accountability simply by operating across borders.

I want to raise a concern about the proposed expansion of Eurojust's analytical capabilities and its ability to proactively identify links between investigations. I understand the operational benefits of this but the greater an agency's capacity to collect, analyse and exchange sensitive personal information, the greater the need for proper oversight and accountability. The European Data Protection Supervisor has raised questions about the clarity of the rules governing access to information, cross-checking of databases and the exchange of personal data with third countries. What assurances will Ireland seek during negotiations that personal data will be subject to appropriate safeguards, that access will be strictly controlled and that there will be independent oversight of how these expanded powers are exercised? I am also interested in knowing what safeguards will apply when information is shared with countries outside the European Union, particularly where standards of data protection and fundamental rights may differ from our own.

Ultimately there is broad recognition throughout the House that serious organised crime requires an international response.

8 o'clock

I will vote for anything that seeks to alleviate these problems and place pressure on the criminal networks that are destroying communities the length and breadth of Ireland. If the Minister tells me that this will help, I will take him at his word because what we are seeing on the streets at the moment is unlike anything I have seen in my lifetime. I have called for a national emergency response to the issue of drug-related intimidation and the coercion of young people and children into crime. It is imperative that we use any legislative or other means at our disposal because the stories of footage of the sexual exploitation of children being used to coerce them into crime are horrific. Children have been torched in their own homes. We are in a crisis. I will support any endeavour and anything we can do to address it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We will be supporting the motion as well but we do have some observations and questions. Opting into this Eurojust proposal in no way breaches our Constitution, which expressly allows the State to join EU criminal justice measures once both Houses approve. However, the proposal still raises four issues that do touch on constitutional values: who may order searches and seizures, the independence of the DPP, the independence of Eurojust itself; and the right to a fair trial. I will go through some of these now.

On the powers of Ireland's national member, Article 18 of the proposal would give every national member the power to issue or carry out certain cross-border orders. These include evidence-gathering orders, orders freezing assets and so on. Normally, the national member would need the agreement of the competent national authority under Article 18(2). In urgent cases, where that authority cannot be reached in time, the national member could act alone and inform the authority afterwards. In Ireland, an officer of the DPP would have no power to order measures of this kind. The Constitution protects the home against entry, save in accordance with law. In Damache *v.* Director of Public Prosecutions in 2012, the Supreme Court held that a search warrant for a home must be issued by someone independent of the investigation. The current regulation recognises this problem. Under Article 8(5) of the 2018 regulation, a national member may only make a proposal to the national authority where using these powers would conflict with constitutional rules or fundamental aspects of national systems such as the division of powers between the police, prosecutors and judges. This proposal does not appear to contain an equivalent safeguard. What remains is weaker. Powers must be exercised in accordance with national law. Where national law gives a power to another authority, the national member may ask that authority to act. This is no longer a reference to a conflict with constitutional rules or fundamental aspects of the national system. This removal should be explained. Ireland's partial participation in related EU laws narrows the issue without removing it. The electronic evidence powers are therefore where Article 18 would apply to Ireland immediately. The other powers would follow if Ireland later joined the related instruments.

On the independence of the DPP, Article 30.3 of the Constitution provides for prosecutions in the name of the people. By statute, the DPP makes prosecution decisions independently. Under Article 28 of the proposal, Eurojust could, on its own initiative, send reasoned requests asking national authorities to open investigations, bring prosecutions or accept that another country is better placed to prosecute. National authorities would have to respond without undue delay. Article 28(5) lists grounds on which they may refuse. These include national security, risk to an ongoing investigation, or risk to a person's safety. This list does not include the ordinary reasons a prosecutor declines a case, such as insufficient evidence or the public interest. Read alone, it could suggest that refusal is confined to the listed grounds. That needs to be dealt with. Article 28(8) states that national authorities remain responsible for deciding how to follow up. Eurojust's opinions on which countries should prosecute are expressly non-binding. It may be that the DPP's discretion is preserved but, if so, the text should say so directly.

There are other issues in relation to the independence of Eurojust and the management board. This point is on the separation of powers. Criminal cases should be handled by independent prosecutors and judges rather than by governments and administrators. At present, Eurojust is largely run by the national members themselves, who are prosecutors and judges. The proposal would create a management board with one representative per member state and one from the European Commission. It would adopt the budget, the work programme and the

staff rules. According to the Council Presidency note of 28 September 2026, this was the most intensively discussed issue and most member states raised concerns. Some argued that the board risked compromising Eurostat's judicial independence. The Commission's answer was that the decisions on individual cases would stay with the national member and its college. The concern here is indirect influence. As we all know, whoever sets the budgets and priorities can shape what cases receive support. The European Parliament Research Service reports that Germany, France, Belgium and Austria proposed reallocating duties among existing bodies instead and that France opposed the board outright. An additional question for Ireland is who would sit on the board. Under Article 7(3), it could not be the national member. If it were a departmental official, then an executive appointee would help govern a body handling live prosecution material. How do we square that?

The fourth issue is trial by jury and fair trial rights. Article 38.1 of the Constitution guarantees trial in due course of law. Article 38.5 guarantees jury trial for serious offences. Nothing in the proposal changes this. However, there are indirect effects. This analysis is drawn from the Department's note on the Council paper. It states that, in respect of disclosure to defence, in Ireland, the prosecution must disclose relevant material to the accused. Under Article 78 of the proposal, a country supplying information may attach conditions on its use and the receiving country is bound by them. A condition restricting disclosure could conflict with Irish duty. There are also issues in relation to the rights of suspects.

I have a number of questions relating to the four issues I have outlined. Will the Government seek to restore the safeguard under Article 8(5) of the current regulation protecting constitutional rules and the division of powers between police, prosecutors and judges? Which Article 18 powers would Ireland's national member exercise in practice? Who is the competent national authority whose agreement is actually needed? Does the Government intend to opt into the European investigation order directive, which would bring more of Article 18 into play? Will the Minister confirm that the DPP and the Garda may decline a Eurojust request for any reason open to them under Irish law and seek to have Article 28 say so? What is the Government's position on the management board, which I have outlined? Who would represent Ireland on it? Clarity is needed on that. Will the Government oppose any amendment giving Eurojust binding power to decide which country prosecutes? How will conditions on the use of information under Article 78 be reconciled with the prosecution's duty of disclosure? Will the Minister report back to the Oireachtas before the Council agrees its position, given that the opt-in cannot be withdrawn? That is a pretty critical question for the Minister. Finally, will implementation require primary legislation or will regulations under the European Communities Act 1972 be used, as in 2019?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In principle, I am okay with co-operation between justice systems, prosecutors and so on across Europe to deal with cross-border crime. However, I have significant questions about what the European Union considers to be a cross-border crime and precisely what we are using these structures and institutions to do in terms of our own citizens and what these structures define as crimes worth pursuing.

Let us start with the crime of genocide. The Irish Government has supported a case against Israel regarding genocide of the Palestinians. As the Minister will know, anybody who assists with genocide is complicit, legally speaking. For example, the provision of arms to Israel to commit a genocide or even a possible genocide is potentially a very serious crime. I would say

that it is one. Today, an Irish citizen, Kitty O'Brien, is in court in Germany because she protested against the murder of journalists by Israel in Gaza, the committing of a crime.

She was on a protest in Germany in August of last year where she was punched - people will have seen this video - punched repeatedly in the face by a German police officer. Her arm was broken and she has permanent nerve damage. She took a case against that police officer and that case is happening in Germany as we speak. The prosecuting authorities in Germany decided to knock down the charges against that police officer to the lowest possible level, so that he was charged with one of the punches but not with the actions that led to the breaking of her arm or one of the other punches that did such damage to her and so on. This woman was protesting against the killing of journalists and war crimes and was beaten savagely, but the German prosecutors knocked down the charges against the police officer. Contrast that to the treatment of another Irish citizen, Daniel Tatlow-Devally, and the Ulm 5, who are sitting in a high-security prison in Germany for protesting against Elbit Systems and damaging property, but no damage to a human being - we have repeatedly asked the Government to send observers to the trial, which is ongoing for the last year, with their being in solitary confinement and so on - where the German prosecutors decided to use the highest possible charge against him. He is being treated as an organised criminal, where he threatened nobody, where they filmed themselves and gave themselves up to the police. This contrasts, in the same courthouse that I visited, where he is on trial behind a glass cage and not able to talk to his lawyers, with people, who shot at the German police and were part of an armed coup attempt against the German state, who are getting taxis to the court and being allowed to sit beside their lawyers. He is being treated like a terrorist and an organised criminal by the German authorities that the Minister is co-operating with on cross-border crime, and an Irish citizen who was savagely beaten by the German police is having the charges against the police officer knocked down because she was protesting against genocide. These double standards in terms of protesting against the genocide is surely something we should be raising and expressing concern about. Are we? Are we raising this? We will not even send an observer to the trial of the Ulm 5, despite repeated requests, because it might - I do not know - annoy the German prosecuting authorities? Why, if it is such a serious matter for the people involved and their treatment?

It also begs an even bigger question. The United States is imposing sanctions on employees of the International Criminal Court who pursue crimes against humanity, war crimes and so on. It is freezing their bank accounts. It is referred to in this thing, about sanctioning people and freezing their bank accounts. It is also doing it to Francesca Albanese, a UN special rapporteur on the Palestinian occupied territories. Are the European authorities doing anything about that, about America interfering with the bank accounts of members of the International Criminal Court and a UN special rapporteur? Not so far, that I can see - no action. Are we going to do anything? Are we going to use the structures of this to uphold international law and prevent the American authorities interfering with the personal bank accounts of people because they do not like the political matters they are raising?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to raise another case that illustrates the disturbing trend in terms of civil liberties across Europe and in this country. It is about Sami Kupiszewski, a Turkish national who, after attending an anti-war protest in Dublin last Thursday, was abducted by gardaí on Gardiner Street. The gardaí had disguised themselves as fellow protestors. There is film of them being on the protest earlier. He was put picked off the street and put in an

unmarked car. It was reminiscent of the sort of scenes in America with Donald Trump's ICE. He is now being kept in Cloverhill Prison where he is awaiting deportation back to Türkiye where his life will be in danger.

As a Kurd, Sami has already been persecuted by the Turkish state for his political activism. He was imprisoned in 1996 and was only released after his health deteriorated following a hunger strike, and he then escaped to Sweden. Türkiye has already sought his extradition on three occasions, and the courts in Denmark, Sweden and Poland all ruled against his extradition, citing among other grounds the very real risk of torture should he be returned.

In Sami's own words:

> Türkiye is definitely not safe for me. It is evidently not safe for me. I have been in Türkiye. I was subjected to torture, degrading treatment and imprisonment.

Despite that, Türkiye was somehow designated as a safe country in a deportation order. Since 2016, it has filed almost 2,500 extradition requests largely targeting political opponents and requested 3,500 red notices from Interpol. This is about harm to dissidents. It is about a crackdown on those who oppose the regime.

The Minister was put on notice in August about a stay order submitted by Sami's lawyers following a deportation order to Türkiye. He was due to report to the Garda bureau on 23 November. Instead, he was arrested. He was not given the opportunity to contact his lawyer. The Minister needs to intervene in this case. He should not be sitting in Cloverhill and should not be deported to Türkiye.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have always believed that when it comes to tackling serious crime, common sense must prevail. Criminal gangs do not recognise borders. Whether it is drugs trafficking, human trafficking, cybercrime or organised criminal networks, these people operate across countries, and our authorities must be able to work together to bring them to justice. That is why I recognise the value of Eurojust and the important role it plays in helping prosecutors and investigators co-operate across Europe. Ireland has been involved in Eurojust for many years, and I see no reason we should not continue that co-operation.

However, I want to make one thing very clear. There is a big difference between European co-operation and handing over more powers to Brussels. We have seen far too often how EU institutions start with one set of responsibilities and gradually expand their powers, with very little accountability to the people affected. That is where I have concerns about this proposal. We are being asked to opt into negotiations on a regulation that will expand Eurojust's responsibilities and strengthen its powers. I want assurances from the Minister that our Director of Public Prosecutions will remain fully independent and that decisions about prosecutions in Ireland will remain firmly in Irish hands. I also want clarity about closer co-operation with the European Public Prosecutor's Office, which Ireland has not joined, and what all of this will cost the Irish taxpayer. These are reasonable questions and the Minister should answer them before we proceed. I have no difficulty supporting practical co-operation that helps protect Irish families and communities from serious crime, but co-operation must be between countries and not an excuse for constantly centralising more power in Brussels. We expect the Government to stand up for Ireland's interests and protect our sovereignty throughout these negotiations.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I concur with my colleagues. I understand the importance of and the great work that is done by Eurojust. The Minister started off by stating that he wrote to some Members or parties. I ask that he include Independent Ireland in that. It is only right and fair. The other smaller parties should be written to as well and informed of the Minister's plans.

Protocol 21 exists for a reason, and a very good reason. Ireland gets to decide on a case-by-case basis. I do not understand why we are now looking at this protocol and going directly for Article 3, which is, of course, the opt-in right now option, rather than Article 4. Anytime I agree and shake hands after making an oral agreement, I always read the fine print before I sign anything. If you were purchasing a house or car or buying a bit of house insurance or life insurance, you would read all the fine print. You will not go in blindfolded. I have a difficulty with that when we have the option to have Article 4 and we can read and digest the finished text and understand exactly what the buy-in is.

I have to agree with Deputy Collins. I have serious reservations about the continuous decentralisation of power in this House. We seem to be rushing to give away the power of this House over to Brussels on a regular basis. Whether the Minister accepts it or not, it feels that way. There have been a number of measures regarding Protocol 21 and Article 3 brought through this House. It seems like we do not want to take responsibility in here any more. I accept and agree that our gardaí need to work with Eurojust, in particular when we are now dealing in a situation where the world has become very different, particularly when it comes to cybercrime, human trafficking and drugs coming into this country, as well as the use of Europe and the wider area.

I accept that, and this is a good piece of work we should be doing. However, I have reservations when it comes to the number of powers we are taking out of the control of the Oireachtas and handing directly to Brussels. Is it the case that we do not want to take responsibility, like we do in so many other areas? When I table questions to the Minister, most of the time the reply coming back says he has no responsibility, even though he is the Minister for justice.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I support Ireland opting into this proposal because serious cross-border crime is an increasing challenge. As the Minister stated, we benefit considerably from effective European co-operation in tackling the likes of cybercrime, trafficking, financial crime and other cross-border offences, as do our partners.

As the Minister mentioned, the Commission's proposal repeals and replaces the 2018 regulation and expands Eurojust's mandate into areas including the aforementioned cybercrime, gender-based violence and breaches of EU sanctions. It gives the agency a more proactive and robust role. Some might argue about this European Commission proposal COM (2026) 570. I support a qualified opt-in. I always highlight the need for strong safeguards around the processing and retention of personal data, for example, and the sharing of that information with third countries but, very often, certain information has to be shared for European and State security.

I take on board what my previous colleagues have said about checks and balances and safeguards. We need clarity regarding on each occasion, the divisional responsibility between Eurojust and the various national investigation and prosecution authorities. This has arisen in

debates at European level so it is a qualified "Yes" from me but as others have said, there is a question of the creeping element or cumulative impact of Protocol 21 decisions. I have said in many contributions in this House that as part of the European Union, where it is a free choice by this State and where the Dáil has the right to do so, sometimes it makes more sense for decisions and powers to be operated from European level and sometimes to our detriment in this country - we could do with much more local decision-making.

This particular co-operation we are opting into and doing quite speedily is a case of the benefits outweighing the disadvantages. As an individual TD, I support Ireland opting in but I hope that during any negotiations or when working out the finer details, the Minister will examine the issue of data protection to make sure our sovereignty supersedes everything else, even allowing for the fact we are opting in to subsidiarity on some of it.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Every one of us in our respective counties has seen different crimes committed and the need for international co-operation, whether that is to do with drugs or murder. Sadly, in my own county in recent times we have seen cases where we needed co-operation from people in other parts of Europe. I will not go into them but we desperately needed to work in conjunction with them, so it is very important we support the Minister's proposal here tonight.

However, I have one thing to say. As Minister for justice, I am sure the Minister is as shocked and horrified as I am, but it seems you can say anything inside of this House and get away with it. A while ago, I heard it said that members of An Garda Síochána had abducted a person. Now, the Minister has a lot in his head but I know he heard that. I know that our hard-working, respectable members of An Garda Síochána never went out doing a day's work and abducted anybody. For a Teachta Dála to put that on the record of the Dáil has to be called out and noted. I would also think those proper thinking people in this House would speak up for An Garda Síochána tonight and call this out for being a ridiculous and unfair statement.

Again, I do not want to comment on the case in point, but it is an awful slur on our Garda, and the Commissioner had to hear that a Teachta Dála came along and said working members of An Garda Síochána abducted a person. The Minister and right-thinking people inside here know this did not happen. I would like him to reference that tonight in his response, if he has the time, because we rely on him to stand up for law and order, as he does, and it should be called out tonight for what it is. Just because Members have the privilege inside here of being able to say things without repercussions, and I know the Ceann Comhairle would note it and call things out that are wrong, I certainly want to speak up for An Garda Síochána and say that was the wrong thing to say to respectable people who go out and uphold law and order in this country. They are working on our behalf and the Minister and Commissioner are their bosses. That was a very serious thing for a Member to say here tonight.

Deputy Barry Ward: I agree with the notion of opting into this.

As a general rule, for a small country like Ireland in the context of the European Union, we invariably benefit from sharing competences, resources and information, but also in the context of what is being proposed in the motion, sharing the ability to prosecute crimes on a cross-border basis. I have listened to the debate, and there is a lot of misunderstanding of what is going to be involved. I have heard speeches about decentralisation of power from here to

Brussels and putting power into Brussels. First, we are Brussels; we sit around the table as equal partners. Any decisions made in Brussels are not made by the big bogeyman over there and we have nothing to do with it. Second, it is not about decentralisation of power. Members do not seem to understand what would happen if we did not opt into Eurojust. We would not have access to the cross-border mechanisms of places such as the European Public Prosecutor's Office and all the other resources that come with being part of Eurojust. In fact, prosecuting those transnational crimes that are the exact reason we would opt into Eurojust would go by the wayside and we would lose the opportunity to prosecute them.

Let us be very clear about what is proposed. The motion proposes co-operating with our colleagues, neighbours and fellow member states within the European Union, not decentralising power. We retain power, but we share it in many respects with a centralised agency that gives us access to a cross-border mechanism. This means people involved in certain types of criminal activity will not be able to act with impunity, but will actually be accountable to courts and to a prosecution that will reduce the incidents and repetition of that crime.

We should absolutely opt into this without reservation.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. I only have five minutes to speak, so I will not be able to identify each Deputy individually. It is important to emphasise we are not handing over power from Ireland. We are participating in a European proposal that will assist Ireland and will involve co-operation with other countries when it comes to the investigation of very serious criminal offences.

Deputy Carthy raised some concerns about sovereignty. It is important to emphasise that we are exercising Irish sovereignty here. We are deciding whether we want to opt into a proposal that has been put forward under the justice and home affairs heading of the European Union. We do not have to opt into it if we do not want to, but this is Irish sovereignty in practice. Another issue raised by Deputy O'Flynn was whether we should opt-in under Article 3 as we are doing here, or whether we should wait for Article 4, an issue Deputy Carthy raised previously. An article opt-in to this proposal has many benefits. It allows Ireland to meaningfully participate in Council negotiations on the proposal, and it allows us to influence the final wording of the regulation. If we were to opt-in under Article 4, this would mean we would be stuck with the regulation as is and would have to decide if we wanted to take it or leave it. The benefit of Article 3 is that we get the opportunity to engage in it to try to mould the proposal and regulation.

One of the issues raised by Deputy McGuinness was what the actual and practical terms of this proposal for Eurojust would do.

It is important to emphasise that it reforms Eurojust's internal structure with the aim of improving its internal functioning, governance and operational effectiveness. More specifically, the proposal would reform the roles and responsibilities of the bodies within Eurojust's internal structure, such as the college of national members and the executive board. It is important to point out that, at present, we have an Irish representative on Eurojust, and that member comes from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Deputy Gannon raised a number of issues, one of which I would like to respond to related to data. It is important to point out that the proposal - I think Deputy Gogarty mentioned this as well - sets out a robust framework governing the processing of personal data by Eurojust. The data protection regulation applies to Eurojust's processing of personal data under the proposal. In addition, the proposal also sets out operational data protection rules, so I am not concerned about issues that have been highlighted by colleagues in respect of data.

Deputy Kelly set me nine questions. I am afraid I will not be able to answer them, purely for the reason of time. He highlighted a number of issues. First, he referred to Article 18(2) of the proposal. It is important to point out that it expressly says, "With the agreement of the competent national authority and in accordance with national law, National Members may". It then sets out the issues in respect of members.

Deputy Kelly also highlighted the issue of Article 28 in regard to the independence of the DPP. I believe that the independence of the DPP will be fully protected and Article 28 does not do anything to impinge on that.

Deputy Kelly also referred to the management board. He is correct that there was an issue of discussion in respect of the management board but the proposal contained within Article 7 is appropriate. It is going to preserve the independence of the DPP as well. I know that there was some concern expressed by Deputy Collins in respect of the independence of the DPP.

Another issue Deputy Kelly dealt with was trial and due course of law. This is not going to have any impact on the constitutional rights that Irish people have before the courts.

Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to genocide. For the purpose of this regulation, Annex I to the regulation sets out the crimes that are covered by this particular proposed regulation. However, it is the case that, within Irish law, we have the crime of genocide.

Deputy Boyd Barrett also referred to two individuals who have an involvement with the courts in Germany at present. It is important to point out that one of them is a complainant in a case and the other is the accused in the case. I do not have any responsibility in respect of the domestic prosecution or how complainants or accused are treated in Germany. It is the case that what is covered by this regulation is in respect of international co-operation.

I agree with what Deputy Healy-Rae said in respect of the unfortunate comments by Deputy Murphy, when he said the Garda had "abducted" an individual. The Garda is entitled to arrest individuals, provided it does so in accordance with law. It is an extraordinary power the Garda has and I think it has complied with it.

Question put and agreed to.

Estimates for Public Services 2026

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move the following Supplementary Estimate:

Vote 21 — Prisons (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €35,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the Prison Service and other expenses in connection with prisons, including places of detention, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote put and agreed to.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Members to take their seats. I have a very important announcement. I ask Members to bear with me. It is not very often that we have a Deputy's daughter celebrating her birthday in the Public Gallery. I would like to wish Bella Gibney a very happy birthday, which is tomorrow. Happy birthday, Bella.

Defending Irish Neutrality: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Mary Lou McDonald on Tuesday, 17 November 2026:

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.

Debate resumed on 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."

- (Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Neale Richmond)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding defending our neutrality. On Tuesday, 17 November 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 77; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	

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

McGrath, Séamus.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moynihan, Michael.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Shane.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
O'Connor, James.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Smith, Duncan.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Stanley, Brian.	
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Wall, Mark.	
Richmond, Neale.	Ward, Mark.	
Roche, Peter.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 77; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	

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

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

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire.

Question declared carried.

Health Budget and Recruitment Restrictions: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Marie Sherlock on Wednesday, 18 November 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

> condemns the repeated presentation to Dáil Éireann of annual Estimates for Health, which on the evidence of the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Government's own outturns, the Government must know to be inadequate to maintain existing services;
>
> notes the doubtful legal basis for the Department of Health taking operational control of recruitment decisions for health regions in Tier 3 financial escalation; and

calls on the Government to reverse the systematic under funding of the HSE by the Department of Health in 2026, by presenting a Supplementary Estimate for the Health Vote that provides for the cost of the services delivered in 2026, and specifically covers maternity leave, so that the 2027 allocation, and future services, are not impacted and cut further, by the 2026 deficit.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"acknowledges:

— the substantial and sustained increase in overall Health funding, which is rising by approximately €13.7 billion, or 88 per cent, between 2019 and 2027;

— the contribution of nurses, doctors, health and social care professionals and the wider Health service workforce in delivering care, often in challenging conditions, and the significant expansion of the workforce, including net growth of more than 30,000 staff between 2019 and 2025, and an increase of more than 4,000 staff in the first nine months of 2026, with approximately 400 staff added in September alone;

— that HSE spending was growing by nearly 9 per cent at end-September, against funded growth of approximately 5 per cent above 2025 actual spending. Separately, by end-October, cash drawn down was €781 million above budget;

— that the 2026 financial position reflects a combination of significant and genuine demand and cost pressures as well as savings not delivered. Pressures include medicines, pensions, State Claims, higher prices and demand as well as lower private-patient income. Pay expenditure also exceeds budget, with over-reliance on agency and overtime;

— that a Supplementary Estimate will be provided for 2026 based on the assessed year-end cash requirement; with genuine demand and cost pressures, expenditure above approved budgets and savings not delivered assessed separately to inform future funding requirements;

notes that:

— the controls are financial controls and do not transfer operational responsibility from the HSE, which remains responsible for workforce planning, prioritising posts, recruitment, deployment, service delivery, clinical decisions and patient safety;

— the enhanced controls for the Health Vote were introduced in accordance with the revised letter of delegated sanction issued by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation on 14 September. This sanction is in accordance with the statutory framework established under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Acts 2011 and 2013, the Public Financial Procedures, DPER Circular 21/2026 Expenditure Control and Escalation Process;

— there is no blanket recruitment freeze and essential and patient-safety posts can continue to proceed where the HSE has prioritised them, secured the required internal approvals and demonstrated how they will be accommodated within the pay budget;

— additional funding and staffing must be matched by improved productivity, improved rostering over weekends and evenings, better use of theatres, outpatient clinics and diagnostics, reduced reliance on agency and overtime, stronger procurement and full use of IFMS, alongside a stronger focus on prevention and a shift towards community-based care to meet need earlier and reduce avoidable hospital demand;

supports:

— continued investment in Health services within a sustainable budgetary framework;

— targeted recruitment and workforce deployment based on patient need and service priority;

— the delivery of savings, efficiencies and reforms that enable more care to be provided from existing resources; and

— strong financial governance and accountability to ensure that public funding delivers improved services and outcomes for patients.

and that Dáil Éireann further notes:

Health funding and the 2026 financial position

— There has been substantial and sustained growth in Health funding. Between 2019 and 2027, the overall Health allocation will have increased by approximately €13.7 billion, or 88 per cent, to €29.1 billion. This includes an increase of €1.76 billion, or 6.4 per cent, in Budget 2027, comprising an additional €1.6 billion in current funding, an increase of 6.2 per cent, and €160 million in capital funding, an increase of 10.3 per cent.

— The Department has strengthened health expenditure forecasting through dedicated Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service resources. It combines component-based modelling of demographic pressures, using ESRI age/cost curves developed through the Joint Research Programme on healthcare reform, with regression analysis of health expenditure and wider economic growth. This work includes the 2021 paper on demographics and existing service requirements, the joint 2023 OECD report on the Future Fiscal Sustainability of Health Spending in Ireland, and the 2025 Health Service Capacity Review with the ESRI, now embedded in budgetary, workforce and capital planning. The Department also contributes to the EU Ageing Report and PBO work on Health spending. A paper on multiannual budgeting, providing baseline expenditure estimates under a no-policy-change scenario, is being finalised for publication.

— Forecasts remain subject to uncertainty. Budget 2026 used the Department of Finance's April 2025 inflation forecast of 2.1 per cent, before geopolitical instability in the Middle East; inflation is now running at 4.3 per cent. CSO and ESRI population projections based on Census 2022 have consistently underestimated actual population growth. For 2026, this increases the estimated demographic expenditure requirement from 2.1 per cent to 2.4 per cent.

— The Health service is responding to substantial demand and cost pressures, with Emergency Department attendances, particularly among older people, growing well ahead of projected demographic change. Further capacity and staffing are needed.

Sustained investment is supporting additional services and changes in how care is delivered, including surgical hubs, safe staffing and expanded community care.

— At the same time investment has outpaced measured hospital activity: between 2019 and end-2025, real acute-hospital expenditure increased by 52 per cent and staffing by 33 per cent, compared with approximately 14 per cent growth in measured activity over broadly the same period.

— The financial position reflects a combination of factors, including recurring funding pressures, commitments beyond approved resources and savings not delivered. The assessment of the Supplementary Estimate and future funding requirements must distinguish these factors. An overspend does not, on its own, establish the extent of structural underfunding. The objective is to meet genuine need while ensuring that investment delivers more timely, safe care and better value for patients.

— The Government recognises that healthcare faces genuine demand, demographic and cost pressures. The Department's forecasts explicitly assess pay, workforce growth, medicines, inflation, demand-led services, pensions and income. However, a forecast of the likely cost of services and the final allocation are not the same. Government must determine allocations within the overall resources available, and budgets appropriately require the HSE to deliver savings, efficiencies and changes in service delivery.

— A Supplementary Estimate will be provided to meet the assessed 2026 cash requirement. This addresses the year-end cash position; decisions on recurring funding require a separate assessment of the underlying costs and scope for savings and reform. Budget 2027 provides for identified recurring pressures, including medicines, non-pay demand, inflation and lower private patient income. Pay expenditure above budget, savings not delivered and volatile expenditure must also be assessed to determine the appropriate ongoing provision, alongside the HSE's responsibility to manage expenditure within approved resources.

— Maternity leave cover forms part of workforce planning and is reflected in approaches such as the Safe Staffing Framework. The assessment of funding requirements should take account of existing provision and identify any additional staffing and funding required to maintain safe services.

Legal basis and nature of the controls

— The Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2011 sets out the functions of the Minister for Public Expenditure, including expenditure oversight and policy and responsibility for central accountability, governance and value-for-money frameworks. Under the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2013, Government determines the overall expenditure limit and the amount apportioned to each Minister. Dáil Éireann votes the Estimates and the Appropriation Act gives them statutory effect. The Secretary General of the Department of Health is the Accounting Officer for the Health Vote and is accountable for the management of that voted expenditure.

— Under the Public Financial Procedures, formal sanction from the Minister for Public Expenditure is an essential part of the management and control of voted expenditure. Neither the voting of money by Dáil Éireann nor inclusion of an allocation in an Estimate,

of itself, constitutes expenditure sanction. The delegated sanction for the Health Vote issued on 28 May 2026 and reflected DPER Circular 21/2026 Expenditure Control and Escalation Process, which provides that breaches of delegated sanction and persistent overruns may lead to an escalation process and additional oversight. A revised delegated sanction was issued to the Secretary General on 14 September 2026.

— The measures introduced following the revised delegated sanction are financial controls. They do not transfer the management of Health services to the Department. The HSE remains operationally responsible for workforce planning, recruitment processes, deployment, service delivery, procurement, clinical decisions and patient safety. In the four Regions with the greatest pay pressures, recruitment proposals are submitted to the Department only after the HSE has prioritised the posts and secured the required internal approvals, including approval by the HSE CEO. The Department's role is to confirm that the full cost has been identified and is supported by a credible financial offset before financial sanction is granted.

Recruitment and workforce growth

— There is no blanket recruitment freeze. Health service staffing continues to grow substantially. The workforce increased by more than 30,000 between 2019 and end-2025. At end-September 2026, the Health funded workforce stood at 133,084 WTE, an increase of 4,004 WTE since December 2025 and 6,000 WTE over the preceding twelve months. This includes net workforce growth of approximately 400 WTE in September 2026. This was already ahead of the funded net recruitment target of 3,300 WTE for 2026. The increase included 992 nurses and midwives, 731 health and social care professionals and 138 consultants. These are net workforce increases after departures and therefore understates the substantial volume of gross recruitment taking place.

— Graduate recruitment is continuing. The most recent HSE information shows that offers have been made to many graduate nurses and midwives who completed the relevant recruitment process, with more than 1,000 offers accepted. The Department and HSE continue to work on improving the process so that graduates can move into suitable permanent posts as quickly as possible, taking account of registration, service need and available Pay resources.

— Investment is also expanding future workforce supply, supporting more than 1,100 additional healthcare training places by 2028. Workforce growth and expanded training capacity provide a stronger basis for meeting rising need. Strategic workforce planning, appropriate skill mix and effective deployment are needed to support new services and make best use of permanent staff, agency and overtime expenditure.

— For 2027, the HSE will be required to develop more strategic pay and workforce plans that explicitly provide for planned capacity openings, new services, graduate recruitment. Plans will identify when and where staff are needed, the appropriate skill mix and how costs will be met within the pay allocation, both in-year and on a full-year basis. This will include opportunities to replace agency and overtime expenditure with affordable permanent recruitment where service requirements and skill mix permit.

— The enhanced process applies only in Regions materially above their approved pay budgets. It requires prioritisation, not cessation. Essential and patient-safety posts can

proceed where the HSE demonstrates the service need, priority, full-year cost and funding plan. Graduate recruitment and agency conversion are continuing. The controls are intended to ensure that finite pay resources are directed to the posts that make the greatest difference to patients and do not create further unfunded and unsustainable commitments.

Safe staffing and safe care

— Investment in the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix supports an evidence-based approach to identifying nursing requirements, taking account of patient dependency, complexity and care needs. This informs workforce planning and prioritisation, alongside the HSE's responsibility to deploy staff effectively and manage its overall pay allocation.

— The reported rollout covers all 26 adult Emergency Departments and 39 acute hospitals, with 96 per cent of identified baseline staffing requirements delivered nationally. Baseline delivery is not the same as assurance that staffing needs are met in every service at all times: staffing requirements must continue to reflect patient dependency, complexity and care intensity. Reported benefits where the Framework has been implemented include reduced length of stay, reduced staff intention to leave and lower agency usage. The priority is to sustain implementation and use the evidence on care needs to inform staffing and deployment decisions, rather than relying solely on aggregate workforce numbers.

Productivity, savings and reform

— Meeting rising need requires continued investment in capacity alongside reform and better use of existing resources. Emergency Department demand is growing rapidly, while growth in other measured hospital activity has been more modest. Persistent congestion and waiting times underline the importance of improving how staffing, facilities and funding are converted into timely care. This means organising services differently as well as expanding them, with a focus on the value and patient benefit secured from every euro.

— Between 2019 and end-2025, real acute-hospital expenditure rose by 52 per cent and staffing by 33 per cent, compared with approximately 14 per cent growth in measured activity over broadly the same period. These measures do not capture every aspect of care or changes in patient complexity, and emergency pressures can disrupt planned treatment. Nevertheless, the difference warrants examination to identify how investment can support more treatment, shorter waits and better outcomes.

— Reform also means providing care in a more appropriate setting. Community services, chronic disease management and digitally enabled care can help prevent avoidable hospital attendance and admission and support earlier discharge where clinically appropriate. The objective is not simply to increase activity within hospitals, but to make better use of hospital capacity while providing more care closer to home.

— There is clear evidence of scope to improve utilisation. A review of operating theatres found that only 67 per cent of staffed and available theatre time was used. Improvement programmes in theatres and outpatient services have demonstrated that additional activity and higher throughput can be achieved without additional resources or capital

investment. Better rostering and extended day and weekend working can increase the use of theatres, outpatient clinics and diagnostic equipment and shorten waiting times.

— There is also substantial scope on non-pay expenditure. The HSE is the State's largest purchaser of goods and services and must use national contracts, product standardisation, price comparison and stronger procurement compliance to secure measurable savings. IFMS is now live across HSE statutory services, covering approximately 80 per cent of Health expenditure. It provides earlier visibility of financial pressures and, when used fully, will support price comparison, purchasing controls, standardisation and stronger accountability at Region, care-group and site level.

— Pay and workforce reforms must reduce reliance on premium staffing. Agency expenditure reached €817 million in 2025. Agency expenditure fell year-on-year in 2026, with further reductions needed to bring spending within budget. Direct recruitment and conversion of agency workers, where there is an ongoing service requirement and an affordable permanent post, can improve continuity and reduce costs. The 2027 allocation therefore includes specific savings requirements for agency, overtime and allowances, supported by redeployment, better rostering and stronger workforce practices.

— The objective is to support safe services and meet growing need within a sustainable financial framework. Further investment, stronger workforce planning, effective procurement and service reform are complementary parts of that response. Together, they should enable additional capacity and existing resources to deliver more timely care and better outcomes for patients.

Multiannual capital investment and additional capacity

— The €9.25 billion National Development Plan provision for health for 2026–2030 supports a substantial programme of additional and modernised infrastructure to meet existing capacity needs and future demand. This multiannual investment provides a basis for expanding services alongside changes in how care is delivered. Capital provision and current funding serve different purposes: delivery of new facilities must be aligned with workforce plans and recurring operating costs so that completed projects can open and provide the intended additional care.

Winter vaccination and prevention

— Vaccination is one of the most effective public-health interventions available, protecting people from serious illness while reducing avoidable hospital admissions and pressure on finite Health service capacity.

— The influenza and COVID-19 vaccination programmes are underway, with vaccines available free of charge to eligible groups through participating GPs and pharmacies.

— The RSV infant immunisation programme is also being delivered through maternity hospitals, helping to protect babies from serious illness and reduce the risk of hospitalisation during the winter period.

Surgical hubs and elective hospitals

— The surgical hub programme combines additional capacity with a different model of service delivery. Four hubs are operational at Tallaght, Mount Carmel, Swords and Cork,

with further hubs being developed and elective hospitals being progressed in Cork, Galway and Dublin. Separating planned treatment from emergency care helps protect patients from cancellations and releases acute hospital capacity for more complex care. Aligned staffing, scheduling and activity plans will be important to bring this investment into full use and shorten waiting times.

— Mount Carmel illustrates the improvements that additional investment and service redesign can deliver together. From opening in February 2025 to end-August 2026, it delivered 8,006 procedures, while average waiting times in participating specialties fell from 8.5 months to four months. The Reeves Day Surgery Centre at Tallaght has treated more than 20,000 patients since opening and has supported a significant reduction in the hospital's day-case waiting list. Further progress will depend on developing capacity and applying the lessons from dedicated elective provision across the wider service.

Urgent and emergency care and winter preparedness

— Pressure on urgent and emergency care is substantial. By end-August 2026, Emergency Department attendances had increased by 7.2 per cent, including an increase of 9.8 per cent among people aged over 75, well ahead of projected population growth and ageing. Long waits and overcrowding affect patients, staff and the safety of care. The concentration of 80 per cent of the daily average 8am trolley count in 13 of 29 sites reinforces the need for targeted responses to local capacity and patient-flow pressures, alongside national investment. Further staffed capacity must be supported by timely diagnostics, community services and safe discharge arrangements across the whole patient pathway.

— The winter response includes GP respiratory support, site-specific Emergency Department plans and action to address barriers to safe patient flow. Delivery requires clear responsibility at national, regional and hospital levels, timely diagnostics and discharge supports, and access to appropriate community services. Financial provision and safe staffing are essential but must be accompanied by these operational improvements; additional expenditure alone will not resolve all causes of overcrowding.

— Performance is not uniform across the hospital system. A relatively small number of sites account for a substantial proportion of national trolley pressures, while other hospitals have sustained improved patient flow despite increased demand. This demonstrates that additional capacity must be accompanied by strong operational management, timely clinical decision-making, effective discharge planning and consistent seven-day working.

Moving care closer to the community

— Investment in the Enhanced Community Care Programme, structured chronic disease management in general practice and the expansion of community pharmacy services is strengthening alternatives to hospital-based care. These developments support earlier intervention and a home-first approach where clinically appropriate. Continued expansion and integration of community and hospital services are needed to prevent avoidable attendance and admission and support safe discharge, rather than treating Emergency Departments as the default route to care.

— Virtual wards are operating in every HSE Health Region and have provided care to more than 5,300 patients. They offer suitable patients an alternative to hospital-based treatment and can support earlier discharge. Continued development of these services, with evaluation of their impact on access, outcomes, hospital demand and costs, will help meet growing need and make effective use of acute capacity.".

- (Minister for Health)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the health budget and recruitment restrictions. On Wednesday, 18 November 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 75; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Devine, Máire.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	

Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Lawless, James.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Martin, Micheál.	Nolan, Carol.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		

Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Marie Sherlock and Duncan Smith.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 75; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Devine, Máire.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	

Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kelly, Alan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kenny, Martin.	
Geoghegan, James.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawless, Paul.	
Harkin, Marian.	Lawlor, George.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Higgins, Emer.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Lawless, James.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Martin, Micheál.	Nolan, Carol.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		

Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Marie Sherlock and Duncan Smith.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we adjourn, I ask Members to join in welcoming the Gallagher family, who are in the Public Gallery this evening. They are most welcome.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.05 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 19 Samhain 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.05 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 19 November 2026.