



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*
(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 25 Feabhra 2025

Tuesday, 25 February 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Teachtaireacht ón Dáil - Message from Dáil

An Cathaoirleach: Dáil Éireann passed the Merchant Shipping (Investigation of Marine Accidents) Bill 2024 on 19 February 2025, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader has accommodated us to take six Commencement Matters over the next few weeks instead of the normal four. I thank the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, for being here today.

I have received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters:

Senator Paul Daly - The need for the Minister for Rural and Community Development to make a statement on the introduction of a funding mechanism for community centres and similar such groups to purchase and install electricity generators.

Senator Ollie Crowe - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the financial supports available to radiation therapy students, particularly in relation to unpaid summer clinical placements.

Senator Garret Ahearn - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to introduce measures to increase security for councillors in line with those provided for Oireachtas Members.

Senator Pauline Tully - The need for the Minister for Education to make a statement on the shortage of appropriate school places for children with additional needs in Cavan.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee - The need for the Minister for Education to provide an up-

date on the new school building project for Rush National School, County Dublin.

Senator Laura Harmon - The need for the Minister for Education to make a statement on her plans to amend the assault leave for teachers and special needs assistants.

Senator Cathal Byrne - The need for the Minister of State with special responsibility for disabilities to make a statement on the vacant speech and language therapist posts in New Ross, County Wexford.

Senator Tom Clonan - The need for the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to make a statement on the provision of services by children's disability network teams and early intervention teams in Blanchardstown, Harmonstown, Coolock and Kilbarrack to a child with special needs, who has been on waiting lists since 2020.

Senator Nicole Ryan - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the planning challenges encountered by residents in Gaeltacht areas.

Senator Joanne Collins - The need for the Minister for Social Protection to make a statement on the pension disadvantages encountered by women who stay at home to raise families or work on family farms.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on his plans to address homelessness and the housing crisis.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the closure of Allenwood Day Care Centre in County Kildare.

Senator Mark Duffy - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on his plans to address the shortage of supply of housing in County Mayo.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Education to make a statement on the status of the application for emergency accommodation by Grange Post Primary School in Sligo.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Paul Daly, Ollie Crowe, Garret Ahearn, Pauline Tully, Lorraine Clifford-Lee and Laura Harmon and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Weather Events

Senator Paul Daly: I welcome the Minister and congratulate him on his appointment. I have not been speaking to him in a public forum since his appointment. I am delighted for him

and to see him. Regarding this Commencement matter, I compliment him on how quick he was out of the traps in his response to the major crisis that was created by Storm Éowyn. I am always conscious when saying the name of that storm whether I am pronouncing it correctly.

I am asking for a dedicated funding source towards the purchase of generators for community groups that have community halls, or even GAA clubs that have centres. During our experience of this storm, it was seen how important it was to have those hubs within communities for people to go to. Even if it was only to charge devices or to boil a kettle and get a hot drink, they were vitally important. That situation was not one those groups would have consciously prepared for in the past. When such clubs are doing grant applications, a generator would not or ever have been on the priority list. I know as somebody who is involved in the GAA and other community groups, the majority of centres that would be most suitable for similar situations going forward are up to their proverbial tonsils in debt. They owe banks money as part of the matching funding for the many good grants they would have received for different facilities in their areas. They would never have prioritised or even considered getting electricity generators as part of the projects. We are aware that was the worst and most devastating storm this country has ever witnessed. There is no guarantee there will not be similar storms, possibly even in the immediate future. With that in mind, it is important there is some mechanism of grant aid for generators in at least one community facility in every immediate locality. That is my request, which has come to me from people who are activists, who are involved in community groups, and are prepared to go that extra step but are already up to their proverbial tonsils in debt with their particular community centre or pavilion.

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus leis na Seanadóirí. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Chathaoirleach, leis an Leas-Chathaoirleach agus leis na Seanadóirí nua atá tofa. I congratulate the Cathaoirleach, the Leas-Chathaoirleach and the new Senators. Excuse me not knowing a lot of your names but I will get to know you all. I also welcome back all the returning Senators.

I thank Senator Daly for raising this important matter. Collectively, we saw the devastating impact Storm Éowyn had right across the country. We have worked tirelessly since to ensure the Government has taken on board the lessons learnt during those days and that comprehensive preparations are in place in anticipation of similar future weather events.

As Senator Daly said, the importance of community centres as a fulcrum for every community is crucial in good times and in bad. They are the glue that binds communities together. They provide vital social and economic services. We saw that at first hand in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Many community centres were repurposed as community emergency response hubs. I visited a number of these immediately after the storm, as did the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and other Ministers. We saw at first hand how invaluable they were as an outlet for people facing very difficult circumstances. I thank all the local volunteers and the staff across all our local authorities who were central to the effort in standing those hubs up. I was very proud that many of the facilities that were visited have been supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Social Protection under schemes such as the community centre investment fund, CLÁR, LEADER and the local enhancement programme. I am anxious to ensure these facilities are supported to ensure they continue to be relevant at all times for every community.

I have previously said the provision of generators to support communities during extreme weather events is an issue I feel strongly about. I am also of the view that we should be taking

into account all the elements that any future emergency hub may require, be it power generation, digital connectivity or the provision of showering facilities, as well as food, catering, etc. I have asked my officials to take full stock of the lessons we have all learned in recent weeks and to do so in consultation with our key partners, such as the local authorities. Central to this is the suite of investment schemes being implemented by my Department. For example, the Senator will be aware that in recent years funding has been provided for a small number of generators for community groups through LEADER and CLÁR. There is no reason such support cannot continue to be made available.

One of the main advantages of the range of schemes run by our Department is flexibility. I have seen in recent years that these schemes can be been adapted to react to and anticipate emerging challenges and priorities. I have asked officials to review schemes that are due to be launched over the coming weeks and months to ensure they are fully focused on the real needs of communities, be that the provision of generators, the refurbishment of existing community facilities or the development of new projects that will help ensure we continue to support strong, resilient and vibrant communities across the country. In this regard, I intend to open schemes such as CLÁR and the town and village renewal scheme in the coming weeks. I will also be announcing further details of funding for projects under the community centre investment fund. This will build on the announcement earlier this week that saw €14 million in funding awarded to 163 community-focused projects under the community recognition fund.

We are working to ensure we continue to support resilient and healthy communities. We have clearly seen the strength of these communities in how they responded to the recent challenges and I am committed to ensuring we help them to be ready for every future challenge.

Senator Paul Daly: I thank the Minister for what is a very positive response. I would not have expected anything less. I compliment him on the line that covers it all for me, where he said he has asked his officials to review existing schemes. I have never doubted the fantastic schemes that are there for local community groups, community halls and for GAA centres and so on through the sports capital grants. It may be an idea to consider it in the latter programme, going forward, for GAA and soccer clubs, or whichever, that have pavilions. Those schemes might be reviewed so it would be put in as a priority item. As I said, it was never seen as being a priority anywhere before the events that have happened took place. I welcome the Minister's response and thank him for such a positive response. I look forward to seeing it in fruition.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Senator I will continue to engage with him and the Seanad on the response and on building resilience in not just rural communities but urban ones. Generators are not necessarily going to be the answer to everything. It is not as easy as some people make it out to be. Irish Water has already made plans to acquire 100 generators in the immediate future. We will have a range of emergency hubs that are fully equipped and that can be stood up relatively immediately in response to the next challenge. We are making the funding arrangements and also the logistical arrangements for that as we speak and I will continue to keep the Seanad updated.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister for coming to Seanad Éireann to take that Commencement matter.

Health Services Staff

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, for being with us.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for joining us in the House. As he and Members will be aware, cancer affects nearly every family in Ireland, with one in every three people receiving a diagnosis at some point in their lives. When that happens, access to timely and effective treatment is critical. Radiation therapy plays a vital role in cancer care, yet students training for this essential profession receive no financial support, uniform allowance, travel allowance or payment for clinical placements completed every year during their four-year degree programme. This is despite working full-time hours in hospitals. Unlike student nurses who receive a payment during their final year internship, radiation therapy students must complete an unpaid summer clinical placement. Many students rely on summer jobs to support themselves through college but this requirement makes it nearly impossible to earn enough money to cover expenses for the academic year.

As Members may also be aware, it was reported in December 2024 that a staffing crisis in radiation therapy contributed to the HSE spending almost €12 million in 18 months on contracting private hospitals to treat public cancer patients. By addressing the financial struggles facing radiation therapy students, we can address the staffing crisis and make this career path more attractive. As a result, we can save our health service money in the future by reducing the need to outsource to private hospitals. The Irish Institute of Radiography and Radiation Therapy, IIRRT, has also warned staffing deficits have led to machine closures in public hospitals, reducing capacity and worsening delays for cancer patients. The result is longer waiting lists, postponed treatments and potentially poorer outcomes for those in need of urgent care.

This is not just a student issue; it is a healthcare issue. Without financial support for radiation therapy students, staffing shortages will continue and directly impact on cancer patients across this country. If we invest in the students of today, this will pay dividends in the years ahead. There is no reason for these students to be treated less favourably than student nurses. We need to see swift action in this regard.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Senator Crowe for raising this matter today. I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

Practice education placements for radiation therapy students are essential to support clinical skills development in the application of theory to patient care and attainment of regulatory standards of proficiency. Practice education offers opportunities for students to translate theoretical learning into practical experience, work in different settings and develop relevant practical skills. Across the health and social care disciplines, there are many students on placements in hospitals and healthcare settings, of which approximately one third are final year students. The length of placement and the activities performed during these placements vary between the disciplines. These students are not employees and are therefore not paid. In many cases, the nature of placement can mainly be limited to participation in an observing and learning capacity.

The length of placements for health and social care professions - HSCPs for short - and the activities performed during these placements varies between disciplines and is determined by the educational standards set by professional regulators. Practice placements for radiation therapy students takes place in two blocs in year one and two blocks in year two. Students must

complete a minimum of 1,000 hours in clinical settings. Placements are provided in public and private healthcare settings. CORU registration requirements have been changed to bring Irish training requirements in line with international comparators. Practice hours have been reduced to 1,000 hours from 1,200 hours.

As Senator Crowe mentioned, radiation therapists play a vital role in the delivery of radiation therapy services and supporting patients through each step of their cancer journey. There are approximately 227 whole-time equivalent radiation therapists employed by the HSE. While on placement, radiation therapy students are not employees of the HSE and remain registered with the higher education institution throughout their placements. The nature of the placement is in a learning capacity under supervision meaning their status as a student is protected. In general, there are no allowances or payments for HSCP students while completing placement hours in the health service. Occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or radiation therapy, dietetics and radiography students do not receive an allowance to support time spent in clinical placements as part of their training.

As the Senator mentioned, uniquely for student nurses and midwives, there is in the final year a paid salary when they are specifically employed on internship placements. Student nurses' and midwives' final year internship placements consist of a continual 36-week rostered clinical placement, including annual leave. The internship placement is a paid placement as student nurses and midwives take a reduced caseload. During these placements, students are under supervision and are considered as 0.5 whole-time equivalents of the workforce. In addition, intern students can be allocated across all shift patterns, including nights, weekends and 12-hour days.

An independent review of the radiation therapy profession was finalised in 2024, making 16 recommendations in total. These recommendations intend to support the radiation therapy profession into the future. The review considered important issues such as organisational structure, career development in line with health and social care professional frameworks, strategic workforce planning, and recruitment and retention strategies. An oversight committee is being established by the HSE to implement the recommendations arising from the review.

Senator Crowe may also wish to note that there are a number of student grants and other financial supports available to students in further and higher education. Details are available from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

I note the point the Senator raised and I will bring it back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator has one minute. Just to be aware, we will ask for a suspension of House because the Minister of State has to go for a vote in the Dáil Chamber. We will finish this one.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I am okay; I have a pair.

An Cathaoirleach: Have you a pair? Okay.

Senator Ollie Crowe: While I understand that any payments while on placement is a matter for the relevant employer, which in the public sector would be the HSE and, in other cases, private providers, regarding the HSE aspect, I believe there would be considerable benefit in the Minister for Health raising the issue with the chief executive of the HSE and agreeing on a

path forward to address this. I have outlined the staffing issues, so I will not repeat them, but it makes this career path more attractive and it requires a focus. As the Minister of State proposed, I would be grateful if he could raise the matter with his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank Senator Crowe for raising this matter. The delivery of healthcare education programmes is complex and requires multiple parts of the health and education system working together. Practice education is a fundamental part of a student's learning experience. The Department of Health provides supports to the HSE and other stakeholders to ensure essential practice placements are available for HSCP students.

It is recognised that many students in higher education experience financial difficulties. Consequently, a number of student grants and other financial supports are available to students in further and higher education. In budget 2025, there was a €1,000 reduction in the student contribution fee for higher education students who are eligible for free fees. The Department of further and higher education provides student grants to eligible applicants attending approved full-time undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Grants include maintenance grants, fees grants and student contribution grants. Budget 2024 increased the value of all maintenance grants. Students who are not eligible for a maintenance grant may still be eligible for a student contribution grant, which could cover the full student contribution charge, 50% of the charge or provide a €500 grant towards same. The income thresholds to qualify for the grants were increased in budget 2025 and the higher thresholds will come into effect in September of this year. In addition, students experiencing exceptional financial need may be eligible to apply for supports under the student assistance fund, which has been subvented by a further €10 million under the Government's cost of education supports in budget 2025. This fund can be used to meet costs such as childcare, rent, transport costs, books and class materials.

The Senator raised a specific point in respect of the HSE, which I will bring back to the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Crowe for the question and I thank the Minister of State for being here. As there is a vote in the Dáil Chamber and the next Minister of State has gone to vote, I ask the Whip to propose a suspension until 3.05 p.m.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I propose a suspension of the House until 3.05 p.m.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.55 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.04 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.55 p.m. and resumed at 3.04 p.m.

Local Authorities

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins, who is a former Member of this House. I look forward to engaging with him in his role.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber and wish him well in his new role. It is wonderful to have a former Member of this House elevated to a Ministry. I know that during his term he will show this House and Members of this House the

utmost respect, because he is a former Member.

I raise the issue of security for all public representatives right across the country. As the Minister of State knows, politics has changed in the past 20 years. Demands on politicians and local representatives have increased dramatically. The pressures and challenges they face, particularly with social media, have been recognised over recent years. There is an obligation on all of us in politics to encourage people to get into politics and serve their communities. One of the biggest challenges we have seen over the past ten years concerns the security and safety of all public representatives. A number of measures introduced in recent years have to be recognised and they have been prioritised by the Government, the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Minister of State's Department. A scheme has been put in place to support Oireachtas Members in securing their homes and offices and to provide security to the staff who work in their offices. This scheme was put in place about three years ago. A sum of €10,000 was available to invest in either one's home or office, and 50% of that could be reclaimed as an Oireachtas Member. A similar scheme was set up for councillors whereby they could spend €5,000 on safety measures in their homes, with 50% of that, or €2,500, reclaimable.

All this could be done only when a crime prevention officer came to visit one's house, produced a report and made recommendations on what needed to be done. That has been welcomed and has been good, but the problem is that the uptake has not been significant. The uptake by Oireachtas Members has not been significant, and the uptake among councillors has certainly not been. As the Minister of State knows, councillors are at the very front of local politics, and their security really matters. When we talk to councillors around the country, we hear that one of the reasons the uptake has not been great is the 50% rebate. Councillors recognise they need to get the works done and increase security for their families and staff working in their offices, but they have different circumstances and financial challenges. Councillors are not paid a lot, so having to pay for something up front if repaid only 50% does not encourage them greatly.

I ask that the Minister of State consider the changes made over recent months for Oireachtas Members whereby the amount they may spend was increased to two and half times the original value. Most important, there is a rebate of 100%. I do not believe for one second that we cannot take seriously the safety of councillors right across the country. We need to give them every opportunity to get into public life and feel as though they can devote themselves to it and contribute. However, most important, we need to ensure they are safe when doing their job.

If we recognise that the measures introduced three years ago were not sufficient for Oireachtas Members, we should also recognise that those introduced for councillors at the exact same time and based on the exact same recommendations, made by the group set up to make recommendations, have not been as successful as the Minister of State and I would like. Deputy Cummins, in his position as Minister of State responsible for local government, should consider this and what can be done to encourage and support councillors and keep them safe.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Ahearn. The matter is one on which I believe he has unanimous support in the Chamber.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): Although it is a little strange, it is fantastic to be back here in the Seanad Chamber for my first Commencement matter. I thank Senator Ahearn for raising this important matter, which I know all Members of the House will agree on. In the context of the

recent revision of the security allowance made for Oireachtas Members, I have raised the issue with my officials. We want to make progress on it. I am grateful for the opportunity to go through what has been done on this matter thus far.

As the Senator has rightly stated, local government plays an important role in the life of the nation. It is responsible for the delivery of a wide range of local services, and elected councils provide vital forums for the democratic representation of our local communities. I am sure we will all agree that all elected representatives should be free to carry out their functions and representational role without fear of harassment or intimidation. Heightened adversarial attitudes to elected representatives are corrosive to democratic participation. This risks deterring potential new candidates and induces existing representatives to withdraw from public life.

As the Senator rightly pointed out, a scheme was introduced for local authority members that provides for up to €2,500 to be claimed back on expenditure of €5,000 on personal security on a once-off vouched basis. This is administered by local authorities. I asked for information regarding how many have drawn that down. Unfortunately, only 23 councillors have done so. The reason for that relates to many of the items the Senator pointed to. In making that vouched claim, applicants have to get a written report from a crime prevention officer, which is a prerequisite for both the Oireachtas and local authority schemes, and the security measures have to be installed by Private Security Authority-registered installers. As the Senator said, there has been a change in respect of the Oireachtas scheme. One of my first acts as Minister of State, when I met the team in the Custom House regarding local government matters, was to raise the issue of the security allowance for councillors. As a former local authority member and a former Member of this House, I understand how important it is. I want to see progress made on this as early as possible.

I met with LAMA with the AILG today on a wide range of local government issues, but this is one of the matters that both organisations raised. Thus far, my officials have engaged with Revenue, which has indicated that there is no issue with the 100% element the Senator referred to. What my officials now have to do is make a business case to the Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform. That business case is required to set out the rationale and evidence for any revision to the allowance, as well as its value and cost, and the ability of local authorities to meet the unforeseen costs that might arise in 2025.

As Minister of State with responsibility for local government, I am very clear that I want to see progress on this without delay because the security of councillors throughout this country is of the utmost importance to me.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Minister of State for his response. As he said, he knows this issue very well. He was a councillor for 11 years in Waterford City Council and mayor for two years. He knows the challenges and pressures councillors are under. Councillors also know that. I know from talking to a lot of councillors that they are very hopeful that he will be able to make changes. As he said, 23 people put in applications in 2024. We have more than 1,000 councillors, which shows there is something in the system that is wrong.

I welcome the fact that the Minister of State, after only a couple of weeks in the role, has already met LAMA and the AILG on a range of issues and on this matter in particular. I especially welcome his confirmation that the 100% element is not an issue because that is the most important part of it. I am sure he is getting recommendations for what the amount should be. That is clearly important in supporting councillors. The majority of councillors do not have

offices so the amount would obviously be different from Oireachtas Members. From talking to councillors throughout the country, the key element is that 100% would be repaid. That seems to be the deterrent for local representatives throughout the country. They want to do it but cannot afford to, or are not in a position to be able to do it.

Deputy John Cummins: It is important to state that Revenue does not have an issue with the 100% element. I have to make that business case to the Department of public expenditure regarding changes in that respect. The Senator has rightly pointed out that the lower amount for councillors, relative to the rate for Oireachtas Members, is in recognition of the fact that councillors do not, by and large, have offices. We must land at a figure for that business case but I am anxious for that process to be brought to a conclusion as early as possible. It is important to say that the existing scheme is still available. The commitment I will make is that should there be changes to the scheme, anybody making a claim under the existing requirements will not be negatively impacted. I implore councillors availing of the current scheme to do so because safety and security is of the utmost importance. I will work with the entire House to make progress on this issue.

Special Educational Needs

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, is very welcome.

Senator Pauline Tully: I attended a meeting last week at a primary school in my constituency. Another meeting that is coming up soon will combine a number of primary and secondary schools. A number of issues were raised at the meeting last week and will be raised at the meeting next week. The first and main issue is the lack of suitable and appropriate school places for children with additional educational needs. That is especially the case for autistic children but applies to all children with additional educational needs. One parent at the meeting said that her son is in sixth class. He is autistic. She has been applying to schools and looking for a suitable secondary school placement for her son but has not as yet been informed whether a place will be available.

All of us with children take it for granted that when we apply to schools to allow our children to progress from primary to secondary school there will be sufficient places to accommodate need in the locality. Unfortunately, for children with additional needs that is not the case. More often than not when we come to September, there are many students without places for the start of the school year. There were approximately 120 students without a place this year. That number has reduced in recent months but there are still students who do not have a secondary school place at the moment and are being educated at home. That is not fair.

It comes down to a severe lack of planning. There needs to be much better co-operation and consultation between the NCSE and the Department of Education to ensure this does not happen in the future. One of the teachers at the meeting was a special education teacher. She was put into the position of teaching in an autistic class when she had absolutely no training in special education. Most teachers do not have that training because it is not included in their primary degree. All of the teachers who are asked to teach a special class do their utmost to upskill. The teacher I am speaking about upskilled in her own time and at her own expense to ensure she knew what she was doing. That is not fair. We need continuous professional development for all teaching staff. We also need specified degrees in special education to be rolled out in this country to ensure that our staff are trained to educate children who have additional

needs. That is a wide and varied cohort and every child has different needs.

One thing that teacher pointed out was that prior to the setting up of the children's disability network teams, CDNTs, members of the children's development teams used to call to the school. They were occupational therapists, OTs, physiotherapists and speech and language therapists. They would advise her and the special needs assistants, SNAs, in the school on practices they could and should use with the children. They would devise plans around the child's specific needs. That has not happened since the establishment of the CDNTs. What makes it worse is that the community supports that did exist for children prior to 2021 no longer exist in any shape or form. All of the parents at that meeting were able to say that their children had not seen an OT, a speech and language therapist or a physiotherapist since 2019, when the child's development teams were disbanded, along with the early intervention teams, in favour of the CDNTs. That structure is not working and needs to be replaced. I have for some time been advocating through committees and in the Dáil for in-school therapy for children. They should be in special schools but they should also be in mainstream schools where there are special classes attached. There could be a cluster of schools which would access support from a number of professionals who would go into the school, meet the children, devise plans to help them with their needs and instruct both the teachers and the SNAs how best to help educate those children. The teacher pointed out that many of the children in their autistic class in the school are either pre-verbal or non-verbal. The biggest problem is the frustration that they cannot communicate what their needs are to the teachers, and that causes all sorts of problems, including self-harm and harming of other students and of staff. It needs to be addressed.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank Senator Tully for raising this important matter.

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. The Department of Education and the NCSE have introduced a number of strategic initiatives to plan for and provide sufficient mainstream special classes and special school places. We know demand for new special classes at post-primary level is expected to increase significantly over the next few years, due to increasing demographics and increasing prevalence rates, and the Department and the NCSE have engaged with post-primary stakeholders regarding the provision of special classes.

In October 2022, the Department wrote to all post-primary schools, requesting that each school begin planning to provide for up to four special classes to meet the needs of children progressing from primary learning. Last October, the Department issued a circular to all schools, setting out new measures to support the forward-planning of special education provision. As a result of this forward planning, five new special schools will open for the 2025-26 school year, including one in County Monaghan. This is the first special school in County Monaghan, which up to now was serviced by the special school in Cootehill, County Cavan. This should ease the pressure in terms of application to the special school in County Cavan.

Capacity has also been expanded in a number of other special schools around the country. The NCSE has to date sanctioned 209 new special classes - 138 at primary and 71 at post-primary level - for opening in the coming school year 2025-26. Four of these new classes are in County Cavan - one at primary level and three at post-primary. These will be added to the existing 59 classes currently in operation, which comprise 46 at primary level and 13 at post-primary level. The NCSE is engaging intensively with more schools and school patron bodies to confirm further new special classes in the coming period. It has recruited additional special

education needs organisers, SENOs, advisers and team managers. A total of 120 SENOs now operate nationwide, almost double the number we had previously.

Cavan now has two SENOs dedicated solely to supporting schools and parents in the county. SENOs play an important role in ensuring there is adequate special educational provision within local areas and support families to secure placements for children. I assure the Senator that both the Department and the NCSE will continue to monitor and review the need for further new special classes and schools or the expansion of existing special schools over the coming months and years.

Senator Pauline Tully: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Chathaoirleach and the Minister of State.

The opening of new schools and new classes is always welcome and I welcome the new special school in Monaghan. It is badly needed. There was only one school between Cavan and Monaghan. It was definitely needed, although I urge the Minister of State to ensure that school is established in a suitable premises and not one that was deemed unsuitable for students some years ago.

There is a lot more work to be done because, as the Minister of State said, we know demand is increasing. If the Government and the NCSE know that demand is increasing, there should be plans in place to ensure that there are sufficient school places for all students as they transition from preschool to primary school and then from primary school into secondary school, but that is not happening at present.

As regards SENOs, there are not enough of them. They are overworked. We need more SENOs. When I was teaching, the SENO assigned to my school knew every student who attended the school and their families and was in regular contact with them about where they should be going to school and what their needs were. That is not the case now. A lot of families do not even know who the SENO is for their area. That needs to be addressed as well.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call the Minister of State to respond, I welcome the transition year students who are here with the Office of the Ombudsman. They are very welcome.

Deputy Niall Collins: In conclusion, it is a priority for this Government to ensure that all children have an appropriate school placement and that the necessary supports are provided to all our schools to ensure the needs of children with special educational needs are met. It is important to remember that the vast majority of children with special educational needs are supported to attend mainstream classes with their peers. To support children with more complex needs, special classes in mainstream schools and special schools are provided.

More than €2.9 billion will be spent in 2025 supporting children with special educational needs. This figure builds on previous years and represents more than a quarter of the total education budget. It will provide for, among other things, 400 new special classes, 300 new special school places and will also increase special educational posts by 768 special education teachers and 1,600 special needs assistant, SNA, posts nationwide. The NCSE continues to assess what additional provision is required at local areas and what schools have capacity to accommodate the required provision. As the NCSE progresses the sanctioning of new classes over the coming weeks, it will advise parents in turn on the location of new special classes for the 2025-2026 school year.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit.

Schools Building Projects

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach. The Minister of State is very welcome to the Seanad to discuss this important matter. As he knows, I am passionate about the delivery of services for my constituency. One of my top priorities is the delivery of a new school building for Rush National School. It is a matter I have continuously raised in the Seanad and one we need to keep raising and pressing the Department on because this is a project that has been in the offing for 18 years. The school leadership, under Morgan Doran, and the board of management have been pressing this. The previous principal, Margaret Dobinson, started the campaign. It has been a long and sorry history, which I will bring the Minister of State briefly through. Approval was obtained in 2010 and planning permission was granted in 2013. While it was renewed on a couple of occasions due to it expiring, it finally expired on 8 December 2024. A fresh planning application was required and this is currently in process.

It is a school of some 700 pupils. It was built in 1953 and is completely inadequate. A new 32-classroom school needs to be delivered that will also have two autism classrooms, which are really badly needed, particularly in light of the previous Commencement matter. The same demand is seen throughout north County Dublin. Rush has a big population with more than 11,000 people and is increasing rapidly. Thousands of houses are being built and delivered in north County Dublin and Rush is at the centre of that. There is huge demand on school places and autism classrooms and the principal of Rush National School, Morgan Doran, wants to deliver this school so that he can cater for the huge demand in the area. The school is not fit for purpose.

I am raising this Commencement matter to see whether we can get some information as to where the project is at. While the school wants to engage positively and collaboratively with the Department of Education, there is a complete lack of information coming from the Department with regard to the progress of this project. Given the long history I have outlined, including the lapsing of the planning permissions and the need for constant renewal of planning permissions, the lack of information coming from the Department is concerning. The school needs to be delivered. I do not want to let this matter slip from the attention of the new Minister for Education, Deputy McEntee. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth of Ireland, Deputy Foley, visited the school last June when she was the Minister for Education, as did the Taoiseach, when he was the Tánaiste, in November. They saw the great education the children receive in the school but also the completely inadequate facilities. The people of Rush are proud of this school and the education it has delivered for generations in Rush. They are invested in its success, but the delivery of the school building is needed. When I was out knocking on doors last November, people were telling me that when their children started school, they were told the new school would be delivered within a couple of years. Not only have those children finished in Rush National School, they have also finished in secondary school at this stage, so enough is enough. We need this school building to be delivered as soon as possible. I would really appreciate an update about where the project is and a commitment that the Department will keep engaging or start better engagement with the school and board of management.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank the Sena-

tor for raising this matter on a number of occasions and again today. The large-scale capital project for Rush National School is included in the Department of Education's construction programme, which will be delivered under the national development plan as part of the Project Ireland 2040 framework.

The project brief for Rush National School includes the construction of a new two-storey, 32-classroom school with two classrooms for children with special educational needs, a general purpose hall and ancillary accommodation. External works include the demolition of the existing single-storey school building, the removal of existing temporary accommodation, a new boundary treatment, landscaping, staff car parking area, ball courts, play areas and ancillary works. The project is at architectural planning stage three - tender action and award.

A tender report was received from the design team in 2023 and was reviewed by the Department of Education. During the course of this review, it was noted that the planning permission was due to expire in December 2023 and a new planning permission application would be required. Given the passage of time since tenders were returned and the requirement for a new planning application, the design team was authorised in July 2024 to collapse the former tender procedure and proceed with the new planning application. This planning application will include decarbonisation measures in accordance with technical design guidance. The design team has liaised with Fingal County Council accordingly. The updated tender documents will include the updated mechanical and electrical requirements in accordance with decarbonisation measures and compliance with any statutory requirements.

The due diligence by the Department of Education is a critical part of the overall completion of the stage three process and is critical to ensuring quality and value for money and that projects are progressed within overall programme parameters. The large-scale capital project remains a priority for delivery and Department of Education officials will keep the school authority updated as stage three progresses.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Minister of State for his response, which outlined the long and sorry history of the delivery of this project. It is not good enough. The people of Rush and, in particular, the children of Rush National School deserve better. I am glad to see that Department officials will keep the school authorities updated as this stage progresses. Regarding doubling down on this commitment and getting them to engage in a better way than heretofore, I can guarantee that the school leadership and board of management want to ensure the quality of the school and value for money and are fully signed up to the principles laid out by the Minister of State in his response. They want to collaborate with the Department to get this delivered and not allow this to go on any longer than is necessary.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Senator for raising a project that is very important for her constituency. It is not acceptable to me or, I think, anybody else in Seanad Éireann or Dáil Éireann that this project should take so long. I will be communicating with the Department on foot of what I have heard here today. It beggars belief that so many projects in the Department's school building unit take so long. I have come to this House on many occasions to answer Commencement matters on issues rightly raised by the Senator and others across the House regarding the inordinate length of time some of our building projects take. It is simply not acceptable. It raises alarming issues in terms of value for money and delivery. If we have a national development plan, as we have, and we want to see our projects delivered, we want to have them delivered in a timely manner. Our communities and the teachers and students who are going to those schools deserve better. Everybody needs to work harder. I thank all Senators

for raising this issue.

Education Policy

Senator Laura Harmon: I wish to ask what is being done to amend and improve assault leave for teachers and SNAs. With her consent, I will talk about the experience of a special education teacher, Sophie Cole. I had the privilege of meeting Sophie and her husband, Shane O'Brien, last November in their home in Carrigaline, County Cork. They are a young couple very much in love and starting out on their married life together. Their world was turned upside down and inside out when Sophie, a special education teacher with a clear passion, love and deep understanding of her profession and the children she teaches, was assaulted in the classroom in November 2022. Sophie's left hand was slammed into a steel reinforced table while at work. As a result, she has complex regional pain syndrome, one of the most painful conditions in the world. She has undergone many surgeries at great expense to try to get any relief she can from the debilitating and excruciating pain that she feels on a daily basis and the endless sleepless nights.

She has said that sometimes she has to look at her hand to make sure it is still there because it feels like the flesh is burning off it. She has had to become a full-time campaigner, when she can, for herself and many others who have experienced assault in the classroom. Three months after Sophie experienced this assault, her assault leave entitlement ended and she had to use up all of her sick leave. One day, without any warning, she received a letter through the door telling her she would receive no more pay. Sophie has lost her career and her wage and has incurred large medical bills. Her world has been turned upside down by this.

Her husband Shane sometimes has to take leave to take care of her. The couple has feared on many occasions that they would not be able to keep up their mortgage repayments on their home because of the financial pressure this has resulted in for them. Meanwhile, the State and Department of Education have completely let Sophie, and hundreds like her, down. The previous Minister ignored Sophie and I implore the new Minister to make time to listen and act. It feels like it is a case of, "Knock, knock, is anybody there? Knock, Knock, does anybody care?" when people like Sophie are trying to communicate how they are being affected by this.

We need to amend the circular relating to assault leave to ensure that financial assistance covers medical bills and therapy and to ensure that teachers and SNAs are covered for the duration of their medically certified leave so that there is information and adequate support available put in place for all teachers and SNAs. When will we properly value teachers and SNAs?

Sophie's social media page, Special Education Muinteoir, has hundreds of stories of people in similar situations, some with broken backs, damaged eyes, PTSD or facial paralysis, all because they were assaulted in the classroom. Many do not share their stories because they feel shame due to what has happened. I would argue that the shame is on the State for the lack of support. Our classrooms must be safe for teachers and children. We need multidisciplinary teams. As we know, there is a teacher shortage in this country because we are not looking after them properly in terms of their workplace conditions and pay. Unfortunately, we are exporting many of our teachers to places like Dubai.

The Labour Party was the only party to have this in our general election manifesto. A lot of people are not aware of the number of people who are suffering because of this. It is not

anything that any aspiring teacher setting out on their career thinks about. They do not think it is something that will happen to them. I commend Sophie on her campaign and look forward to the Minister of State's reply.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank Senator Harmon for raising this important matter of leave of absence following assault for teachers and SNAs.

Where a teacher or an SNA is injured as a result of physical contact from a third party causing physical injury in the course of their duties, and during approved school activities, they may apply for leave under the leave of absence following assault scheme. The provisions of this scheme are contained in the Department's Circular 0061/17 for teachers and Circular 0062/17 for SNAs. It provides for special leave with pay, subject to specified limits, for teachers or SNAs who are unable to perform their duties due to a physical injury following physical contact from a third party which happened in the course of their duties or during approved school activities.

The leave available under the scheme for leave of absence following assault is three months, or 92 days, at full pay in a rolling four-year period. In exceptional cases, such as where a significant period of hospitalisation is required or in situations of a second or subsequent incident of assault, the leave may be extended for a further period not exceeding three months, or 91 days, at full pay, subject to an overall limit of six months, or 183 days, at full pay in a rolling four-year period. A teacher or SNA who has exhausted the maximum period of paid leave under the scheme for leave of absence following assault and who is still medically unfit to resume duty may avail of sick leave under the sick leave scheme, subject to the normal rules of that scheme.

The Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform determines the terms and conditions of the leave schemes for public servants, which include teachers and SNAs. In this regard, the leave limits noted in the assault leave circular for teachers and SNAs were agreed with the education partners, consisting of the relevant unions, school management bodies and the Department, in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform. It is intended that the terms and conditions of the scheme will be reviewed in consultation with the education partners in 2025.

The employee assistance service, which is currently provided by Spectrum.Life, is also available as a supportive resource for teachers and SNAs following physical injury. The free-fone confidential helpline is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Supportive resources may include up to six sessions of short-term counselling. If the EAS recommends additional short-term counselling sessions with the teacher, the Department can facilitate this request.

It should be noted that, in accordance with section 14 of the Education Act 1998, it is the duty of the patron to appoint, where practicable, a board of management. The board of management is the body of persons, or the person, appointed by the patron to manage the school on his or her behalf, including issues surrounding health and safety. While the Department of Education has statutory functions in the setting of terms and conditions for teachers and SNAs, the Department of Education is not the direct employer.

Senator Laura Harmon: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. It is welcome that this scheme will be reviewed, as has been promised, in 2025. We await that. It is very important that the unions and the teachers themselves are consulted as part of this. I know this is on the radar of Fórsa, representatives of which I will meet in the next week, and of the INTO. As re-

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gards the case I outlined of Sophie Cole and those of many others, six months is certainly not enough. We need to review and extend that. We certainly need to look at how we communicate this to those working in our classrooms in order that they are aware of it and know what their entitlements are. There is a clear lack of awareness of rights in this regard.

We look forward to further engagement, and I really hope the Minister, Helen McEntee, will engage as well on this issue.

Deputy Niall Collins: There is an established and agreed process to amend all circulars. Once discussions have concluded with the education partners and the Department of public expenditure, we will amend the necessary circulars to reflect the required changes.

The Department of Education developed new guidelines and published them on 12 December 2024. They are entitled “Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations Guidelines for Schools in Supporting Students”. The Department established a working group to develop these guidelines for schools on the prevention and management of behaviours of concern where such behaviours pose imminent danger of serious physical harm to self or others in the school environment. The guidelines have been the subject of extensive consultation with education stakeholders and advocacy groups. They support schools to develop a whole-school, positive approach to behaviours, with particular emphasis on prevention, early intervention and de-escalation. The guidelines have been developed to take account of national and international legislative requirements, school governance structures and duty-of-care considerations directly related to supporting the well-being and safety of students and staff. The guidelines place a strong focus on prevention and on early intervention and de-escalation strategies for the management of crisis situations. Physical intervention may be employed only as the last part of a comprehensive, positive, planned behavioural approach by the school. It is intended the guidelines will be a live document and, as such, will be subject to review and updated from time to time.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.46 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.46 p.m. and resumed at 4.01 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Seán Kyne: The Order of Business is No.1, statements on community safety, to be taken at 5.15 p.m., with time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not exceeding ten minutes, group spokespersons not exceeding ten minutes and all Senators not exceeding five minutes. Time may be shared and the Minister is to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I support the Order of Business as outlined by the Leader of the House.

It seems unbelievable that it was three years yesterday that we woke up to the news that Russia had invaded Ukraine. Since then, we have had three years of a war of aggression by

Russia against Ukraine. There have been many fatalities with people displaced and Europe has been in a state of chaos. We have to think of all the Ukrainians, both those in Ukraine and those who have left. We must also think of those who have come to Ireland. I want to thank all the Irish hosts who have supported Ukrainian individuals and families, particularly Angie Goff for helping Irish hosts.

A total of 57% of those who have come to Ireland are staying with Irish hosts who have opened their homes and hearts to support people fleeing war. There is no doubt we need a strong and united Europe against the tyranny of Putin. It is important that we have the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade come in and have a debate regarding the situation in Ukraine.

I want to mention the just transition funding announced yesterday, which will allocate €6 million in funding to really important projects. That funding will go to Laois, Offaly, Longford, parts of Galway - I understand it is the Ballinasloe area - and parts of Kildare, the Clane, Maynooth and Athy areas. This is to try to rebalance employment opportunities that have gone because the extraction of peat has ceased. Some of the projects in Kildare are particularly good. We have four funded projects, one of which is the refurbishment of an old vacant secondary school that will be used to create economic opportunities and training.

I never understood why the area of the Kildare-Rathangan MD has been left out. Rathangan, if anybody knows it, is very much in the heart of the bog of Allen. As a village, it grew because of migrants from other parts of Ireland coming to settle there and work in the bogs. I understand EMRA is the regulatory authority in Ireland but it would be important to have a discussion around future funding and the geographical area. I would like a debate in this House with the Minister on this issue.

In the brief time I have left, I want to refer to eating disorders. An estimated 200,000 people in Ireland will experience an eating disorder at some time in their lives. There is a myth that eating disorders only affect young people and girls. However, approximately 25% are men and it is generally felt that men are not presenting. People need help. There are only three inpatient beds in the country. Twenty more were promised but have not been delivered. In budget 2024, funding was announced for five new posts within the HSE south-west Dublin, west Wicklow and Kildare area to commence an adult eating disorder team. We need clarification on that because it is very hard to get the information. I would like to see a debate in the House on eating disorders, which of course are not just about losing weight as there are psychiatric conditions and mental health elements involved.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: The time of year is looming when St. Patrick's Day approaches and officeholders of this House, the other House and Ministers of the Government visit all over the world, showcase all that is good about Ireland and, importantly, meet the diaspora in those countries. We have a debt to our Irish diaspora in the sense that they are our own kinship and they had to off and leave in difficult times. Apart from that, they are a great resource for Ireland abroad, they are great ambassadors for Ireland, they are very good at marketing Ireland abroad, they are very good lobbyists for Ireland abroad and they are very good at showcasing Ireland. They are actively promoting Ireland abroad. They maintain a loyalty to the home country and a patriotism. It is quite wonderful.

In light of that, I ask the Leader to arrange a debate on the role of the Irish diaspora internationally, how we can tap in more to the resource that they are, how we can be supportive of them and how we can have tighter links with them. It is incumbent on us to have this debate.

I ask the Leader to request the Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, Deputy Richmond, to come in for this debate. If we could have it before St. Patrick's Day, it would be much more apt, so people in this Chamber of all political parties and none could come forward and give their ideas of what should be said to the diaspora, what we should be asking from the diaspora and what we should be offering the diaspora.

I had occasion last year to meet the Cavan diaspora in New York and join them on their parade. I was accompanied on that occasion by newly elected Senator Sarah O'Reilly, among others. We all did it in our own time and of our own initiative. It was wonderful. They were delighted we were there to help to lead the parade. We immensely enjoyed meeting them and interacting with them. If Sarah were addressing this question on another occasion, I think she would testify to how impactful and valuable it was in terms of the tourism product and potential investment in this country, for example. It is an important link. The thing I have most enjoyed in my public life down the years have been the visits to our diaspora, whether it is in London, Luton or right through America. It is very special.

I ask the Leader to invite the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, who is a distinguished former Member of this House, to discuss this topic here. I think he will bring great energy to his new Department. If we could do it before St. Patrick's Day, it would make more sense.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I rise today to echo what my colleague, Senator Fiona O'Loughlin said, in calling on the Leader of the House to organise a debate on Ukraine as we mark three years since Russia's brutal and illegal invasion - three years of war, suffering and absolute displacement of the Ukrainian people, but also extraordinary resilience from the Ukrainian people. From the start - I will echo what Fiona said - Ireland has stood with Ukraine. Our Government has provided humanitarian aid and supported EU sanctions. We have welcomed more than 110,000 Ukrainian refugees to our shores. The generosity of the Irish people has been remarkable. However, we must ensure our support does not end there. I will never forget when this crisis became a reality for me. When I was at the Tiglin centre in Greystones for the parade on St. Patrick's Day in 2022, I received a phone call from the then CEO of the Red Cross, Liam O'Dwyer. He was ringing to ask if I could take in a family or two, three or four. By the end of St. Patrick's Day, the buses had arrived with 117 people, mothers and children who had fled from their country with only one bag. I remember one particular child. He was 13 years of age and had cerebral palsy. His father carried him from the taxi. His name was Rodion Kudryk. He is now part of our community in Greystones. With the kindness of the Irish people and the safety we have provided, he is now a pillar. He has a new electric wheelchair and is certainly part of our Greystones community. I was asked by the Ukrainian ambassador, H.E. Larysa Gerasko, to speak at the peace rally this past weekend and I saw once again the strength of the Ukrainian people both here and abroad. I realised that their fight is not over and that our responsibility to stand with them remains. That is why I urge the Leader of the House to organise a debate. We must affirm and reaffirm our unwavering commitment to Ukraine. We must assess Ireland's ongoing role and ensure that we are doing everything possible politically, economically and diplomatically to support their fight for freedom. The war continues and the need remains. Ireland must stand firm.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: The craft sector in Ireland is valuable not only to our economy but also, importantly, to our international reputation. Craft practitioners and makers all over Ireland provide an invaluable contribution to our culture. Many of them are based in rural enterprises, contributing to local rural economies. They need State support. They need support from the State body that was established to do just that. I question why Design and Crafts

Council Ireland would threaten legal action against its own members for putting forward constructive criticism in a feedback process sought by DCCI itself. This followed participation in an international craft exposition, Collect 2024. There is deep concern among practitioners. Many of them are based in my own county of Kilkenny but they are also all over Ireland. There is deep concern and deep fear as to the future of their sector. They have asked me to propose that we request that DCCI withdraw that legal action. The craftspeople are seeking an apology from DCCI and also ask that the Minister might intervene in some kind of mediation process. Practitioners raised valid and constructive concerns having participated in Collect 2024. This feedback process was sought by DCCI. That is the critical thing here. Not to take on board those concerns and not to help to improve future events DCCI might lead out on, particularly international trade fairs, would be to devalue the sector itself and the practitioners who rely on this for their living. I ask that the Minister, Deputy Burke, intervene to try to resolve this impasse. Perhaps he could also look at a review of DCCI in light of what has happened here. As I have said, there are significant concerns among practitioners and makers, many of whom have contributed a great deal to Ireland's economy and culture. DCCI should have an open and transparent process. If it seeks feedback on participation in an international craft fair and if valid concerns are raised as part of such a process, those concerns should be taken on board and used to provide lessons for the future. It should not be left hanging over the participants who took part.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome the former Captain of the Guard, John Flaherty, to the Gallery. He is most welcome. I am sure he is delighted to be on the other side of the glass and not to have to keep law and order for a change.

Senator Eileen Flynn: On 1 March 2017, Enda Kenny recognised the Traveller community as an ethnic minority group. Since then, we have seen pure tokenism for our community. We are not truly recognised in Ireland as an ethnic minority group. This brings me to the issue of the joint committee which focused on matters that impact the Traveller community, such as health, mental health, education, employment and accommodation. During the last term, the committee also focused on Travellers in the justice system. That committee, of which I was Chairperson, was dissolved in November 2024. We are looking to re-establish the Traveller committee in order that Travellers can have a meaningful voice within these Houses, especially when it comes to legislation and policies that impact our community. There was a missed opportunity for us to work with the Roma community while we were working on issues that impact Travellers. We would love to see the committee re-established. We worked very closely with local authorities and had great relationships with them and communities. I ask the Leader for as much support as possible from this House to re-establish the Traveller committee. One in every 11 deaths in our community is caused by suicide. Traveller women live 12 years less than women in the general population and Traveller men live 15 years less than men in the general population. We have many crises within our community, such as addiction, homelessness, health and mental health. I would really appreciate the Leader's support for the re-establishment of the Traveller committee. We worked to make it a long-standing committee to truly recognise Travellers as an ethnic minority group. The committee members fought for that at the time. We were just on the edge of getting it when the general election was called.

Senator Teresa Costello: St. Patrick's Day is fast approaching and, after six years, my community of Tallaght will see its parade return. My community is often portrayed in a negative manner. The absence of a St. Patrick's Day parade in the area for the six years since 2019 was very much evident in the hearts of all the people of Tallaght. South Dublin County Council

recognised the need to have a parade and, in conjunction with local groups, organisations and sports clubs, it is due to make a return this year. I have many fond memories of taking part in the parade with my local GAA club as a child. It is a vital day to bring our community together and to showcase and uplift it. I call on the Minister to release funds centrally to support such vital community initiatives. All too often, we focus on the negative. When we can bring a community together and showcase what is wonderful about it, that should be supported.

Senator Mark Duffy: Through the six years in my role as a county councillor prior to being elected to the Seanad, County Mayo was plagued with the challenge of the housing crisis, which impacted right across the county. In council buildings I sat next to people in desperate domestic situations who were looking for a new lease of life and to get on the housing ladder.

At a county development plan level, we are told it is down to our local area plan. I sat on the Northern and Western Regional Assembly and we were told in respect of regional spatial strategies that it goes back to the local area plan. When we had the opportunity to create the Ballina local area plan, similar to Castlebar and Westport, we made multiple submissions to have land zoned in order to unlock the housing crisis in each and every one of these towns. Every recommendation and measure we suggested to improve and unlock the housing challenge in each of these towns was rejected by the Office of the Planning Regulator and the Minister. A local area plan for Ballina was signed off on last week but all of the recommendations of the local councillors were rejected. This means Ballina has been set back by approximately 400 to 500 houses. We need to return power and decision-making to councillors, who, being on the ground and in the community, know best. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly identified that Mayo was delivering on 30% of its housing target, based on land zoned, so we need to increase drastically the amount of land zoned, by three times at least, just to ensure we keep up with demand. I have tried to raise a Commencement matter on this and would like to have the opportunity next week to discuss it with the Minister for housing. There is a crisis throughout the country. I have outlined the challenge faced on the ground. If we do not address it, it will create huge problems across society. I ask that the Minister for housing come here to address this. If there were a cooling-off period for him to reconsider the sign-offs, I would welcome it. If a judicial review is what it takes, that should be carried out to ensure we get people living in houses and address the problem and challenge of the housing crisis in Mayo.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: There has been a newfound interest in defence in this country. This weekend, there was not one publication that did not have an opinion piece of some sort expressing a view on where defence should be at. They were written by various people. It is a matter of serious concern to me that people in this House and the Lower House find themselves speaking on such things as the triple lock and neutrality without the basic information they need to do so. My colleague Senator Clonan, who is here right now, speaks with informed knowledge of these things, but there are too many Members of this House who speak with uninformed knowledge of what the triple lock is about, what neutrality is about and what is required under international law when we talk about neutrality. We hear terms like “politically neutral” and “militarily neutral”. There is only one form of neutrality, and that is the one that comes under the Hague Convention. Members do not need a lecture from me, nor I am sure from my colleague Senator Clonan. Rather, what is needed are independent people to brief Members of the Oireachtas so that when we make public statements, they will have currency and be based on fact, not opinion. We need to be extremely careful as geopolitical plates are moving in this world. Statements made by politicians are being heard outside the country and we need to be sure that, when our politicians speak, they speak on the basis of knowledge and

fact, not on the basis of what they feel or do not feel. Senator Clonan and I differ on the triple lock, which is perfectly reasonable, and I differ from other retired members of the Defence Forces on it while others see it from my point of view, but we can have an informed argument on it. Ultimately, we had a situation in Kabul where we needed to remove people, and the triple lock could have cost us seriously. I ask the Leader to organise the debate.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I raise the issue of broadband access following Storm Éowyn. As Members will be aware, tens of thousands were without broadband for weeks following the storm. Indeed, ComReg said at the end of last week that 3,500 remained without access, a month after the storm. Speaking of my county, the impact was particularly felt in Connemara and across north Galway, where thousands remained without access for weeks. The impact this has cannot be overstated. Businesses were unable to take payments. Remote workers were unable to carry out their work at home and had to return to their offices, which for many involved lengthy journeys every day.

The priority right now needs to be addressing with as much speed as possible the needs of the final 3,500 without broadband access, but following that we need to proceed quickly to having a discussion on how to strengthen our infrastructure to ensure this issue does not arise again after another major storm, be it next year, in two years or later. Given the ways in which we now rely on broadband, it is simply unacceptable for thousands of businesses and tens of thousands of homes to be three weeks or more than a month without broadband access. It does considerable damage to our economy and we must take safeguarding measures to prevent this from arising again. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House raised the matter with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and requested him to join us for a debate as soon as possible.

Senator Manus Boyle: I ask the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW to come to the House. I would like to get an update in respect of the flooding that took place at Bridge Street, Killybegs, on 23 November. It was one of the worst floods to ever take place in County Donegal. At this time, residents are getting no answers from the relevant Departments. They are afraid to go to sleep in bed at night if there is heavy rain in case it will be the same as 23 November, when they were woken up by fire brigade sirens and people knocking at their doors trying to get them out. All the people want to know is what is happening with the river. Will tree cutting go ahead before 31 March? We need to get answers on that. Looking forward, people are now afraid to go to bed at night if a heavy rain is forecast. The sandbags are still at their front doors. I would like the Minister of State to come to the House to give us an up-to-date plan of what he intends to do, and outline how we can keep these people updated on what is happening.

Senator Pat Casey: Senator Duffy touched on the issue I will raise. The headline of an article in yesterday's *Irish Independent*, written by Fionnán Sheahan, stated that targeted zoning of land by councillors for large-scale housing will be overruled. According to the article, a Government source stated that "Local councillors and TDs can often be to the forefront in objecting to the building of houses or rezoning of land as they side with "Nimby" objectors." It gets worse. The article continues:

"You can't be limited by what a local authority wants to do on zoning. Councillors are a law unto themselves. Local authorities will have to be directed on where to zone land," a government source said.

A Government source who understood anything about how a county development plan is

adopted would not make that statement. It is national policy and national legislation that prevents our councillors from zoning land and controlling the zoning of land. It was the NPF that decided what the national population growth was. It was the regional assemblies that then dictated where that population growth went into our counties. It was national policy that decided the headroom in relation to zoning of land. The quantum of land zoned in a county development plan has nothing to do with councillors but has everything to do with national policy. It is disrespectful if a Government source is now trying to blame councillors and county councils for not having the prerequisite zoned land in place. In every one of the counties I visited in respect of the previous plans, every one of the councillors made proposals for the zoning of land. It was national policy and the Office of the Planning Regulator that prevented all those lands being zoned. It was because of national policy. To come now and try to blame councillors and county council officials for not being proactive in land zoning is completely disrespectful.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: As we look out the windows of the Chamber this afternoon we will see, dare I say it, signs of spring or a good summer ahead. Unfortunately, the issue I will raise is the flooding events in west Cork during the past weekend. It was yet another flooding event for many of the rural communities I represent, including Rossmore, Ardcahan, which is near Dunmanway, and Halfway. Ballinascarty, which is close to Clonakilty, was probably the worst-hit area. We saw both residential and commercial properties flooded yet again. In addition to many private properties suffering damage, public infrastructure and roads were damaged, predominantly due to rivers bursting their banks. I commend my local councillor, Councillor John Michael Foley, on raising the matter at Cork County Council yesterday. I have invited Kevin Boxer Moran to visit west Cork to see the damage for himself.

We have a crisis in our rivers and streams in this country. To put it simply, they are full and choked up with gravel, silt and a build-up of debris from years of no proper maintenance. There is no doubt that we have a climate change issue in this country and globally. We see change in the increased levels of rainfall, but we have also seen change in recent years in that we no longer maintain and clear our rivers as we used to. I love nature. I love west Cork and our unique and special landscape. We have a biodiversity crisis. I am on the side of protecting our streams and rivers, but not at the cost of our people or property. We need to find balance.

I might sound alarmist, but Cork County Council had to visit Ballinascarty and Dunmanway last weekend to assist people who were caught up in the flooding. We need to find solutions. Landowners are afraid to clear and maintain rivers because of their fear that Inland Fisheries Ireland and local authorities will get involved. We need to bring about a commonsense solution. We, as a State, need to step in. We need to bring Inland Fisheries Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Department of the environment to the table to find a solution. That is why I am asking the Leader, similar to what was asked by Senator Boyle, to invite the Minister with responsibility for the Office of Public Works to attend the Chamber for an informed debate about the proper maintenance of our rivers to ensure a commonsense plan. As one local in Ballinascarty put it, we want to keep the river in the river.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I move to the next speaker, I welcome to the Gallery former Senator, Deputy Marie Sherlock. I thank her for coming back to visit us. I know she is missing us terribly, as we are missing her. I call Senator Flaherty.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I echo the sentiments of several of my colleagues by requesting

the presence of the Minister for housing as a matter of urgency. Housing was the stand-out issue during the term of the previous Government and will be again in the lifetime of the current Government. There are obviously outstanding issues. It was heartening this morning to hear positive numbers for the Croí Cónaithe scheme, which is gathering momentum. Donegal is the county with the highest take-up of the scheme. At a parliamentary party meeting, the current Taoiseach tried to lay claim to the project. He said he had a Eureka moment when he was walking around west Cork. I had to remind him that every rural councillor came up with the same idea over the past generation. Either way, we have a good scheme, although we need to review it. Auctioneers will tell you that the starting point for a valuation for any derelict or old property in rural Ireland is €70,000 before they even look at it. That is fuelled by the scheme. Equally, construction costs have soared. There is momentum building behind the scheme and there is considerable interest in it because it is one of the quickest, most secure, easiest and most cost beneficial ways to get a new home or a starter home in Ireland at the moment. It is great for rural communities because it brings life back to them. However, we urgently need to review the scheme. If we are going to review it, we must send out a clear message to let people know that a review is coming, that it will be timely and we will make a quick decision in that regard. On that point and in respect of other housing issues, I want the Minister for housing to come to the Chamber as soon as possible.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I raise an issue in my home town of Enniscorthy, namely, the need for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, to fund a town bus service. At the moment, there are four seven-day-a-week services that are funded by Transport for Ireland. They crisscross the town, servicing various different routes. Unfortunately, this means there is no designated service in the town at the moment. While great work for Enniscorthy has been done by Ms Mary B. O’Leary, the general manager of the Transport for Ireland Local Link service, the reality is that approximately 13,000 people are now residing in the town. We have a target, through the Enniscorthy decarbonisation zone, of a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030. While great work is under way to ensure a viable transport service, without funding from TII and the Minister for Transport, the concept and idea cannot be implemented. I call on the Minister for Transport and TII to accept the findings of the survey that is being done at the moment in collaboration with UCD and Trinity College Dublin and fund this service so that the people residing in Enniscorthy can have their own designated town bus service.

Senator Sarah O’Reilly: We are now five weeks from Storm Éowyn and while ESB crews worked tirelessly to restore power, broadband services remain in total disarray. Many people across Cavan and Monaghan are still without a connection for broadband, landlines and network coverage. People are completely stranded, especially those working from home and those whose livelihood depends on connectivity. I will take the example of a family in my constituency who recently brought home their newborn baby. What should be a time of celebration is consumed with anxiety and stress, as they have to drive 10 km to an out farm because they cannot access their calving camera. It might sound like a small thing to us, but it is extremely frustrating for them. They are not alone. Many rural areas already suffer from poor mobile phone networks, making landlines and broadband essential, yet broadband providers are nowhere to be found. There is no customer service, no accountability and no urgency to restore services.

People are looking to the Government for help. They feel ignored and badly let down. I invite the Minister to drive around Cavan and Monaghan and see for himself the appalling state of communications infrastructure there - Eir lines holding up falling trees, cables drooping dangerously low and dangling along ditches, and thousands of poles like little leaning towers of

Pisa. The damage is so obvious, with no sign of a provider service crew. How is this acceptable? Broadband providers seem to be answerable to nobody.

If this were Dublin, it would be sorted in days. Why is rural Ireland being left behind again and again? I call on the Minister for communications, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon, to hold broadband providers to account. There should be no more excuses, no more evading answers and no more delays. People have already waited five weeks.

Senator Alison Comyn: I would like to request from the Leader a debate on, and an exploration from the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, of, a second railway station for Drogheda, County Louth. Drogheda is Ireland's largest town and is currently being serviced by one train station on the south side of the town which is under severe pressure as it stands. There is not enough parking to service the commuters. If you are not there by 6.45 a.m., there is not a hope of any parking.

The idea of a north-side train station was in a local area plan originally and then was dropped from the local area plan. I would like to see it put back in and see the possibility. Almost 7,500 new houses are being built on the north side of the town. I would like to see a new north-side railway station on the site of the third part of the northern access route, the port access northern cross route or, as it is more commonly known, the PANCR road. It would be ideally located there. The second phase is just beginning. It is almost shovel ready. The third stage would then be the ideal point to put in a tunnel to be able to access a train station.

What is happening at the moment is that all the commuter traffic is going through the town and blocking the town, because there is a toll leading in and out of Drogheda and people are obviously using the town centre to avoid that toll. It makes absolute common sense to put a northern rail station there which could act as an entire transport hub for that part of the county. I could envisage traffic coming from Slane, Castlebellingham, Dunleer and from all that part of the county to park and ride there and get the train across to the other side, making sure the commuters leaving Drogheda are there at the best possible time. We are told it is coming down the track - pardon the pun - that we will be in the fairer fares scheme. That has been long delayed. It is about time Drogheda was seen as a proper commuter hub for the north east.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I formally request the presence of the Minister for arts, media and communication, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, before this Chamber to address a number of profoundly concerning developments that have transpired within his Department. I am not referring in this instance to the inherited €7 million IT controversy or the oversized scanner.

The first matter pertains to the recent disclosure, only last week, that An Garda Síochána has been authorised to survey the private communications of the Irish publication *Gript*. This authorisation was granted by a District Court judge utilising a legal mechanism designed primarily for the investigation of drug trafficking, money laundering and the financing of terrorist organisations. The Minister must clarify whether his Department views this as an inappropriate application of this legal instrument. Following the revelation, the publication sought clarification from An Garda Síochána regarding whether this instrument has been employed to investigate other publications, a query to which the Garda did not provide a response. Should the Garda decline to answer, I urge the Minister to come before us and provide that information.

The second issue involves the Abbey Theatre's refusal to host a play that addresses the expe-

riences of the victims and survivors of the 7 October massacre in Israel, which debuted in New York last year. After several weeks of being denied the opportunity to privately rent the theatre space on the grounds of prior bookings, the playwrights, Phelim McAleer and Ann McElhinney, were subsequently informed that their work was deemed incompatible with the remit of the theatre's programming aims and ambitions. Meanwhile, the director of the theatre, Mr. Mark O'Brien, publicly shared his meeting with a Palestinian theatre group on social media. Considering the Abbey Theatre receives up to 80% of its funding from the Government, how does the Minister plan to guarantee that such venues remain true spaces for free expressions and artistic creativity? I ask this House to reflect on the fact that the Abbey Theatre was once a venue that braved through the street riots during the premiere of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, which is now a celebrated part of our national artistic heritage. What future awaits our art scene if this is the current state of affairs?

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I rise today to speak to the subject of special needs and disability, not from the usual angle but from the angle of the families of these people. Through my current work and also through a previous life, I have assisted families with assessments of need applications, therapy applications, etc. I always found it difficult to deal with the families because many of them are hurt and let down. While I thought that might just be me being a sensitive soul - although many Senators might not think I am, I am - over the weekend, I spoke to a few councillors who are also helping families that are trying to move on with their lives with members who have a disability. I feel compelled to bring this issue up today to try to get the Minister in and to start a debate on this matter. I feel very helpless.

We can do things for the person with the disability - we can move them, try to get them up the queue, or try to get some monetary supports for them - but what about the families? For example, I spoke to one mother who has a six-month-old baby with special needs. She described it as like planning to go to France on holidays but the plane lands in Spain and you have a new life to plan. Everything just happens together. These families have a lot going on. It is also hard on siblings who have someone with additional needs in the family. It is called additional needs for a reason. There is a lot going on. I ask for some discussion on this matter for these families, please.

Senator Tom Clonan: I wish to raise the issue of the triple lock. It has been reported widely that the Government is considering removing the triple lock and will introduce legislation to do so in the coming weeks. I have some serious questions for everyone in this House in this regard. I am trying to be as constructive as I can. The triple lock consists of a UN Security Council resolution, or UN Assembly approval, as well as Dáil and Oireachtas approval. Those are the three layers. If the UN dimension is removed, it does not revert to a double lock, but rather just one. A simple Dáil majority could send Irish men and women to a conflict zone. I am worried about that because we need to know what other mechanisms will be in place. At the moment, we can only send 12 troops overseas without the mandate of the triple lock. For example, we have sent troops to Afghanistan from 2002 onwards. Irish troops served in Afghanistan with NATO in that peace enforcement mission. I am not even sure many Irish people are aware that Irish troops, under the Irish flag, served in Afghanistan for quite a lengthy period of time. Why not just raise that number, which is within the gift of the Government, from 12, which is effectively section strength, to, let us say, 120, which is company strength? That could deal with the emergencies that arise, like repatriating citizens from an airport or carrying out humanitarian or emergency response work, and we could leave the triple lock in place. It would remove the difficulty the UN Security Council mandate poses. If we are just going

to go to a simple majority, will it be a free vote? It should be a free vote? Nobody in here should be whipped into sending Irish troops abroad and into harm's way. It should be a free conscience vote. If we are sending troops overseas, there has to be some sort of veto or safety valve. Should the Council of State be convened to review a Government decision? I trust the Government but it does not always get things right and we need to be really careful about that. Let us not have our troops sent abroad by simple Government majority in the same way it has guillotined legislation through this House without reference to any argument. We need to be very careful about our military non-alignment and neutral status. Despite what has been said in the media over and over again, our international partners have no problem with our military non-alignment. They respect it. It is a national competency. It is being framed at the moment in the context of the Trump Presidency and the war in Ukraine as something we should get rid of or be ashamed of. That is not the case, so let us not use the triple lock as a stepping stone - a manufacture of consent - to dilute, erode or remove our neutrality.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: There is much debate and commentary about the lack of prison spaces in our country. There is no doubt that there is urgent need for prison places and we should get on with it as a matter of urgency because it is so badly needed. With the best will in the world, it will take years to have a new prison or two new prisons as the case may be. With that in mind, it is a very opportune time for us to have a debate on and conversation about community service, how we can expand community service and what we can learn from other jurisdictions about how they handle community service because there is no doubt that it has a role to play. In light of the current revolving door situation in our prisons, it is an apt subject. I ask the Leader to request that the Minister for Justice come to the House so we can have a debate on it. It costs in the region of €85,000 per annum to keep someone incarcerated in our prisons for 12 months. This is a serious amount of money. There are loads of things at which we can look across community service, such as litter picking, taking graffiti off a wall or tidying up our towns. Surely there is a role that could be played with regard to our forests in the wake of the recent storm we had. These are just a number of areas we should be exploring. We also need to explore who supervises these workers when they are out there. I would be grateful if we could organise a debate on the expansion of community service as soon as possible.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I want to raise an issue that occurred in the past 24 hours. We heard how a former Member of this House, Lynn Boylan, who is now an MEP, was refused entry and deported when attempting to visit Israel as a part of an official EU delegation in an official capacity on an Irish diplomatic passport. Two Members of the European Parliament and their officials were denied entry to Israel and denied the right to perform their roles in terms of international observation and international diplomacy.

This points to a time when we are still seeing extraordinary breaches of human rights. These include 162 healthcare workers for whose release the UN has been calling, reports of mistreatment and torture, six children frozen overnight because shelter was not allowed to enter the Gaza Strip, a new massive expansion of settlements and the tanks that rolled through the West Bank very recently. These are all important. It is important that we look at them. The Taoiseach spoke yesterday about the international rules-based order and how important it is, but the international rules-based order and international law are important in the principle that they are applied everywhere and for everyone. Ireland has the opportunity to be the champions on international law and the international rules-based order by showing that we take breaches of those rules and laws very seriously and take actions such as the appropriate basic action of passing the full occupied territories Bill. That is just one piece.

Giving leadership in these ways is how Ireland shows courage. There is nothing in the triple lock that stops Ireland from providing leadership on international law and its implementation. There is nothing that stops us showing leadership when it comes to the areas I have spoken about on previous occasions, such as data and online regulation. We have seen the attempts to disrupt the German elections, for example. There is a reason people are giving out about regulation. It is because regulation has an impact. Finally-----

An Cathaoirleach: You are-----

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I will come to my conclusion.

An Cathaoirleach: I know, but you are over time.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: As I come to it-----

An Cathaoirleach: I want to point out that I have given a lot of latitude, but there is a clock for a reason.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Okay.

An Cathaoirleach: If you want to-----

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I will conclude.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator, I am making a general point. If you want your three minutes, come in for the start. If your speech is going to take over three minutes, you might want to bring it up as a Commencement matter.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: That is fine. I join with what Senator Clonan said. We need policies that are clear and we do not need to dismantle our triple lock if Ireland is going to show leadership. That we are doing it because other countries were embarrassed sends a sign we need a triple lock and we cannot trust our Government to say “No” when it needs to say “No” and to say “Yes” in terms of the implementation of international law when it needs to say “Yes”.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank all Senators for their contributions today. Senators O’Loughlin and McCarthy spoke about the Ukraine war. We will have a minute’s silence tomorrow after the Order of Business to mark the third anniversary of the war. I urge Members to be in attendance. I will bring forward the larger point on a debate with the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and for Defence on what is an important issue.

The €6 million in funding for the just transition was mentioned. I believe Kildare did quite well out of that funding, with some €1.9 million in total. The aim of that funding is to rebalance employment opportunities.

A debate on eating disorders was also sought, and I will ask for that in the future. It is possibly linked to mental health issues and is a real issue for many people who are suffering.

Senator Joe O’Reilly spoke about the importance of the St. Patrick’s Day visits to showcase all that is positive. He asked that the Minister of State, Neale Richmond, who has responsibility for the diaspora and international development, comes to the House. I will try to arrange that debate. It is an important issue in the run-up to St. Patrick’s Day.

Senator Malcolm Noonan spoke about craft practitioners. I am not fully aware of the issue

at stake. Perhaps he could request a Commencement debate on the topic. I will raise the issue with the Minister, Peter Burke.

Senator Eileen Flynn spoke about the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority. Legislation to that effect was passed by the Houses in 2017. She called for the continuation of the special committee on Travellers and Travellers' rights. I will raise the matter with the Tánaiste and leader of our party. I am not sure when the committees will be established. There have been a number of calls relating to disability, drugs and Traveller rights. I will ask for the Senator's request to be included. I commend her work on the issue, as well as that of former Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, who did a lot of work as Vice Chair of the committee, and all of the members who participated.

Senator Costello spoke about the Tallaght parade returning, and I wish all involved well in their endeavours on St. Patrick's Day. It is important the work of volunteers, sports clubs, local authorities and everyone involved in the St. Patrick's Day parade in the community is acknowledged. I hope the sun shines, there is a good crowd and people appreciate their local community, whether it be in Tallaght or elsewhere.

Senator Mark Duffy spoke about the challenges of the housing crisis in Mayo. That is replicated across the country. He made very important points about the county development plans, local area plans, the Office of the Planning Regulator, the Minister and zoning decisions being overruled. As I understand, the Senator has put down a Commencement matter. I urge him to continue to put down that Commencement matter - maybe the Cathaoirleach's office might look favourably on it - and to raise the matter directly with the Minister. It is a specific issue as regards the Ballina town plan but it is replicated in other areas. I have come across it in Galway and other areas. The Office of the Planning Regulator was set up for a specific reason in the context of previous planning tribunals, but I know the question has been raised on numerous occasions as to whether it is in tune with what is needed in terms of our local area plans and the zoning of land.

Senator Craughwell talked about experts on defence, and he has pedigree as one, as do Senator Clonan and others. Senator Craughwell talked about the triple lock and neutrality, as did Senators Clonan and Higgins. The Minister and the Government are examining options and proposals. Some would say time and world events have overtaken the triple lock; I know Senator Craughwell would disagree respectfully. I will ask the Minister to come in at the earliest opportunity to discuss these things. I am not sure exactly when a Bill would be brought to Cabinet on this but I will certainly ask the Minister. The Senator suggested increasing the minimum number that could be deployed as an alternative or as a possibility. I will certainly raise that.

Senators Ollie Crowe and Sarah O'Reilly talked about broadband access. This is a hot topic across the country. In Galway County Council yesterday, the issue that arose among councillors was broadband access following Storm Éowyn. We will have an opportunity tomorrow to discuss the fallout of Storm Éowyn and to look to the future. The Minister, James Browne, as I understand, will be in tomorrow. I understand that responsibility for communications will transfer from one Department to the Department of the Minister, Patrick O'Donovan, in the near future. I will ask for a debate with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, on this matter. I know he recently met with Eir and broadband operators to discuss the issues and their plans for the future. It is certainly a very important issue.

Senators Manus Boyle and Noel O'Donovan raised issues of flooding. Flooding can be so

traumatic for communities. They feel helpless. The power of water, whether it be in a town or elsewhere, coming down at them is very difficult and traumatic. On the specific issues, if the Senators want to put down a Commencement matter on specific updates on their local towns, whether it be Killybegs or Ballinascarty, they could do that. We will request an overall debate with the Minister of State, Kevin Boxer Moran, as well regarding flooding and Government responses to it.

Senator Pat Casey spoke about a newspaper article written by Fionnán Sheahan in which “a government source” is reported. I am not sure who the Government source is. The Senator would have to ask the author who that Government source was. I do not believe it was any senior Minister who said that. National policy, as Senator Duffy talked about, as well as the figures and the OPR, determines the levels and amount of land that can be zoned. In the past, there were concerns of overzoning of land. That was changed and tightened up by previous governments. The Office of the Planning Regulator has a role now, together with the national planning framework, which determines the total number of homes that are allowed within different parts of the country. That is broken down then to the local area plans. There may be a case for reviewing that and certainly for upping the figures, and I know the Tánaiste has mentioned that, but I cannot comment as to who or at what level that Government source was. Senator Casey would have to ask the author of the article.

5 o'clock

Senator Flaherty requested that the Minister for housing come to the House to discuss positive numbers in regard to the Croí Cónaithe scheme. He called for a debate on housing as soon as possible in order that the Minister, Deputy Browne, can give an update on his priorities as a new Minister, taking on board, of course, the programme for Government.

Senator Cathal Byrne raised a specific issue regarding bus services in Enniscorthy and called for a designated town service. Fianna Fáil will put forward a motion on transport during Private Members' business tomorrow, which might provide an opportunity for the Senator to raise that matter with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. If not, the Senator can put it forward as a Commencement matter.

Senator Comyn spoke about a second railway station for Drogheda. Again, she might make that case tomorrow during the Private Members' business motion put forward by her party. If not, she might consider raising it on the Commencement debate. Drogheda is one of Ireland's largest towns and many people have advocated for it to have city status. I am sure the Senator will continue that fight, as well as for its inclusion under the fairer fares scheme, in the House.

Senator Keogan requested that the Minister for the arts come to the House. I will draw his attention to the two issues she raised, of which I was not aware. It is important we have free speech and that a publicly funded space is available for all sides. That is a fair assessment of the issues. I certainly will draw the Minister's attention to them.

Senator Murphy O'Mahony requested a debate on disability issues. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, to come to the House. A number of Senators have asked in recent weeks for a debate on the challenges for families and the pressures they are under. People come to our offices on behalf of their loved ones, whether small children or adult children, because they are worried about their future. Those children could be in their 50s or 60s. It is a real issue. I will request that the Minister of State come in to speak on issues such as therapies and

assessment of needs.

Senator Gallagher talked about the lack of prison spaces and the expansion of the community service programme. He might raise this as a Commencement matter or he can put it to the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, who will be in the Chamber shortly to discuss related matters.

Senator Higgins spoke about former Senator Lynn Boylan being deported from Israel. On the front of every Irish passport is a message from the Minister for Foreign Affairs asking that the bearer of the passport be afforded the right to travel, etc. Israel is a sovereign country that shall determine its own immigration policies. At the same time, Lynn Boylan is an elected representative of this country and an Irish citizen. I certainly hope this will not be a new standard from Israel in respect of allowing people into the country.

Order of Business agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 5.03 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.17 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.03 p.m and resumed at 5.17 p.m.

Community Safety: Statements

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Jim O’Callaghan, to the House to discuss the all-important issue of community safety. He has ten minutes to make his opening statement.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan): It is a great honour to be before Seanad Éireann for the second time. I was here last week talking about a youth mobility scheme the EU is implementing with the UK and our intention to opt into it. I am back today to talk on an issue that probably is of more central importance to my function as Minister for Justice, that is, the whole area of crime, policing and community safety. I repeat what I said at the outset last week, namely, that I take very seriously my duty of being accountable to the Houses of the Oireachtas. It is a great privilege to be Minister for justice, home affairs and migration. There are many talented people in Dáil Éireann and in this House who would do this job excellently and would love the opportunity to do it. I am fully aware it is a great privilege to have the job. I want Senators to know I will work tirelessly at it. I also want them to know that, clearly, I do not have any monopoly of wisdom in respect of the issues. I have great respect for people elected to the Houses of the Oireachtas. I will listen to what Members of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann say about how I should proceed and what steps can be taken to improve community policing and community safety.

One of the priorities of the Government, and one of mine as Minister for Justice, is to try to ensure people are living in communities that are safe and enjoyable. It is important to be clear that we will never get rid of criminal activity. There will always be some level of crime in society. What infuriates people is that when crime inevitably happens, they want to see a system in place to respond to it. The primary way by which that is done is through having An Garda Síochána investigate when complaints of criminal activity are made. If those complaints are upheld and valid, we then need to ensure we have a criminal justice system that can adjudicate on whether the crimes deserve the imposition of punishment. If there is an imposition of pun-

ishment, we need to look at other aspects other than sentencing terms of incarceration. An issue I am anxious to bring forward is the development of community sanctions. Our prisons are places that should be reserved for people who are violent and who are a threat to others within the community. We need to look at more innovative methods of trying to impose penalties on people who are not violent and who find themselves before the criminal justice system because of personal issues such as addiction or other issues.

A huge amount of my focus will be on An Garda Síochána. Nothing I want to do or the Government wants to achieve can be achieved without the support and success of An Garda Síochána. When a crime is committed, the first port of call a victim has is to contact An Garda Síochána. Unless the force is properly resourced and given adequate powers which are clear and definable, we are not providing an appropriate system for people to ensure they feel a sense of safety.

At present in An Garda Síochána we have 14,100 members. It is not enough for a country of our size. We also have, however, about 3,500 civilian staff within An Garda Síochána. The objective of civilianisation was to try to get people who are not gardaí doing the jobs we do not want gardaí to do. Our primary focus and my primary focus when it comes to An Garda Síochána is to try to create the climate which allows gardaí to be more visible in our community. As I have said before, we are lucky in this country in that the vast majority of people are supportive of the police force in this country. They want to see gardaí on their streets. In some other parts of the world that does not exist. I am sure most Senators here will be aware from going to meetings in their local community that one of the things repeated most is that people want to see more members of An Garda Síochána on the street. That is something positive. It shows that there is general confidence in the Garda. It is also something that imposes an obligation on someone like me and on the Government to ensure we get membership numbers up in An Garda Síochána and that we do not have members of the force doing things such as bureaucratic office jobs. We do not want to do that.

At present we have a recruitment drive in the force. It is part of my job, as Minister for Justice, to try to encourage people to join the police force. Sometimes being a member of An Garda Síochána is a bit like politics. There is a lot of negative coverage about the fact that being a garda is a tough job. There is a lot of reference to the abuse and criticism gardaí get on social media. I am sure that is correct in the same way it is correct for Members of this House and Dáil Éireann as well. I do not think we can allow that narrative to be the dominant message when it comes to being a member of An Garda Síochána. It is a fulfilling and rewarding job. It is an interesting job that requires people to do diverse actions every day. My job is to ensure people are aware that it is a much more multifaceted and fulfilling job than is presented. The tagline for the recruitment campaign is that it is a job worth doing. I am very clear that it is.

In terms of the different type of criminal activity in the country, I am aware that it is going to be impossible to get rid of all criminal activity. Nobody expects a politician or government to do that. It is important to distinguish certain types of criminal activity. The type of criminal activity that has a significant impact on an individual is when violence is inflicted on them. Anyone in this House will be aware, from speaking to constituents and from talking to councillors, that it has a very debilitating and negative impact on the victim if they have been subjected to acts of violence or, indeed, acts of sexual violence against them because of their gender. That is something we need to adopt a strenuous approach towards. People need to know that if that happens to them, there will be swift response by the State to their complaint and there will be an appropriate progression of a case from investigation by the Garda, to the courts, and to a

sanction if the person is convicted. That is one of the major focuses I will have in respect of violence against the individual.

I commend my predecessor as Minister, Deputy Helen McEntee, who did an excellent amount of work in respect of gender based violence. In fact, tomorrow morning I will be at a reception for a further launch by Cuan, which is the statutory body to combat domestic and gender-based violence. It is extraordinary to think people say more men are victims of violence than women. The distinguishing thing about violence against women is that it is predominantly committed within a relationship. The fact there is a relationship there and the attacker of the person is somebody known to them is something that should send warning signals to us. It is also something that should make it easier, if I can use that term, to try to combat it. We know the environment within which women, predominantly, are going to be exposed to gender-based violence. We need to ensure there are mechanisms in place to deal with that.

I am conscious that Senator O'Loughlin is here. She played a significant role during the previous term of the Seanad in respect of issues such as putting together a register for domestic violence. That is something I am working on and would like to see brought forward. I also have the Guardianship of Infants Act issue, which can arise when one partner commits a crime of violence, whether murder or manslaughter, against another partner, and a situation develops where they retain guardianship of any surviving children. That is an issue that needs to be looked at. I have asked my Department officials to have a look at and I will be bringing forward legislation in respect of that shortly.

I am conscious that the whole area of my brief includes issues of national security. I know that is not the focus of the debate in this House today, but it is relevant because An Garda Síochána is responsible for national security in this country. The responsibility for that rests with it and it has to be resourced in respect of that. That is another branch in respect of community policing. Many of the Senators were Members of the previous Oireachtas and so will be aware that the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act was enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas in 2024. It has not yet been commenced, meaning I have to sign a statutory instrument stating the Act is now in place. It is important that is done in the very near future. I am aiming to do it in March. The reason for such urgency is that it is complementary series of statutory provisions in respect of policing and An Garda Síochána. Members will be aware the term of office of the current Commissioner comes to an end in the summer. We need to ensure the new statutory regime for the appointment of a new Commissioner is in place so it can happen without delay and so all the statutory provisions are given effect to.

I thank everyone for listening to me and I am here to listen to the Senators.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I will be sharing my time with Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I welcome the Minister to the House. He is absolutely the right person at the right time. There is no doubt there is a huge weight of responsibility on his shoulders. We need to get this right and I have no doubt he will. I appreciate the fact he mentioned Jennie's law in his introduction. I worked closely with Jason Poole, whom the Minister met several times himself, in establishing a domestic violence register Bill. We hope to see that come to fruition under the Minister's leadership during this mandate.

This is an important topic and I am pleased to lead off on it for Fianna Fáil on this side of

the House. We know everyone wants to live, and has the right to live, in a safe and secure community and home. Unfortunately, throughout the country we see communities dealing with the scourge of crime and antisocial behaviour. I know the Minister is committed to expanding, developing and strengthening the role of An Garda Síochána. The tagline he mentioned is important. It is a job worth doing. I thank all of those who help keep us safe on the streets of our towns, cities and communities. Aside from what gardaí do, the Judiciary is another really important part of this process, so it is important we get that legislation around sentencing right. I wish to make an appeal for Kildare on the appointment of judges. In Kildare, we currently have only one judge who deals with thousands of cases every single week. Unfortunately, in many cases where there is a level of urgency, particularly around family law, those cases keep getting put off week after week, month after month and year after year. I would appreciate if the Minister could look at that.

I want to talk briefly about preventative measures and youth justice programmes which are hugely important. From my own experience in Kildare - I am sure it is no different from other places - the vast majority of young people are excellent individuals who contribute to society and to their communities. Unfortunately, we have a tiny percentage who are wreaking havoc on their communities. There has been a particular problem in rural areas outside Naas and Newbridge. Senator McCarthy referred to this issue last week when he spoke about Rathasker Stud and only ten minutes ago, I spoke to Madeline Burns from there. In recent weeks, hundreds of thousands of euro worth of damage has been done. When we are talking about farms, we are talking about the welfare of animals, such as cattle and horses. We are now coming into the foaling season. We see young people going out for the hell of it to create havoc. It is very important to put an awful lot of thought into how we deal with this. The gardaí has been very helpful in this regard. It has been able to get some of the young people, but it is difficult because they are under age. It is known that similar has been done before and this needs to be taken into account.

Talking about rural crime, I also want to mention fly-tipping and dumping. This is a huge problem in rural parts of our country. Indeed, millions of euro has been spent on cleaning up the Curragh Plains after fly-tipping and dumping. It is worth looking at the Greentown Project in Limerick, which I would like to see rolled out for how we deal with young people. Extra CCTV is also very important. Retail crime is something we come across all the time. Talking to those in the retail industry and seeing the amount of shoplifting going on, it is something we need to take seriously and put a plan in place.

My final point refers to having a safe public place unit. It is really important when we look at our villages, towns and cities that we have proper public lighting and street planning. We must do our best to create positive and vibrant places for the communities that use those villages and towns. If not, places will turn into no-go zones and, unfortunately, everybody will suffer - those who live there and those who have day or night-time businesses there. I appreciate the opportunity to raise these issues with the Minister.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I welcome the Minister to the very important debate we are having. I specifically raise the issue of domestic and gender-based violence. We are at a record high of gender-based violence, with 20,000 more reports to gardaí in more than four years. It is good that people are coming forward and reporting to gardaí but it is clear there has been an increase in violence in the community.

Women and children are dying in their own homes at the hands of somebody known to them

and whom they have been in an intimate relationship with. As the Minister rightly pointed out, there is a special aspect attached to gender-based violence - the relationship and the trust that the victim has placed on the perpetrator - that gives a different tint to this. People are being abused and traumatised. Children's lives are being destroyed within their homes. This needs to be seriously looked at by the Government. I know it is something the Minister has a personal commitment to. I am glad he mentioned Cuan, which the Minister, Deputy McEntee, established in her previous role and on which work is ongoing. While it is a very important development, I know from speaking to colleagues at all ends of the country that we do not have enough women's refuge spaces here in Dublin and across the country.

I have spoken to colleagues who have served in these Houses over the years. They have told me that a number of years ago, if a woman came to a clinic in a domestic violence situation, they would have been able to work with that woman to secure council accommodation and get her to safety within a couple of weeks. That does not happen anymore because of the housing crisis. Women are remaining in difficult and dangerous situations because of our housing crisis. That is completely unacceptable. Women are dying. Their children are dying or are being left without their mother, as in the case of Jennie Poole, which was mentioned by Senator O'Loughlin, whom I commend for her work on Jennie's law. We need to make it a matter of priority to progress that. If Jennifer Poole had known that her partner had a history of domestic violence, she would have never exposed herself or her children to that risk. She did not know because we do not have the adequate laws in place and we need to change that as a matter of priority. Those children are left without a mother and Jason and his family are left without a much-cherished sister and family member.

This is not acceptable in this day and age. We need to have a zero-tolerance approach to domestic violence. On that note, I commend Jarlath Burns, GAA president, on recently taking a strong leadership position in this regard. There can be no place in society for domestic abusers. We need to stand up and say it is not good enough. We need to call a spade a spade and not hide behind people who are held up as pillars of their communities. We need to call them out and say exactly what they are. I commend Jarlath Burns and I hope plenty more in similar positions will take a strong stance against domestic and gender-based violence.

Senator O'Loughlin also mentioned the lack of judges we have, particularly at District Court level. Many family law matters, such as custody access, guardianship and maintenance, are decided at District Court level. To have a situation where people are rushed through the court system because of a lack of judges is completely unacceptable and in many cases, this leads to an unsafe environment.

It will come as no surprise that I raise the issue of the new family court complex at Hammond Lane. It is a top priority of mine. It is something I have raised constantly since my election in 2016. I was glad to hear from the Minister, in a previous forum, that it is also a priority of his and something that will be progressed without any further delay during his tenure.

We need extra gardaí in north County Dublin. We have a booming population and we are absorbing the housing needs not only of Dublin but of the country. We do not have enough gardaí to deal with antisocial behaviour that arises. People are afraid because their calls go unanswered. They ring 999 and nobody comes. That needs to be recalibrated. It is not a direct issue the Minister can deal with but one for the Garda Commissioner. We need a policy which looks at populations. Areas of large population growth should be prioritised for the new gardaí who will hopefully be coming out of the Garda recruitment campaign that the Minister has well

steered.

I will leave it at that. I thank the Minister and look forward to his response.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome Deputy Shay Brennan and Councillor Fiona Murray to the Visitors Gallery today. I hope they enjoy their visit to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. I thank him for joining us today to talk about community safety.

We are here to talk about one of the most underacknowledged crises in the nation: the crisis of law and order. Many Irish people across the country feel that policing is virtually non-existent, criminality is allowed to run free and justice for victims is a distant ideal for regular people. At the core of this issue is the critical understaffing of An Garda Síochána. Many communities across Ireland find themselves with virtually no Garda presence, particularly in smaller rural communities. Even in Dublin, the force is stretched thin as it tries to deal with the rising levels of offences, with many stories of gardaí taking over an hour to respond to instances of violent assault. We also need to be realistic and truthful with the public in how we record crime according to nationality. For too long, our Government has been obfuscating any links between crime and the origins of the criminals. In 2022, plans to consider recording nationality were announced. What became of these considerations? Across Europe, many other national police forces have been allowed to record this data and have subsequently studied these questions in depth. This has allowed raw data to inform the conversations and decision-making of other EU nations. The data would suggest allowing unvetted potential criminals to come and go as they please, as the current Government does, is not conducive to community safety.

At the same time, we are also having to deal with a new generation of cartelised drug gangs that are increasingly operating with ease across porous borders using Ireland as a drugs import hub for Europe. I take this opportunity to praise the Trojan work being undertaken by Detective Chief Superintendent Séamus Boland and his team in stepping up seizures and combating organised crime in our country. However, it is worrying that the scale and number of seizures and arrests only ever seem to increase. Unfortunately, like many gardaí, Detective Chief Superintendent Boland is fighting an uphill battle.

Year in and year out, the successive governments of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have seemed to think it acceptable to throw open the borders and to then sit on their hands while our police force haemorrhages numbers. Last week, we were told it is expected that 1,640 gardaí will be eligible to retire in the coming five years. Meanwhile, in the past two years, only 1,304 entered the college at Templemore with only a little over 800 being sworn in. This is not considering the 500 who left the force last year alone. Who can blame them for wanting to go? As force numbers dwindle and crime rates soar, the working life of those gardaí who choose to stay on becomes even more miserable and toxic. They are overworked and undersupported and we are now stuck in a vicious circle where each garda who leaves creates more incentive for the rest to go.

What is the Government going to do to address this question? Is it talking about seriously improving the pay packets of our police force's members to better compensate them for their hard work? No. Instead, the Government is trying to somehow close the gap by bandying about proposals for facial recognition laws. Ultimately, the Government appears to be intent on straying into very dangerous and even totalitarian waters, violating our citizens' right to

privacy. At the same time, it does not seem intent on paying for the police force it intends to uphold this project. In this regard, it is unbelievable that I have to credit the Government for at least being somewhat more realistic than certain members of the Opposition who have been proposing that we put special anonymous knife surrender bins at the disposal of would-be stabbers. This approach has failed totally in England since its introduction more than 20 years ago. At least the Government is a little more imaginative and original with its impossible ideas as to how to reduce crime without paying police a decent wage and pension.

If the Minister wishes to make concrete improvements to security surveillance in this country, I am happy to suggest improvements that could be made today. For example, we could improve surveillance by having data controllers permit the usage of number plate recognition in the CCTV systems currently available in many towns and cities nationwide instead of using number plate recognition software solely to dole out speeding tickets on motorways and to take money off people in high-end car parks. The Minister could also make immediate improvements in the exact same area by ordering the chief executives of the local authorities to be the data controllers of their local CCTV systems. Unfortunately, many CEOs are unwilling to take up that burden. The Minister can and must step in to force the CEOs to step up.

While speaking of aimless and confused projects, I will also take the opportunity to raise the issue of the future of Thornton Hall. Following the fiasco of numerous Government developments such as the Dublin children's hospital, many Irish taxpayers are justified in fearing that we will face yet another end-of-the-rainbow scenario. In other words, the closer we get to the theoretical deadline for Thornton Hall, the further away it will get. While wasted time would be one thing, we know well enough that the further the deadline recedes the higher the final bill will be. Sadly, we are already beginning to see that in this case. A report in *The Irish Times* earlier this year showed that more than €114,000 had already been spent over the last three years on an effectively empty site. This included €27,000 to repair boundary and perimeter security and €4,832 in water charges. The final aggravation associated with this issue is that the Government is not only failing to tell us its plans to get things done, but is also now failing to tell us what it plans to do with the site in the first place. Last year, the Department of Justice told us that 30 acres of this site were to be earmarked to create a processing centre for asylum applicants. Knowing the scale of the migration and asylum crisis, it is highly unlikely that these 30 acres would be enough. I understand that a contract was signed with the Prison Service for the use of this land for two years. A contract was also signed by the Department of children and integration in May 2024 with the provider of on-site services and facilities for these international protection applicants. I have no doubt that this contract is still in place despite plans for this site getting side-tracked. Will the Minister look into that waste of money as well?

In addition, we are facing a crisis of overcrowding in our prisons. Sadly, it looks like the new prison will need every acre we can get. Just today, the *Irish Independent* reported that more than 300 prisoners are without beds, with some commentators believing that more than 500 are sleeping on mattresses on floors. The issue has been so bad for so long that, as far back as May of last year, the Irish Prison Service was going into talks with the Defence Forces to re-open the old military prison at the Curragh. I ask the Minister for Justice, who is with us today, to give us a timeline for the construction of the new prison at Thornton Hall and to let us know how much of this site his Department is willing to hand over to his colleagues at the Department of children and integration. Is he taking it back? How does he intend to co-ordinate the construction project alongside the processing centre?

Times change and plans change. That is fine but we simply must have a plan in the first

place. This style of slap-dash improvisation is unacceptable and not worthy of Government, whether in the reinforcement of An Garda Síochána, the creation of the new security legislation or the construction of a new prison facility. I actually believe the Minister will do really good things in this Department. I really have faith in him. I look forward to working with him over the coming years.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I am sharing time with Senator Duffy. We will take five minutes each, if that is agreeable. The Minister is very welcome to the Chamber. He has now been here two weeks in a row, which is a good start. You cannot talk about community safety or crime without first acknowledging the service our gardaí provide right across the country. In our jobs, we deal with them on a weekly basis. We know the sacrifices they and their families make for them to carry out the work they do. We have family members, friends and neighbours who play that really important role. When we talk about community drive, we should talk about it in a positive sense. There are challenges in every job, and in the job of our gardaí more than most, but that role can be really fulfilling. That is important to say.

The Minister talked about different types of crime. In Tipperary, there are three types of crime that happen quite a lot and that cause great distress and frustration for communities. One of these rural crimes is violence, particularly in the robbery of farm equipment and machinery. It happens to people in rural areas who are in a vulnerable situation as they are not close to neighbours and friends. In Clonmel two or three years ago, a young farmer came home to his farm and people were on site robbing machinery and equipment. He tried to intervene in some way and was severely injured. We can be thankful that he has now recovered. Only a couple of days later, a meeting was held in the community hall. Over 600 people attended because of the fear people have of what can happen. These people sped off, drove up the motorway and were not found again. That is a common occurrence. It does not always happen that a farm owner gets injured but that potential is always there and that is where the fear comes from, that they are often on their own and in a vulnerable situation.

The other thing that happens in Tipperary quite a lot is theft - shop crime, where people rob from shops. That this happens on a regular basis is a huge financial burden on shops and it also causes huge intimidation and fear among the staff who work there. Only a couple of weeks ago, two women working in a small shop in a rural town in Tipperary were confronted by armed robbers who robbed the place. Luckily the two women were not injured but they were traumatised. In fairness, local gardaí responded extremely quickly and actually apprehended the people and they will go through the court process, which is a really good outcome. That fear is there. Talking to shop owners right across the county of Tipperary that happens on a daily and weekly basis and robbery is at an all time high.

The third thing, which is quite common, is the sale of drugs right in a town centre on a main street. The Minister said in his contribution that visibility of gardaí is one of the things that keeps being brought up with us as public representatives, and I completely agree with him. I also agree with his narrative that when people talk about visibility of gardaí that means there is trust in the gardaí but people want to see more of them. We see such obvious signs of drug taking and drug selling on the main streets of places such as Clonmel and other towns across Tipperary, and that is not the way it was 20 or 25 years ago.

Obviously we need more gardaí and recruitment is important. The Minister said there are 14,100 gardaí. That is not enough but we need to remember that only ten years ago, we only had 12,500 gardaí so it has increased. When people talk about gardaí retiring, there are new

people coming in. This is important for me because Templemore is in Tipperary. Every 11 or 12 weeks I see an average of 200 new gardaí coming through the system, all proud of the fact they are able to serve their country.

Recruitment is a challenge. We made a commitment in the programme for Government to get 5,000 new gardaí. We are at a stage in this country, which is very positive, that we have full employment. That makes getting more gardaí a challenge. What is the Minister's plan to do that?

My final question is about the capacity of prisons. With an increasing population we need more prison spaces, and more prisons. What is the long-term objective? I know Thornton Hall is one but in general, what is the long-term objective in terms of prison spaces?

Senator Mark Duffy: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach. I welcome the Minister and thank him for his contributions last week and this afternoon. My experience of policing in County Mayo has been very positive. I served on Mayo County Council over the past six years and the model I found most effective and efficient in terms of being close to the people and gardaí being the guardians of the peace on the ground was the community policing model in the towns of Castlebar, Westport, and Ballina where I am from.

The community policing model is brilliant in multiple ways. It is the touchpoint for the gardaí on the ground, whether it is touching base with the shops to keep an eye on crime, being visible on the streets or in relation to rural isolation. There is nothing better than a garda in a community policing role who is conscious of Mary who lives on her own two miles out of town and who may need something, such as presence and visitation. Given the number of community gardaí in Mayo who are fabulous at their jobs and do them so well, I ask the Minister to consider expanding that model and rolling it out as much as possible to every town, village and community because it has such a positive effect. Even from intelligence gathering on crime or petty crime, although not even petty crimes but larger scale crimes that are committed, community police are on the ground every day and are picking up information that can be fed back while also showing the presence of the force right across the community.

From an elected member's point of view, the second matter is the role of joint policing committees. I know changes have been proposed but it is really important from a local democracy point of view that the decision-making, interaction and orbit of the Garda remains as close as possible to the county councillors and elected representatives on the ground. As representatives we are, and councillors are, the touchpoint for the community on the ground and the elected members and the gardaí need to be interlinked. It can only be a net gain for communities.

When preparing for my contribution, I wrote a note about data control and Senator Keogan raised this issue as well. The system in place does not make sense. In Ballina, if gardaí want access to CCTV, they have to go to the county council, as the data controller, to retrieve footage and video evidence. That does not make sense and we need to have a ministerial directive, or something else, that cuts through that in the interest of the common good and public safety. A council building could be closed on a bank holiday Monday and a crime could be committed on Friday night but gardaí would have to wait until Tuesday morning to access footage. That does not make sense in any world or any walk of life and I ask the Minister to look into that issue.

Another opportunity is town and village regeneration. There is still dereliction and vacancy right across the country. It is still not being dealt with. Passive surveillance is such a brilliant

way of tackling and addressing crime and antisocial behaviour in towns and villages. There needs to be a conversation around that between the Department of Justice and the Department of local government and housing to make sure there are regulations that encourage over-the-shop developments and that there is deregulation to allow for that but that they are safety conscious from a fire point of view. It is powerful to have people on the ground, monitoring and keeping an eye on the town centre, so that it is not quiet and dead in the evening but that there is activity and vibrancy.

My final point concerns the proliferation of vaping shops in towns and villages across the country. There are multiple examples in County Mayo of vapes and candy being sold together. It is disgusting and is not positive from any point of view. It has so many antisocial knock-on effects, so the Minister should do whatever he can do within his power. There is a loophole that vaping and candy can be advertised and sold together on high streets. Some of these are heritage streets. It is totally out of kilter in terms of what we are trying to do about town regeneration. If the Minister has powers and means within his office and Ministry to address that, it would be most welcome across the board. I would really welcome his consideration of that and if he could put some effort into this issue because this is brought up at grassroots level and by councillors right across the country. It would be really welcome if this issue was addressed.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I understand Senators Nicole Ryan and Maria McCormack are sharing time, with five minutes each. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Nicole Ryan: It is great to see the Minister back again. Community safety is a fundamental right. Too often we discuss crime and safety with the focus placed on urban areas. There is no doubt the cities face serious crime issues but the conversation cannot ignore rural Ireland, where crime, harassment and fear are just as real and sometimes more so given the lack of Garda presence and resources. For example, in my constituency, the community of Charleville lives in absolute fear due to massive antisocial issues. There have been a spate of car break-ins in Macroom and Coachford where people are living in fear in their own homes and estates. When these crimes go unsolved and there is little to no Garda presence, it sends a message to criminals that they can get away without any consequences and our communities are left to fend for themselves.

It is not just property crime that affects our rural communities. It is sometimes something much more insidious. It is the everyday fear among so many people, especially women, who live with it. I personally know that fear. Growing up, my mother always said that it is not always the big cities, it can also be the local towns but when you are 18 you think you know it all. When I was 18 I was walking home from our local nightclub one night. The walk is ten minutes long in a well lit area and I walked it thousands of times since I was in primary school. On that night I was followed by a man and chased home.

6 o'clock

The only luck I had on my side was that I was faster than him. While I did get home safe and sound, it did not stop there because the fear was with me for weeks on end. For weeks, I had to ask my mother to drop me into town because I did not feel safe walking down, and I would make sure I was home before nightfall. A place where I grew up, and my home town, which was a safe place, as I always thought, became a source of anxiety for me. I look back on that incident and wonder why I did not report it. It was because I felt then that nobody would believe me. I feared my experiences would be dismissed, that I would be minimised and I would

be asked if I was sure. Perhaps I was imagining things and maybe I overreacted.

The reality for many people in this country is the same. Their experiences of fear and danger are brushed aside because “nothing happened”. However, something did happen. That fear stays with you. It changes how you move through the world and how you see things.

For those who do report the incidents, the system often fails them too. A woman in Newmarket was assaulted while walking in the woods, just going about her day. For every case like hers, there are countless cases where people are harassed, followed and threatened, but because they do not escalate to physical violence, it is not taken seriously.

In another incident, a friend and I were harassed by a man in Cork city. He had followed us from the city centre to Barrack Street. He was continuously trying to engage with us and we were not interested. From my past experiences and now being older, I was able to stand up to him and tell him I was not interested, and he backed away. However, because my friend was not vocal in that instance, he followed her instead. I stood there, watching her go off to her estate. He walked past me and ran after her. In that moment, all I could do was try to run after him. I probably would not have been able to overpower him but I did not want her to feel alone in that fear, the fear that I know well. When we tried to report it, it took three attempts for the issue to be acknowledged. Even then, because he had not physically attacked her, nothing could be done. What kind of message does this send, that you have to be attacked to be taken seriously, that women should have to accept harassment as part of their everyday life, that people in rural Ireland should just accept that stations are closing, and people have to live in fear and it is something they have to get used to? I refuse to accept that.

It is not just one incident, one case or one community. This is a systematic failure that has been years in the making. Garda numbers have fallen while the population has risen. Like other Senators have mentioned, 1,640 gardaí are eligible for retirement in the next five years yet the recruitment and training have not kept pace with demand. What do we need to do? We obviously need more gardaí, and I think everybody echoes that. We need investment in youth services and community resources because crime does not just happen in a vacuum. We need a justice system that actually listens to victims and understands that the fear and trauma are real, even if there are no bruises and broken bones to prove it. We need to stop treating safety as an afterthought. It should not take a high-profile crime or tragedy for action to be taken. This must change, and it must change now.

Senator Maria McCormack: I thank the Minister for coming back to us. I welcome that he will look at sentencing. The family of Joe Drennan lives in my constituency. Joe Drennan was a 21-year-old fourth-year student in journalism who lost his life by someone with 46 previous convictions. I quote his dad in the court, who asked whether that person would not serve one day for killing his son. I would welcome the opportunity for the Minister to speak to this family. Overall, we need to look at concurrent sentences, and where a fatality is involved, sentences should not run concurrently.

Community safety is an issue that affects every town, village and rural community in Ireland. It is the right of every person to feel safe in their own home, in their streets, in their workplaces and in public areas. Yet, across the country, including in my county of Laois, too many people no longer feel that sense of security, whether it is businesses in Portlaoise facing vandalism, rural families experiencing home break-ins, or elderly residents in Portarlinton who just this weekend have been in contact with me, afraid to open their doors at night. The message is

clear. We must do more our communities safer.

While increased Garda numbers and resources are critical, policing alone is not the answer. We need to be proactive rather than reactive. This is where crime prevention through environmental design, CPTED, comes into play. It is a proven evidenced-based approach that reduces crime by designing safer workspaces. This is a resource that is not currently being utilised to its full ability. I have talked in detail to our crime prevention officer about this. It is a resource that could really make a difference in crime prevention, community safety and our community. It is not just about security cameras or stronger policing. It is about smart urban planning that makes crime harder to commit. It is about better street lighting to deter antisocial behaviour; well-maintained public spaces that promote community pride and reduce opportunities for criminal activity; natural surveillance through urban design, ensuring sightlines are clear so there are no hidden areas for crime to take place; and secure, accessible infrastructure, including proper pedestrian routes, well-lit car parks and safer residential layouts. We have seen successful examples of this across the world, where simply improving the built environment leads to significant reductions in crime and antisocial behaviour. Why are we not embedding this into our development plans in Ireland?

If we are serious about crime prevention, we must give communities the power and resources to design safer spaces. This means requiring all housing estates and public developments to integrate CPTED principles; investing for urban design for town centres, including safer public transport hubs, parks and pedestrian areas; and providing grants to community groups for local safety initiatives such as CCTV, improving lighting and crime deterrent programmes.

In Laois, we already have strong neighbourhood watch and community alert groups and we have excellent community policing, but there needs to be real funding and support. CPTED should be a key part of local government planning and strategies, ensuring safety is designed into the community rather than being an afterthought. For rural communities, crime prevention is often a challenge due to isolation and a lack of Garda presence. In places like Ballyroan and Stradbally, we hear of farms being targeted for theft, of illegal dumping and of people left feeling vulnerable. CPTED can play a role here too, with better road layouts, strategic lighting and CCTV in key rural areas. These measures, alongside strong Garda resources and rural crime task forces, can protect our vulnerable communities. In urban areas like Portlaoise, we must address drug-related crime and antisocial behaviour with a combination of policing, youth engagement and safer public spaces. We know that poorly designed urban areas contribute to crime. Abandoned buildings, poorly lit streets and neglected parks become hotspots for illegal activities. Revitalising these spaces can make them safer for all.

Community safety is not just about crime statistics; it is about the people. It is about the woman fleeing domestic violence who finds no available refuge bed. It is about the child in an area where gangs and drugs seem more accessible than opportunities. We need more investment in domestic abuse services, youth intervention and education programmes, and a national strategy on urban design and community. I would welcome all of these.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Minister of State, Deputy Collins, is replacing the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan. I now move to Senators Nessa Cosgrove and Patricia Stephenson on behalf of the Cross-Party Group. I understand they are sharing time.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: People have the right to feel safe in their communities but they also have the right to thrive in their communities. I worked as a youth worker for more than

20 years. No young person wakes up in the morning and decides they will commit a crime. No young person decides throughout their life that they will become an addict. Crime cannot be treated in isolation. Years of underinvestment in front-line youth services and community-based services have led to this. I think the community policing model worked. Senator Duffy said this as well. I would love to see a move back to the community policing model. When I started in youth work more than 20 years ago, there was always a community garda presence, and that seems to have been eradicated over recent years.

We need to look at the whole area of drug use. That is the elephant in the room when we talk about crime. There was an important citizens' assembly on the use of drugs and taking a health and social education model to drug use. We need to start looking seriously at the decriminalisation of drugs and the users of drugs.

There is another area within crime prevention that we would support. Joint policing worked well. The Labour Party is in favour of the new local community safety partnerships, the membership of which will include 51% community members. The reduction of crime cannot be done on its own and we need to fully resource youth and community services. Youth workers are leaving the sector at an alarming rate because they are on low wages. Youth workers cannot be recruited. I urge the Minister of State to engage with section 39 workers. I am like a broken record on that point. Unless there is investment in front-line community people who work in services and do community work at the front line, the crime rate will go up. Prevention works, as does youth work.

We need to have a conversation about freeing up Garda time. It was welcome to see cautions brought in for adults who are caught in possession of a small amount of cannabis for personal use. We need a broader conversation about legalising cannabis. We need to consider how many of our resources are taken up, including police time that could be diverted to dealing with violent crime or gender-based violence.

We have all spoken about Garda recruitment this year, and the recruitment and retention of Garda members. There needs to be an increase in the supplementary payment to gardaí. There needs to be investment in Templemore. There needs to be further investment for the supplementary pension allowance. Retention of staff is the biggest issue. If we want to reduce crime and make people safer in their communities, we must keep the people working in the communities. The way things are going with wages, people are not being encouraged into, and are not staying in, the sector.

The issue of the regeneration of areas has been raised. Senator Duffy made reference to it. Many regeneration programmes have been successful through working with different Departments, including the Department of housing. In Sligo, for example, there was considerable investment in the regeneration of Cranmore. It has changed things. Morale has changed and there is a better sense of pride in the community. People seem safer. There has been investment in playgrounds, recreational space and lighting. The budget has fallen short, however, and the community centre is going to suffer. The approach should be flipped upside down because the community centre should be the first place invested in and everything should be built around it.

I hope the Minister of State will listen to what people on the ground are saying, those who are working directly with young people and community groups. If there are going to be new local community safety partnerships, I hope that public participation networks, PPNs, community groups and people working directly with young people in addiction services, Garda diversion

programmes and youth work services will form a part of the conversation.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank the Minister of State for coming to speak to us today about this issue, which has obviously been in the public psyche. As all the other speakers have already said, people across cities, towns and rural areas are feeling a greater sense of threat. I live on the Carlow-Kilkenny border and rural communities are concerned for their safety, as we have heard from others. We heard that from Senator McCarthy last week, and from Senator Ahearn. We have heard about rural communities and farming communities. This is an issue throughout the country.

I will comment on Senator Ryan's thoughtful contribution about living with fear and the fact that no one deserves to live with fear. That was an important statement about how we address safety for different communities and populations. We need to strengthen the initiatives we have in rural areas to ensure that rural communities feel they are being supported. There is a wider issue around rural exclusion and how rural communities feel and are treated in comparison with those in towns and cities.

An effective response to crime that ensures a swift, fair and community-focused response is essential. We have already discussed that the Garda must be well-resourced, visible and engaged with the communities it serves. This means increased community policing, an increased presence and better training in things such as de-escalation and mental health crisis intervention. We should be stressing our response to crime through increased Garda patrols in areas that are known to have higher levels of crime. We should be focusing on deterrents and working with communities rather than taking a punitive approach.

We should be developing a restorative justice programme where victims and community representatives have the chance to meet offenders so there is an opportunity to repair the harm done in the medium and long terms. As we have heard, however, response alone is not enough. We also need to address the root causes of crime. The root causes to any social issue are important to address if we wish to reduce it. Those causes include things such as addiction, poverty and social exclusion. We need greater co-operation between the Garda, social services and local communities, and must ensure we take an holistic approach that prioritises rehabilitation over punishment, where possible.

Preventing crime starts with creating opportunities. We must invest in things such as education. Senator Cosgrove spoke about the importance of youth services and employment initiatives that steer people away from crime before they enter the justice system. In many cases, once people are in the justice system it is difficult for them to leave it. Research has shown that young people can be vulnerable to things such as peer pressure, socioeconomic factors and childhood trauma, which is a significantly contributing factor to their participation in crime. Addressing these challenges and needs through youth diversion programmes is key. The approach can include community centres, mentorship programmes and affordable housing projects, which are proven ways to reduce crime by fostering stability, inclusion and social cohesion. As we have already heard, things such as well-lit street areas, maintained parks, safe after-school programmes and the regeneration of communities, as Senators Duffy and Cosgrove spoke about, all contribute. These initiatives obviously come at a cost, but it is about an investment in safer and stronger communities. That is a cost I think we can all agree is worthwhile.

In my own area of Carlow and Kilkenny, we have seen the power of local solution in action. The Kilkenny community policing initiative has made strides in strengthening relationships

between the Garda and residents, and ensuring that policing is responding to local concerns. In Carlow, we have St. Francis Farm, which is a community-based addiction recovery programme that recognises substance abuse is a social issue, not a criminal one. That is an important point.

We have heard about earlier interventions around gender-based violence. In response, the Garda has been asking for powers to allow for the removal from the home of perpetrators of domestic violence in instances where the threshold for arrest is not met. That was on the agenda in the term of the previous Government and I think it is something we should continue to explore.

Community safety is not just about policing. That is an element of it, but it is not the sole factor. It is about building a fairer society in which everyone has the right to feel safe. As Senator Ryan mentioned eloquently, we need a society where everyone has the right not to live in fear. I believe that in order to respond to crime effectively, we need to focus on preventing it through investment and championing local initiatives, such as the ones I mentioned in Carlow and Kilkenny.

Senator Lynn Ruane: This is an important topic to discuss. Over the past year or two, I have been lucky enough to visit some violence intervention programmes in Newark in the United States. There are some amazing initiatives elsewhere. We do not need to recreate the wheel when we consider violence intervention, specifically. Ireland can look to Scotland and some of the initiatives in the United States and Sweden around violence intervention.

There is also the whole realm of community safety, which also includes the perception of safety. Some things are not measurable. We cannot always address people's perceptions of whether they are safe or not in a real and tangible way. There are many things we can do in that regard. To speak specifically to the violence intervention piece, there is an initiative in the United States founded by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I met a guy over there who I have been working with closely to build a strategy. He is an academic and was the founder of the Boston ceasefire project. The evidence behind that project has shown that youth homicides have massively reduced through focused deterrence and group violence intervention initiatives. That does not happen instead of law enforcement but works in parallel with it. The approach is about looking at the group dynamics of violence and a model that intervenes in the moment to address violence in communities. It is a relationship-based model that requires a lot of trust, infrastructure and work but it is something we need to do.

We often react to situations of violence within the community by automatically looking to the police and saying we need more policing or more visibility of police, but even where present, the visibility of police has not reduced crime overall. The guillotine did not reduce crime overall. The public display of punishment and sentences have not decreased crime. The police's ability to respond to and investigate crime is a necessary and important one but we cannot rely on the police to police us out of poverty and the core drivers of violence. All of the evidence shows that the core drivers of violence are humiliation, shame, not being able to meet one's economic needs and one's proximity to violence. Violence, in and of itself, breeds violence. The closer someone is to violence, the more likely that person is to experience violence or to experience the cycles and the revictimisation within that.

There are some models in the United States. There is an amazing one in the health sector. When somebody arrived at a hospital having clearly experienced a violence-related injury, there used to be a "treat and street" model where the person was treated and then allowed leave the hospital. What has now been introduced there is a wider community-based public safety model

that involves partnerships with law enforcement and the other arms of justice, social services and the health sector, including doctors. There are trained community violence interventionists to work within the health system and communities in a partnership model to interrupt violence when it is happening. That is not just gang-related violence, although some of the models operated by the people I met were specifically developed during a time of heightened gang violence in the likes of LA. There is a guy called Aqeela Sherrills who negotiated the peace deal between the Crips and the Bloods in 1992. He was an ex-LA gang member but is now seen as a credible messenger and voice. He was someone who has the relatability and credibility within a particular world who went on to build a community-based public safety model that Scotland later relied on as well. It brought Aqeela Sherrills, David Kennedy and others over from the United States. That was at the request of the police in Scotland. I have had some communication with Karyn McCluskey, who oversees the Scottish violence reduction unit. Police in Scotland decided to move away from only seeing violence through the lens of justice to also seeing it through the public health lens.

The World Health Organization has a definition of violence as a public health issue. Treating it as such opens it up for us to deal with it in a much more holistic way. Part of the World Health Organization's definition is that violence is preventable rather than inevitable. It treats violence using a population disease model.

Regarding the men who are engaged in violence, there is a very small percentage of people who cause the most harm in a community when it comes to violence-related issues. However, no one is working with that group in a targeted way. It is only ever a police response, so we do not actually get to interrupt the violence. In the models being tried out in Sweden, Scotland and other places, people try to build and develop relationships within those communities so that, between a policing model, a community model and a health model, there are interventions that happen within the moment. We will never stop violence that happens as a random act, but those countries have systems to interrupt when there is potential for retaliation. A violence intervention team will not enable us to catch everything before it happens, but we can look at all of the other dynamics involved, for example, who else is impacted by the violence and whether we can intervene at all of the different pressure points in order to ensure there is no retaliatory violence within communities.

The umbrella term I find being used is "community violence", which is basically interpersonal violence. It is any type of violence that can happen within a community. Even though the focused deterrence and group violence intervention models had a relationship at one time with the illicit drug trade, they are not specifically set up to be about that trade. They are about the violence intervention piece in and of itself and are used in all types of community violence where there is a dynamic of group violence. Often, people think that, under a particular model, we just engage with the individual committing violence, but it is sometimes about the pressures of the community, an estate or a group in the context of reputation, image control or what the group expects a person to do in a given situation to save face. All these group dynamics can add to and fuel violence.

I am discussing these initiatives because, while I understand the reaction to opt for sentences, more police and so on, that must be done in parallel with other initiatives that are about reducing violence overall, not just responding to violence or a particular instance of violence. It is about looking at violence prevention in the widest possible sense.

I have worked with men who have committed violence. When I was doing theatre of the

oppressed and so on in the prison, I brought the current Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, in to do a bit of work. When you map the histories of many of the men who are perpetrating serious violence, you find that they were victims of violence in the first instance. Services, interventions, the education system and so on often did not intervene or were not aware at certain points of whether there was familial violence within the home, for example. People have been completely dehumanised and violence becomes a normalised behaviour. People also feel there is a reward system with violence. We need to be able to speak about that as well as the kind of relationship men have to violence in that regard. The problem is that, when men become more physically men in the world, we do not allow them the victimhood that came before the perpetration of the violence. In a sense, we separate them from their own histories, so we never get to truly and fully explore the shame, humiliation and events that happened to them in their lives and interrupt the violence. We must be a lot more open about how we engage with the topic so that, when we are considering legislative responses, we ensure we invest in communities and set up evidence-based violence intervention initiatives that are much more holistic and look at it as a public health issue and not just a justice one. We have to be willing to work long term to reduce violence, not just respond to it. It is a balancing act to get the two of those elements correct.

In the past few weeks, I have read a number of books by Édouard Louis, a French writer. He discusses violence through novels. A line I found in one of his books - I believe it was *History of Violence* - was about how, when violence was part of someone’s daily rhythm, he or she ended up believing it was normal. If we want to get to the root causes of why violence becomes so normalised in people’s lives, we need to blow the conversation open a little so that we can work in a targeted way and interrupt violence within communities rather than just locking people up or calling for more prisons.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I welcome the Minister of State and thank him for discussing community safety with us. It is a request other Senators and I have made. The people who live, work and visit my community just want to feel safe. This is not an unreasonable expectation to have or an unreasonable request to make. I congratulate the Minister of State on his appointment and Jim O’Callaghan on his.

Trying to improve community safety is something I have been engaged in for a number of decades. I am a founding director of one of the first community policing forums and when a local authority member, I served as chair of the Dublin central joint policing committee. Speaking as a resident of the capital and of Dublin Central, I, like most of the people living there, am quite sick and tired of our part of the city featuring in news headlines because of stabbings, murders, begging, drug dealing and aggressive antisocial behaviour. It is totally unacceptable to us. My constituency has a population of approximately 120,000, but every day the area’s population expands to more than 500,000. We do not just have the challenges most communities would have with their indigenous populations, we have many multiples of that because we have so many people coming in and going out of the constituency daily. I commend the gardaí working in Dublin Central - in the Bridewell, Store Street, Fitzgibbon Street and Mountjoy Garda stations, and the new stations opened on O’Connell Street and in the port. Each and every one of the gardaí and all of the staff who work there do a tremendous job. They are engaged, committed and hardworking, and we appreciate their presence. They actively engage with community residents, schools, employers, businesses and all of the tourist attractions we have. No event that takes place in Croke Park, sometimes with 80,000 people attending, could take place without An Garda. The Mater Hospital, Rotunda Hospital and Temple Street are

indebted to An Garda. Every one of us who lives in the city is indebted to it. I am glad the new Minister has made a top priority of delivering on the promise in the programme for Government to increase garda recruitment to 5,000. It is important that number is achieved. I would like, in his response, if he could outline to us how the increased recruitment will be achieved.

Gardaí alone cannot make the world safer. The Minister said at the outset that we need to be realistic and accept that crime will always be with us. It is not going to disappear no matter how good the Minister or the gardaí recruited are. I am a strong believer in the small-area policing model. The community policing model is one pioneered in the north inner city going back more than ten years. Unfortunately, due to a lack of resources it fell by the wayside. One of the opportunities we have with increased garda recruitment is to re-establish that community small-area policing model that some of the other Senators have mentioned. Where you have dedicated community gardaí who see the role of a community garda as a career role, you see the kind of investment and commitment needed to make our communities safer. That leads to more community engagement and more support for An Garda. I would be interested to hear what resources will be applied to the community safety partnerships. There have been three community safety partnerships running. One of them is in the north inner city, but I would appreciate if, in his response, the Minister would talk about how the community safety partnerships will be rolled out nationally. I know he indicated that he intends to sign the enacting instrument in March. It is important that those community safety partnerships have community representatives and local authority members. The elected councillors on the ground are elected by their local communities, so they should have a strong role. It is important that the local authority officials - the executive functions - buy into those community safety partnerships. If we have sufficient dedicated gardaí on the ground, they can work and engage with the local authority where there are estate management issues. They can work with youth services, schools and justice youth diversion programmes.

I have heard the bell and will stop talking. I wish the Minister well and look forward to his response.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome the Minister. A lot of what I was going to say has been said by other Senators, but An Garda Síochána adheres to the ethos of the first Commissioner, Michael Staines, in policing not by force of arms but on its moral authority as servants of the people. The preservation of this unique and special bond is built on a strong tradition of policing by consent of the communities they serve and protect. That is very important about our police force in Ireland. If I had been standing in this Chamber six months ago, I would have been talking about the constituency of Roscommon-Galway and how we had three public marches and a number of public meetings about a spate of crimes targeting rural areas, the elderly, and unsupported areas where there were no Garda stations. We had a number of crimes in the area between September and November. Thankfully, with the support of our local service and national bodies, An Garda Síochána has made arrests and is prosecuting the people arrested in relation to those crimes. However, it still left a fear within a vast part of our community. That constituency has one of the oldest demographics in the country. Those people liked, and grew up in, a time when you knew your local garda. You would see your local gardaí. They would be in your local sports club at the weekend, or maybe in the pub selling lottery tickets. They were a member of the community. That is not something we experience nowadays. The job of our gardaí has gotten so admin-intensive that their presence on the street is not what it used to be. I know a lot of gardaí. They are members of our local GAA clubs and soccer clubs. You meet them socially. Some of them are our family members. They are very proud of the job they do

and they want to do that to the best of their ability, but they are inhibited by the role they have to take nowadays.

I will talk about rural Ireland as opposed to the total model, but the biggest challenge we have is the vast areas the districts are covering at the moment. In my own area it could take two hours to travel from one end to the other. Quite often you might only have one or two cars working on a particular night. This is known. People can make phone calls and have An Garda in one part of the county or district, while they are doing something in another part of the district. This is demoralising for gardaí on the ground not having the resources to be out there trying to protect and serve the people within their districts. Rural staffing is also a major issue. The Minister mentioned earlier the number of admin staff they have, but I know a lot of gardaí from the Roscommon-Galway constituency who are based in other parts of the country and would do anything they could to get back to live in their own district and area. That is something the Minister might look at. It might not necessarily be in their own district, but in a neighbouring district if there is an opportunity to give them a bit of weighting for moving back to those areas. We need to attract our members back to rural Ireland.

Thankfully, rural crime in my area is not as bad as it is in certain other areas of the country. However, going back to the demographic living in these areas, any crime and issue like that creates fear and an element whereby people do not go out to socialise. They stay at home. They do not go out at a certain time of night. Sunday night past, in the town of Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon, there was a reported mugging and robbery of a handbag at 7 o'clock in the evening, in a busy market town on a Sunday. This town had a large march recently, back in November, looking for additional gardaí on the ground. This happening has lit the fires, and the community is looking for more gardaí on the ground. They are served by a different Garda station during the weekends and the presence and numbers is the biggest barrier.

I compliment the community policing model we have in this country. I ran a few information sessions with our local community policing unit and while it was a great opportunity to bring older people into centres to understand what the community garda did, it also introduced the community gardaí to these people and gave them an opportunity to give addresses and phone numbers to allow the gardaí to go out and meet them. That is something I encourage them to do.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State, and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, for being here and I wish them both well in their new roles. I also extend my gratitude to the Leader of the House for organising this important discussion, which allows us the opportunity to engage on a matter that affects every citizen in Ireland. It is fair to say that the issue of safety in Ireland is changing. Listening to other Senators, our growing population has brought new challenges and, unfortunately, we have seen a serious and worrying rise in crime. Over the past two weeks alone we have seen two deeply concerning knife attacks in the Dublin city centre area. I am also reminded of the incident on Pearse Street with the American tourist, and all of the arson attacks I mentioned in my home town of Naas, one in particular, Rathasker Stud. These acts of violence have left communities shaken and raised urgent questions about how we can better protect people in public spaces.

Crime is not only happening on our streets, but it is also happening online. Today's newspapers showed the situation of Róisín Gillen from Donegal, who innocently answered a text from what was she thought was Energia, but was a scam text and her savings were cleared out.

Every day, more and more people are falling victim to scam text messages and fraudulent emails. These digital crimes exploit the trust of our citizens, particularly the elderly and the most vulnerable. Many people are simply not used to this new wave of cyber criminals and we have to act swiftly to educate and protect them. The Government, in collaboration with tech companies, must do more to stop these scams at their source.

I want to share a personal story about an organisation I am involved with that underscores the reality of these challenge. The Lighthouse on Pearse Street is a homeless restaurant where we serve up to 500 people a day. We recently faced a terrifying ordeal ourselves. One evening, due to a credible threat to fire bomb the building, we were told we had to move people from the front of the building to the back of the building. The people who were there had to move to the back of the building to ensure their safety. This is not the kind of society that any of us want to live in. Vulnerable people who come in to us are seeking a warm meal, safety and shelter. They should not be in fear of their lives.

This is a stark reminder that community safety extends beyond law enforcement. It is about protecting those who have nowhere else to turn. That is why initiatives, such as one I recently launched, the Drug Related Intimidation and Violence Engagement, Drive, initiative, are essential.

I welcome the Minister for Justice's initiative to encourage more people to join An Garda Síochána. We all have a role to play in supporting law enforcement. However, we must also address the broader issues. Why are people hesitant to join the Garda? As one Senator asked, is it about staffing? Is it about pay? Is it about morale, resources or safety on the job itself? These are critical questions that need answers if we are to build a stronger, more resilient police force.

We cannot afford to be reactive regarding community safety; we must be proactive. We need stronger legislative action on violent crime, better support for victims, and a renewed focus on community policing. We must continue this work until Ireland is a place where everyone can walk their streets and live their lives without fear.

Senator Alison Comyn: I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State for coming here today and affording us a valuable opportunity to raise what is a very serious issue. There cannot be anybody here in this Chamber who is not appalled by the level of street crime and knife violence that has been happening right across the country. It is not just in our cities, but it is in our towns and in our villages. Only a couple of days ago there was another stabbing incident in Kerry. What we have to look at is the importance of community involvement in tackling this issue.

I will talk about my home town of Drogheda. If we rewind to between 2017 and 2020, we were visited by horrendous crime. We were in the grips of a drugs feud. We saw violence on the streets like we never saw before. One of the ways we tackled it was that we got an injection of gardaí, which was invaluable. Do not get me wrong; we could still do with more boots on the ground. However, it simply would not have been possible to get to where it is now without that injection. Another major part of it was community involvement.

When we talk about community involvement, it is not only the likes of the community gardaí, which Senator Duffy mentioned and who do incredible work, and the Garda diversion programmes. It is also about the people who are in those communities where it is a small minority who usually take part in this crime. They know them, they know their families, and

they know how to tackle the root cause. There was a scoping exercise by Vivian Geiran which provided 70 recommendations on how to improve what was happening in Drogheda and the north east. That gave way to the Drogheda implementation board, which did incredible work to try to bring in some of those recommendations, many of which concerned investing in our local communities and giving the necessary funding in order to make the changes. Of course, that has given way to, as Senator Fitzpatrick said, a local community safety partnership. I urge that this be rolled out across the country, because this is where it gets to the heart of where the problems are. I wish all the best to Gráinne Berrill, another Drogheda woman, who is now the director of the National Office for Community Safety. These are pioneering schemes and we have seen them work in one part of the country. This is where we need to be going in the rest of the country.

Looking towards some of the more welcome statements of leadership we have seen from Ministers in the past week or so, I really do welcome the likes of the stricter laws, the tougher sentences that are being mentioned and the stopping and searching. At my peril, I have to slightly disagree with my colleague, Senator Keogan, when it comes to the likes of weapon amnesties. I will rewind again to when I was a news reporter working in the UK. I was sent to Sunderland, where they were experiencing some very serious street crime. I am of the opinion that we should look at anything that gets these weapons off the streets. They had amnesties there where knives and guns were handed in anonymously and without consequence and they received thousands. As I said, anything that can take them off the streets should be looked at.

When we are talking about knife crime, it is unfortunately not like gun crime in that knives are readily available everywhere. We all have knives in our kitchens. What I would probably focus on is the likes of these zombie knives and the sickles, swords or machetes that are being used in many of these cases, as these are not so readily available. Is it possible to check whether there could be tighter controls on the importing of these and on websites? It is quite possible some are being legitimately bought, but can we tighten up on any sort of law on importing those? This is about trying to get as many as we can off the streets.

I thank the Ministers for their engagement here today. There is so much that we can do within our communities. As in Senator Duffy's area, in my area, we have the likes of desperate dereliction and vacancy, which means that our streets are not safe and they are dark and not well-lit. We just simply do not have enough businesses but that is a matter for another day.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Cathaoirleach for the opportunity to speak. There are many challenges in the Department of Justice. I am really looking forward to seeing the positive changes the Minister can make. My area is Meath West, which includes great towns like Navan, Trim, Enfield and Oldcastle and villages like Kilmessan, Ballivor, Longwood and Rathmolyon. Speaking to the constituents at the doors - believe me, I knocked on a lot of doors over the past year, as I have run in three elections - they are extremely worried about safety within their community. They are worried about walking down their streets, not only at night-time, but during the day too. One man I spoke to was coming out of a bank in Navan where he was jumped on at 3 p.m. in the day and attacked. On a daily basis we see issues of antisocial behaviour on our streets, and it is of massive concern, especially to the people of Meath.

I will move on to businesses and what they face. According to a survey by Retail Excellence Ireland, 20% of retailers experience crime on a daily basis and 41% on a weekly basis. Approximately 82% of this crime is shoplifting. However, what scares me even more is that 60% of these outlets reported abuse of their staff. In fact, one store told me of how one of their

staff members was spat at in the face.

Another industry representative body, RGDATA, reported that 90% of its retailers were victims of crime in the previous 12 months. The major issues that I am being informed of are as follows: significant increase in shoplifting and retail crime, particularly high value items; growing aggression and violence towards staff with little fear of consequences with the gardaí, which is very concerning; and notable increases in youth involvement in theft, often in groups influenced by social media trends. Security measures are proving less effective as criminals act openly and without fear. Repeat offenders are a real problem. Many come back on the same day to rob again. I spoke to one small shop in Navan. It must be open around 40 years. It is a fabulous family business. They have always run the shop with one member of staff but now require two. Unfortunately, it is not because they are extra busy selling lots of clothes but to keep each other safe. Another shop owner said that they live in constant fear of their staff being injured. That is a very sad reality.

I hear repeatedly that the issue is not Garda support but the lack of gardaí to deal with these issues and the lack of punishment of offenders. Shops feel they report an issue and the following day they see the person on the street again, practically laughing at them. Seven days ago, the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan said “I don’t want to see our prisons clogged up with people who are in there for ... crimes of shoplifting”. If that is the case, what is he going to do about it? Would it help if ASBOs were administered at sergeant level rather than superintendent level? Should there be stiffer fines for people who steal? What about barring orders preventing someone from being able to re-enter a store? Why not make them pay for what they have stolen? Should people who regularly offend only be allowed free legal aid on, say, three court appearances and not the sky is the limit?

My daughter was eight when she was pushed to the ground when out shopping for her first little handbag. These were teenage boys who thought it was hilarious to push one person against the other. Excuse me-----

An Cathaoirleach: Take your time.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: These were teenage boys who thought it was hilarious to push one person against another like dominoes with the last person pushing my daughter to the ground. Thankfully, she was not injured physically but it did take a while to get her back out shopping again. I reported it to the centre and the response was to say it was sorry it had happened and there was nothing it could do because they would just come back the next day. Then I reported it to the Garda. The individual garda was very helpful but also advised there was no point in bringing it back again because it could not be brought further, so we just sucked it up like everyone in our community does every day. People are worried about getting out of their cars at supermarkets. If you cannot shop in peace without harassment, what does the future hold?

Another issue is people’s fear of being sued for defamation if they approach someone suspected of having stolen goods from the premises. Between 2009 to 2022, Ireland had more defamation cases than the UK, a jurisdiction with 12 times Ireland’s population. Businesses are playing their part and now the Department of Justice needs to play its part. What plans are there to protect businesses and their employees from the explosion of retail crime? How can we help communities ravaged by antisocial behaviour? When will Meath get more gardaí? I do not mean gardaí to fill retirements but an increase.

I note the Minister's comment that once the Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024 is enacted "the provisions of the Bill dealing with retail defamation will provide for balancing of the rights of retailers and consumers, promote good practice among retailers and allow retailers to deal effectively with unwarranted claims". I urge the Minister to stop these cases at source so they do not cause retailers thousands in legal fees. Were we to work out how many defamation cases there are in Ireland by cost, it would add up to about €70 million. Small businesses just cannot afford that.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. Being from County Limerick, I am sure he will agree with me it is a place of strong communities and hard-working families with a proud heritage, but too many people, whether in towns or rural areas, do not feel safe. Our gardaí are stretched beyond capacity. The reduction in Garda numbers, station closures and the lack of visible community policing are failing the people of County Limerick. Nor is this only about policing. Tackling crime means addressing its root causes, namely, poverty, lack of opportunity and addiction. We need stronger youth diversion programmes. I was delighted to get an invitation from the Minister of State's office to the launch in Rathkeale of a new diversion programme. We need investment in our communities. Without these measures we are just putting plasters on deep wounds. I call on the Government to increase Garda recruitment and retention. We need a properly resourced Garda force with the numbers and support to do its job effectively. The Government must restore community policing. A visible Garda presence is one of the strongest crime deterrents. It should address drug-related crime head on. That not only means policing but also proper funding for addiction and rehabilitation services. We must break the cycle of addiction and crime. There must be investment in community supports. Safer communities are built on opportunities. We need more youth services, mental health services and opportunities to ensure young people in Limerick county have a future beyond crime or antisocial behaviour. Tackling rural crime needs real solutions. Farm thefts, break-ins and attacks on elderly residents in rural areas are causing fear across County Limerick. A stronger Garda presence with better rural CCTV schemes and tougher action against repeat offenders are essential.

I will make a few interesting points, of which I am sure the Minister of State will be aware but I will say them for the benefit of everyone else. County Limerick has a population of 107,000 and a landmass of 2,735 sq. km and 22 Garda stations, two of which are 24-hour. The other 20 Garda stations are open for an average of 16 hours a week. If there are two gardaí in those stations and they are called out to an accident on the N21 or the N69, for example, that Garda station is closed. There are no gardaí. Public safety is not just a political issue. It is a fundamental right. The people of County Limerick and more widely should not have to live in fear. They deserve leadership that listens, acts and delivers.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The Minister of State is very welcome. I thank him for being here. I know what a strong advocate he is. He first introduced me to the Fianna Fáil Party when he was holding a meeting on rural crime. It gives me a great opportunity to speak about keeping communities safe while also focusing on the rural issues. No different to Senator Scahill, one of the biggest issues in east Galway is our strategic location. We are on the bridge of the Shannon. Portumna is on the bridge, so our entry point is on the bridge but the other entry to the constituency is through Banagher and the other exit point is at Killaloe. We are surrounded by the Shannon but none of the bridge crossings have CCTV because Galway County Council cannot agree who will take ownership or who will man it and what the position is regarding GDPR. It is past time for GDPR and sharing dual access between the local authority and An

Garda Síochána to be addressed. For too long, we have been ravaged by the gangs which come down the motorways, breaching Ballinasloe or who come through Gort if they are coming from Cork. If they are coming from the east, they will come in at Nenagh. They come across, circle and come out again. They will never be glimpsed. The population in the south of east Galway is around 40,000 but the Garda station, which is opened 24-7, is based in Gort. It is 40 minutes away from the bridge at Portumna, 50 minutes from the bridge at Banagher and 30 minutes from Killaloe. If a car is out on a night when the four gardaí are based in Gort, there is no second car because the Garda station cannot be left unmanned. I will not say it for the purpose of anyone who might benefit, but there will be a number of nights in any given week where there is no second Garda station open in the constituency. Not only are CCTV cameras needed but also more gardaí and not just replacing those who are retired. They need more high-powered vehicles so they can do their jobs.

On youth and intervention, there is a fantastic programme called Planet Youth in Galway. It is all about early intervention around drinking and substance abuse.

7 o'clock

It has been rolled out by the HSE in conjunction with An Garda Síochána. We need to share more of the information coming back from schools in order that we can work collaboratively with An Garda Síochána, the HSE, teachers, parents and young people on early intervention. If there is early intervention in regard to drugs and alcohol use, we will prevent addiction and the cost of rehabilitation further along the line. Early intervention initiatives, including the Planet Youth programme, must be stepped up and stood out. The information must be shared more with parents, who, as well as teachers, need to have a clear understanding of what percentage of children are engaging in substance abuse.

In 2017 or 2018, we opened a new regional Garda station in Murrough, where people can train to use guns and there is also a kennel. We have never put a dog in the kennel. The drug detection dog has never landed in Galway. We borrow the dog from Cork when we need to do a raid. The last dog the gardaí got really could not be trained. We still, after eight years, have not achieved our purpose of having a detection dog in the west of Ireland. We borrow the dog to do a raid. I know it sounds farcical. It goes back to early intervention. If we had a drug detection dog in Galway, we could go into the schools, do the talks and do the early detections. The dog could be walked up and down when people are queuing to go into whatever pub or disco it might be in Galway. It could be used as a deterrent, not as a means of trying to prosecute. I was really delighted to see the reference in the programme for Government to training more dogs. I would like to see a dog arrive in the west of Ireland.

We need an understanding as to what is the number of detections of heroin in Galway city. We do not have a statistic on that at this time.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to discuss this all-important issue. As he is aware, I live in the centre of Limerick city. I have seen a lot of things happening in the city centre over the years. In December 2023, the Department of Justice and the local gardaí in Henry Street set up Operation Táirge, whereby they worked with businesses to combat retail crime. That type of crime has been raised by many people in the Chamber. It was found at the time that pilfering and shoplifting cost retailers €1.62 million each year. People working in businesses need to feel safe from this type of criminality. Much has been done to date, including the launch last year of the use by gardaí of bodycams and new

cars with AI technology that can detect a lot of what is going on down the road. We need an expansion of the use of cameras and CCTV. The issue of the GDPR has been raised but that is something behind which many places are hiding.

Limerick city centre is no different from any other city centre in that there is a lot of on-street begging and large numbers of people going down alleyways to deal or shoot up drugs. Many of the streets off the main street become areas where people congregate to deal drugs, especially if there are alleyways or any set-back areas behind houses. We need more gardaí on our streets to tackle this issue. While the gardaí in Limerick have been very successful in the number of convictions they have secured, we still need more gardaí to support that effort. Reference was made to gardaí retiring. I welcome the increase in the number of Garda recruits going to Templemore and the number of gardaí coming out the other end. However, it is about retention and making sure gardaí stay in their jobs. Location was raised by a previous speaker. Sometimes, people want to move close to their home. We need to look at ways of incentivising gardaí and keeping them on our streets. We must ensure they are able to carry out their job.

I pay tribute to the gardaí in Limerick, led by Chief Superintendent Smart, including the various superintendents, inspectors and sergeants. They do an absolutely fantastic job but they are sometimes stretched to the limit between having to go to court, take prisoners on a transfer run or whatever it might be. Sometimes, that means there are not enough gardaí on the street. When a business owner rings the Garda station because somebody has attempted to rob the premises or has robbed it, or people contact gardaí because they have witnessed a drug deal going on in the street, there is sometimes no garda to respond to those calls. While consideration is being given to the provision of an extra Garda station for Limerick in Castletroy, we need to increase Garda numbers to support the existing structure as well as the new structure that is to come on stream.

There have been many successful programmes such as the youth diversion programme. I am chairperson of a community centre in one of the most socioeconomically deprived areas in Limerick. On a daily basis, a number of issues are brought to us whereby people have been subject to criminality or have witnessed things going on in their community that make them very afraid. People have the right not only to feel safe in the city centre and in whatever business they enter but also in their own home and locality. We must go back to having more community gardaí on the street. I remember a time in Ballinacurra Weston, which is the area in which I am involved, when gardaí used to be out playing soccer with local youths on the green. That created a relationship between the youths and the gardaí. We need to look at ways of incentivising initiatives to create a relationship between youths and the Garda. It does not matter where people are from; anybody could end up being targeted or brought into a gang. Having more community gardaí on our streets will be to the benefit of communities.

Senator Laura Harmon: I thank the Minister of State for joining us for the second time today. It is great to have the opportunity to discuss these matters.

I raise the issue of safety in Cork city. The allocation of gardaí to the city is nowhere near enough compared with the trends in population growth. I am aware that people in other cities have the same view regarding their location. We need more interconnectedness between the work of the Department of Justice and other Departments in regard to crime and safety. For example, if people cannot get a bus home at the end of the night or the service is unreliable, they are at more risk. Predators will take advantage of that situation. The unreliability of public transport certainly is an issue in Cork and it is contributing to people not feeling safe and not

going out. I meet people all the time in Cork who say they no longer bother going into town. They stick to the suburbs because they do not feel safe in the city. Cork is a wonderful city with wonderful nightlife and wonderful restaurant options. Businesses must be supported in this. We hear of business owners suffering from having to close their doors if there is crime on the street that is not being tackled.

A welcome development in Cork city is the provision of a mobile Garda station. It is, in essence, a van that travels around and functions as a Garda station. It has been very effective. That initiative needs to be promoted more. When people see more visibility in terms of Garda presence, they feel safer. It is very unfortunate that we have a number of Garda stations in Cork that are not open, including Bishopstown, Ballincollig and Douglas. We have fine buildings that are, in effect, closed most of the time. People do not know where to go if they need a garda.

The current Garda recruitment drive is very welcome. Pay and conditions for gardaí must be adequate. On an average garda salary nowadays, it would be very difficult to purchase a home in this country. Many gardaí emigrate, as do teachers and others in key worker professions. Part of the recruitment also needs to involve a gender perspective. We need to get more women into the Garda. We need to get more diversity in terms of ethnicity because people need to be able to see themselves reflected in the Garda and to feel comfortable reporting a crime.

It was encouraging to hear the Minister speaking about addiction and the need for more of a focus on supporting people with addictions outside prisons. We all agree that crime needs to have consequences but many people living in addiction are already in the prison of their own addiction cycle, which they cannot escape. That applies to drugs, alcohol, gambling and whatever else the addiction may be. It would be transformative if we were to have a more compassionate and healthcare-led approach to addiction. We in Ireland are behind the curve. This is where justice needs to link with education. Even from a young age, we need to educate people about what addiction means as a healthcare issue.

Other Senators, particularly the women Senators, have spoken eloquently about women's safety and domestic violence. I can safely say that as a woman, I have never felt less safe in this country. I felt more safe in my 20s than I do in my 30s. I do not think that is to do with the fact I am a little more aware and worldly now. It is because we hear, day in and day out, about women being attacked and murdered in their own homes. Femicide is an epidemic in this country and we absolutely need to get a grip on it. The issue is connected to the housing crisis. Many women do not have refuges to go to and are trapped in situations because they need to keep a roof over their heads or over their children's heads. That is compounding the issue. Things are interconnected.

Another issue under the brief of the Minister, and one I raised in the House last week, is sex for rent. Unfortunately, people are trying to take advantage of the housing crisis by propositioning people to provide sex in lieu of paying rent. It is abhorrent. We hear that one in 20 female students has seen such an advertisement or has been directly propositioned. There is no stand-alone law outlawing it at the moment. There are laws around intimidation and coercion in this country. The Minister has said he is working with the Attorney General on the matter and we would greatly appreciate an update on that work.

Senator Dee Ryan: The Minister of State is welcome. I thank him for facilitating this important debate on community safety. Throughout the recent general, local and mayoral elections I canvassed in, people voiced their deep concerns about Garda visibility. Whether I was

speaking to young families, elderly residents living alone or business owners in city centres, the message was clear: people want more visible policing in order to feel safe and supported in their communities.

I will take this opportunity to highlight to the Minister of State two critical issues for us in Limerick. With a population exceeding 18,000, there have long been calls from residents for a Garda station at Castletroy in the east of Limerick city. It is one of Limerick's fastest growing suburbs and a major economic hub. It is home to the National Technology Park, the Annacotty Business Park, a thriving retail and hospitality sector, multiple primary and secondary schools and the University of Limerick, all of which draw in further thousands of people daily. It is a truly vibrant and growing area. In order to support this rapid population expansion and the projected continued growth in the area, we need a dedicated and fully resourced Garda station at Castletroy. I take this opportunity to raise the issue with the Minister of State.

I will also raise with the Minister of State the concerns of Limerick city centre residents and businesses. Limerick city is undergoing an exciting urban renewal with significant investment in buildings and public realm improvements. Significant efforts are being made by our locally elected councillors, our executive, the workers at Limerick City and County Council, our new mayor and a host of other stakeholders in civil society, including resident groups, Tidy Towns groups, cycling groups and pedestrian groups. They are all focused on improving the liveability of our fabulous city centre. Like many urban centres around this country, there has been an increase in antisocial behaviour, open drug taking and drug dealing. It is being done by a small minority of people but in very public spaces. It draws fear, frustration and intimidation from passers-by. This is threatening the positive work being done by very many people. Many of my colleagues have today expressed the need for compassion to be at the centre of dealing with those struggling with complex issues and addiction, which I understand. Equally, however, there can be no tolerance for aggression or intimidation in our city streets.

I commend the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, for their no-nonsense, straight-talking approach to tackling crime since taking up office. Indeed, the clear stance taken by the Minister following recent violent and fatal incidents in Dublin sent an important message, but that message must be matched with action. We need increased Garda numbers and community policing in our urban centres and streets. We must ensure that growing residential areas, such as Castletroy, have the policing infrastructure required to meet their growing needs. We must recognise that policing alone cannot solve these challenges. I am pleased to highlight for the Minister of State and the Minister an innovative programme being piloted in Limerick city. The community access support team, CAST, is a partnership between the Garda at Henry Street and the mental health services at HSE Mid-West to put gardaí and mental health nurses into a squad car, so that after an emergency call is triaged and a response is dispatched, there is both a mental health response and a Garda response in the vehicle to deal with whatever is unfolding when they arrive at a situation. I commend the officers in Limerick who brought forward the initiative. I wish them well in their important work with CAST. We look forward to the results after the trial period. I believe we will learn a lot and I hope it will be an example that we can roll out to the rest of the country.

My colleague, Senator O'Loughlin, highlighted the need for an expanded Judiciary. My colleague, Senator Clifford-Lee, and many other Senators in the Chamber highlighted the need for increased refuge spaces for women and children. I must highlight the urgent need for parallel investment in prison spaces. We need dedicated facilities to meet our growing population numbers and the growing incidence of crime unfortunately associated with that. We need in-

creased investment in youth diversion strategies and increased supports for drug and alcohol addiction. I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Senator Cathal Byrne: As this is my maiden contribution on justice, I welcome the opportunity to raise many of the issues that have been raised with me in my capacity as a public representative, first on Wexford County Council and now in this Chamber. I appreciate the opportunity.

I will focus my contribution specifically on the question of rural crime. I will support some of the calls that have been made by the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, for a designated rural crime unit in the Garda. Some of the contributions that have been made this evening have touched on many of the issues that I would also like to highlight. I want to focus specifically on four key points. The first relates to rural crime. Many people may not be aware that criminal gangs are targeting farmers specifically to engage in the theft of global positioning system, GPS, units. The Garda suggests they are being taken to eastern Europe. Many farmers are finding that because the tractors and machinery they are using to sow their lands in the tillage season have high-powered GPS units within them, they are being targeted for theft. I encourage any new rural crime unit to pay specific attention to that, as well as the theft of livestock.

I also highlight the need for An Garda Síochána, the Department of Justice and the Minister of State to tackle some of the unexplained sources of wealth that exist in rural Ireland. Everyone is aware of situations where individuals are living far beyond their stated means. While many ideas and questions can be raised as to the source of these funds and income, we need a designated, targeted campaign and operation by An Garda Síochána, specifically in our rural villages, to tackle this issue head-on. It is an issue that has been allowed to fester in rural Ireland for some years now. It needs to be faced head-on. I encourage the Minister of State to tackle this issue in conjunction with the many members of An Garda Síochána who play an excellent role, day in day out, in ensuring the peace of our rural communities.

I also raise the issue of antisocial behaviour in our rural towns and villages. There are three main towns in my constituency of Wexford - Enniscorthy, Wexford town and New Ross. Unfortunately, it has now become a semi-accepted norm that instances of antisocial behaviour, especially in the early hours of the morning at weekends, have become commonplace. While some of these issues will always be with us - I am not naive enough to suggest otherwise - I am strongly of the view that a visible community policing effort to tackle antisocial behaviour, especially at the weekends, should be a priority for the Department in this coming term.

I am somebody who is very proud to be from Wexford. I am sure everybody, including all our guests who have joined us, will agree that the Wexford countryside is the most beautiful in all of Ireland but, unfortunately, there are those who take it upon themselves to litter, discard their rubbish or engage in fly-tipping. If we want to get serious about rural crime, we also need to get serious about the issue of littering. At present, if somebody decides to litter, the minimum fine he or she will get is €75. On conviction in court, it can be increased to €150, with a further increase to €3,000 at the discretion of the judge. I practise as a solicitor. The cold reality of this is that the current scale of the fines system is not sufficient to act as a deterrent to repeat fly-tipping offenders. I encourage the Minister of State to change the legislation in order to increase the number of fines we have in this area.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the guests of Deputy Shay Brennan to the Gallery. I hope they enjoy their visit.

Senator Eileen Flynn: The Minister of State is very welcome to the House. Senator Gallagher spoke about the need for more prisons and more community service during the Order of Business. I have done work over the past four and a half years in prisons, with members of the Traveller community and others. I say, as would people who are in prison, that we do not need more prisons. What we need is more community development and investment in our communities. I have heard a lot about law and order over the past two weeks in these Houses. For me, it is about investing in people. In 2008 and 2009, when the recession hit the country, the most vulnerable communities were hit the worst. These were places such as Ballyfermot, Clondalkin, Crumlin and rural parts of Ireland. CCTV footage does not stop crime. Gardaí do not stop crime. As Senator Ruane said, it is about poverty. We cannot police our way out of poverty.

The Minister of State is here in respect of justice, but we need a bigger conversation around health and access to health services for people from marginalised communities, in addition to services around addiction and rehabilitation. Drug addicts were mentioned in the debate. A person addicted to drugs can absolutely destroy a family and the community around him or her. I see that with members of my own family, unfortunately. Poverty is a vicious circle. The halting sites in this country all have big, massive walls and very run-down ramps and gates. It is like people are living in prison. If people are surrounded by walls, are part of a run-down community that is not looked after by local authorities - even in wider Ballyfermot and putting halting sites aside - are treated like prisoners and are let live like prisoners, they may begin to behave like they are in a prison.

I do not want to repeat what anybody in the House has already said, but it is not all the responsibility of the justice Department. Again, we need better wraparound mental health supports in this country, especially for young men, but for young women as well. We need people to have full employment. We talk about Ireland never being as great with employment, but more than 80% of members of the Traveller community are still unemployed. In other parts of Ireland as well, unemployment is still a big issue. We all have access to school but it is unfortunate we do not see people from some communities being successful within the education system.

Over the past two years, we have seen an increase in danger within Ireland when it comes to violence on the streets against people from ethnic minority groups and migrants. We hear the word “foreigners” being used. Something Senator Ruane said in the previous Seanad still strikes me today; these are “people with nothing fighting for nothing.” This comes from the Government. While communities are looking, and starving really, for accommodation, employment, equality of education and equality of healthcare in this country, we are putting one community against the other. That suits the Government, unfortunately, but it does not suit communities. As Senator Ruane said in the previous Seanad, again, “it is people with nothing fighting for nothing.”

I heard a Senator reference policing by consent. I have seen many cases where it was not policing by consent. It is where gardaí kick down a door at 5 o’clock in the morning, just go in, vanish through a house and terrorise the people in those houses. Again, that is not consent policing. Some communities are absolutely overpoliced. We have to have a bigger conversation on keeping communities safe. The only way we will keep all communities safe is by dealing with poverty and some of the crises in this country.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber and wish him the very best

in his new role. He will bring great energy and ambition to it, and will achieve great things.

It is fair to say we have heard a very informed and well-rounded debate on the issue of crime. The overwhelming view right across the political divide is that the solution to crime is not one-dimensional but multifaceted. While the Department of Justice has to ultimately do the heavy lifting, there are many other components to this, including social services intervention, community work, housing, poverty and deprivation. All those things need to be looked at in the round. One of the things we probably do not mention enough regarding crime and that has really come to the fore in recent weeks is corporate responsibility. We have seen a huge failing in this regard over recent weeks in the aftermath of the storm of 24 January. Across the country, there are still 3,500 people without phone coverage and broadband. Many of these people are in the midlands, north west and west and many are elderly and live in isolated communities. They are denied access to their panic alarms now because they do not have phone access.

I have been contacted by three elderly people living in the Ballinalee area, all in their 90s, who have been without full coverage since the storm and who have been told it could be two weeks before their phone coverage is returned. They are feeling isolated. They are not sleeping and are worrying, and they are suffering from the consequences of what is nothing short of absolute corporate greed. It is a huge failing on the part of the responsible companies, predominantly Eir, which provides the network and the cables across the country that service the phones. I am aware that many other phone operators depend on Eir, but ultimately the responsibility rests with it. What it is doing to the affected communities is nothing short of reprehensible. There are elderly people who cannot sleep at night and who feel isolated. They turn on the local radio for updates. I have listened to Shannonside FM for the past few mornings and noted that people are consistently ringing in on behalf of elderly parents and grandparents, irate that their phones have not been reconnected five weeks after the storm.

In Lanesborough, where I am from, there is a woman in her 80s living on a very isolated road whose phone is still not working. I believe her house is the only one on the road. Her daughter was told that it will be another three weeks before she has her phone line back. It is unforgivable that a corporate company that makes millions in this country can be allowed to continue like this and not provide the service. The most galling and telling aspect was that the three elderly residents in Ballinalee got a dispatch from the phone company today not offering an apology or stating it would be around next week to fix the phones but telling them their monthly bills were due – bills for a service they have not had for the past four weeks.

This company is failing us. Elderly people depend on panic alarms, which are their connection with the outside world. I appeal to the Minister of State to call out Eir and the phone companies on this and ask them without delay to rectify the situation. The affected people are elderly and are not able to resort to social media or post on Instagram or Facebook to criticise the companies. Invariably, these are the people in their 90s who did the heavy lifting, built this country and provided the building blocks for one of the most progressive, modern countries in Europe, which we now have. We have a country of untold wealth thanks to the efforts and toil of these people. We are now failing them as legislators and as a society. Ultimately, I am most aggrieved over how they are being treated by Eir and the phone companies. I ask the Minister of State to comment on this personally, make a strong statement and let Eir know we are deeply unhappy with its position on this and that how it is treating the elderly people is unforgivable.

Senator Pauline Tully: When discussing community safety, we instantly think of Garda numbers. It is well documented that the number of gardaí has declined while our population

has increased. I acknowledge that there are recruitment drives to try to increase the number but we know that over 1,600 gardaí are due to retire in the next five years. Efforts have to be made to ensure they will be replaced, to address the issues making gardaí leave the force long before they reach retirement age, and to build up the number of gardaí and Garda capacity. Since the number of gardaí is insufficient, they are stretched too thinly. A friend of mine remarked recently that she had seen the squad car in her town. Usually, gardaí are not seen in the town. It is a large town, not just a village. The gardaí are moving around from town to town, just showing their faces, but that is not sufficient. We need to make sure there is a presence in every town and village.

When I was growing up, there was at least one garda, but usually two or three, in every village, and many more in each of the towns. Maybe that was just because Cavan is a Border town - I do not know - but all the gardaí knew everybody and everybody knew them. We need to get back to community policing. As many have said before me, it is not just about feet on the beat; it is about investing in our communities. After the economic downturn there were quite severe cuts to our community services, particularly our mental health, youth and addiction services, and these cuts have had a detrimental effect on many of our communities.

I taught in a DEIS school for many years. It was easy to identify the families who needed support because there is intergenerational poverty, intergenerational unemployment and addiction problems. If there were investment in those families and their communities, it would pay dividends in the end because it would prevent many individuals from ending up in our prisons.

I remember teaching history, or trying to teach it, to a group of second-year pupils, aged 13 or 14. I was talking to them about a programme that had been on the night before and said that, since it had been on so late, they would have been in bed and would not have seen it. One of the students asked me what time it had been on and I said 10.30 p.m. He said he had been out running around the street at that time. I asked him where his parents had been such that they had not ensured he was in bed and he said they had been in the pub. That young man is now dead. He died of a drug overdose. If former pupils are listening to me now, they will not know what former student I am talking about because several have lost their lives to accidental drug overdoses. Those are people who came from families in which there was intergenerational poverty and unemployment and who needed support. We need to invest in our communities and deprived areas so we can prevent crime. We are not going to prevent all crime but we can certainly prevent a certain amount of it.

I engaged recently with the National Youth Council of Ireland, which has said that the funding it gets is very restrictive. It does not get multi-annual funding so it is very hard for it to plan. There are some excellent projects but the council is limited in what it can do because it cannot expand its services. There is no funding for staff. We need to address that and ensure substantial funding is put into all community services, youth services, addiction services and mental health services.

Some Senators have called for an increase in the number of prison places. I remember engaging with the Prison Service when I was a member of the disability committee during the term of the last Dáil. There is a large number of people in our Prison Service who should not be there. I am not saying they have been wrongfully convicted or anything – they are in prison because they have committed crimes – but they may have mental health issues or be autistic. In many cases, they will have committed a crime and ended up in prison because they did not get the community support they required. Had they got it, it is quite possible that they would

have gone on to live different lives. Therefore, we need to ensure the required community supports and services are made available to support people with mental health and addiction issues, particularly our youth.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank all the Senators for their input this evening. It was very interesting to listen to the contributions. All of us, being practising public representatives, citizens and people living in our own communities, have a vested interest in ensuring community safety is key and paramount. We need only look at the programme for Government for the next five years, which has been agreed to and published and is available for everybody to read, to see very extensive sections on justice, policing, crime, rehabilitation and prisons. They refer to the whole range of functions right across the Department of justice, home affairs and migration, which is also a huge issue and means a huge undertaking within the Department.

Let me put this matter into context. I have said we are all public representatives. We are all right in advocating for our own communities and seeking more resources and public services for them. That is our job as public representatives. With regard to policing, in particular, about seven or eight years ago the Houses of the Oireachtas were convulsed for a number of years – some Senators may recall it – regarding various very challenging issues within An Garda Síochána. You could call them scandals or issues. There were several of them and many of them were raised on the floors of the Seanad and the Dáil. They took up a lot of the time of the Oireachtas and of the then Government. One of the criticisms at the time was that there was political policing in Ireland and that the Government was too close to An Garda Síochána. One of the outcomes that came out of that period was the establishment of the independent Policing Authority. To the best of my knowledge, that was supported by pretty much everybody across the Houses of the Oireachtas. The independent Policing Authority was set up on a statutory basis and put An Garda Síochána at arm's length from the Government. Prior to that, when people were promoted to the rank of superintendent - I am not sure if this also applied to the rank of inspector - the decision had to go before the Cabinet. The view was that the Government of the day was too close to the Garda Commissioner of the day and that they were not as detached as they should be and as was seen in successful policing models elsewhere.

The point I am making is that we have an independent Policing Authority that is at arm's length from the Government and other public representatives. Of course, we all deal with local members of An Garda Síochána through our JPCs, which are now to be called community safety partnerships and will have public representatives on them, but the independent operation of An Garda Síochána is solely the function of the Garda Commissioner and his team. They have independence in how they apply Garda resources. We give them laws, powers, money and resources, and it is then up to them. They produce an annual policing plan. Each local Garda division also produces an annual policing plan. It all feeds into that. While we all want more members of An Garda Síochána in our own divisions and districts and we all rightly advocate for that, we do not sit over in Government Buildings and tell the Garda Commissioner where to put gardaí. That is his job.

Obviously, I did not hear the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, speak when he was in the Chamber, as I have come to relieve him. As he has stated publicly, though, we agreed when we were appointed to this Department that we wanted to see more Garda visibility in our communities and on our streets up and down the country. We want to see gardaí in every type of community setting, whether urban or rural. The Minister has impressed his desire and view upon the Garda Commissioner. At the end of the day, it is up to the Commissioner to try to do his job to

the best of his ability, but it is fair to say that he will take on board the view that was expressed.

This leads on to recruitment. We have 14,100 gardaí. It is stated definitively within the programme for Government that we want to recruit an additional 5,000 over the lifetime of this Government. If we can get to that, it will be a great measure of success. There is a substantial job of work to do to get to that point. We have challenges. There is the challenge of people who decide they want to change careers, which many do. Some people do not look at careers as being life-long now. We have pushed the entry age up to 49 years, so a 49-year-old can now apply to An Garda Síochána. We have also pushed the retirement age up to 62. That could go further again. We are pushing recruitment. As Senators are aware, a recruitment campaign is ongoing. I encourage all public representatives in the Houses to share that on their social media profiles. The closing date is Thursday of this week. People can apply online. It is a fantastic career. I encourage people who are interested to look at it.

Regarding the recruits coming out of the Garda Training College at Templemore, everyone is advocating for more of them to come to each of our respective Garda divisions. I am conscious that some of the Senators who have spoken are rural while others are urban, living on the east coast or in Dublin in particular. It is a fact that the vast majority of the recruits that have been coming out of Templemore from the past number of batches have been coming to the greater Dublin area and the wider east coast, which is where the greater population is. However, this is not to say that other areas have not seen an increase. They have. In my own area of Limerick, there were 554 gardaí in 2015. At the end of 2024, there were 582. The number of vehicles in the Limerick Garda division in 2015 was 92. That number is now 132, which is a significant increase. There have been significant increases in my own division. I do not have the numbers for each of the divisions around the country, but Senators will be aware that the Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána account for some of the largest budget subheads in the State.

I will pick up on some other matters that were mentioned. All of the contributions are being watched in the back offices of the Department of Justice. People will take note of everything that was said, feeding into the work we do.

The programme for Government has a number of sections on the modernisation and improvement of our Courts Service. That is a continuous job of work. I refer particularly to our family law courts. Many Senators mentioned family law issues, delays in that regard and how they impact on families, particularly women. It is right that issues like the inability to enforce court-ordered maintenance payments, which has a severe impact on people, are mentioned in some of the strategies.

The youth justice strategy and youth diversion programmes do important work. It is about intervening with young people, teenagers in particular, who are identified as potentially going down the wrong path in life and working with them to steer them back onto the right path and take them away from criminality. I will visit such a programme in my own constituency on Thursday. There are many more of them around the country and they do fabulous work. There will be a budget of approximately €33 million for youth diversion this year. That is a significant amount of money.

Regarding JPCs, most people in the House would have sat on one as a local authority member, as I did, or even as an Oireachtas Member. These are now being superseded by community safety committees, which will have an expanded role and membership. As Senator Fitzpatrick mentioned, they will rightly have public representatives on them, but there will also be people

from the HSE, Tusla and other State agencies, such as the Probation Service. These are people who have front-line experience and a lot to offer. Community groups will also play a major part, and offering them an opportunity be part of those forums is important. Each of the local authorities is conducting an exercise to seek expressions of interest from people to act as the chairperson of those new committees.

I am stuck on names because we are all new here. Senator Scahill mentioned policing by consent. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has rightly mentioned that in many of his early interviews since taking up the role of Minister for Justice. We are really lucky that there is a fantastic working relationship between the vast majority of the people of Ireland and An Garda Síochána. Long may that last. The Senator mentioned something I have heard a number of times, that is, paperwork and administration in the Garda. I hear the Senator when he says that but in the era we are living in, if proper records are not kept, it becomes an issue. I often say that when people are giving out about hospital management and saying that the hospitals are stacked with middle management, pen pushers and paper pushers. If someone goes into an organisation and there is no record of the person or of an event relating to that person, it raises questions about why there is no such record. I know it myself from sitting on the joint policing committee in Limerick, where there would be the data analyst from the Garda division making a presentation to us, as she used to do. Statistics and data are very important in affording and allowing members of An Garda Síochána to develop and devise their policing strategies and policing plans. I know paperwork can be the enemy, but it also can be your friend, and, unfortunately, it is quite necessary.

Much has been said about Garda stations. About ten years ago, there were huge debates in both Houses of the Oireachtas on rural Garda stations because the closure of Garda stations was the Government policy at the time. Many people, including me, did not agree with that. However, much investment is now going into new Garda stations. I can point to my own constituency where, in the town of Newcastle West, the sod was turned recently on the construction of a new, fantastic Garda station. It will be a substantial Garda station to serve the west Limerick community. I note Senator Dee Ryan has raised and campaigned on the much-needed issue of a new Garda station on the east side of Limerick city, with the rapidly expanding population in the Castletroy-Monaleen area. It is badly needed and we will support it in government. The OPW has been tasked with finding, identifying and acquiring a suitable site to do it, and progressing it.

I will mention a few of the other issues. I do not know what to say to my colleague, Senator Rabbitte, about the drug dog for Galway. Perhaps she should have a word with the chief and ask him where that is going. She mentioned quite rightly the number of heroin detections in Galway city. I used to find the JPC was terribly helpful with that, and the new community safety committees will have a huge role in that.

The issue of antisocial behaviour in our urban settings was raised by Senator Mary Fitzpatrick and other speakers. It is a big challenge. We have it in all the big urban areas of Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Galway, where people are begging and carrying on in an antisocial behaviour manner and fashion. It comes back to gardaí being visible on the street and enforcing and rolling out a plan for it. We all speak from the experiences of our own communities. Superintendent Andrew Lacey in Limerick has put a lot of work into that in Limerick city centre. I am told it is bearing results. It is something that needs to be worked on day by day and you need the manpower to do it. That, again, falls back to the Garda recruitment campaign, which is under way to try to encourage people in.

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People mentioned an expanded Judiciary. It is within the programme for Government to appoint more judges. We have to appoint more family law judges. We need more judges in the appeal courts to try to speed up the hearing of cases and the processing of cases because, as we all know, justice delayed is justice denied. We need to ensure we have a unit within the courts related to planning law. As we know, there are many issues. That was one of the outworkings of the new planning Bill, which was enacted just before the general election.

Rural crime was mentioned in relation to the IFA. There is a commitment in the programme for Government, as Senators will note, to devise, in conjunction with An Garda Síochána, a national rural safety strategy. That will put another added focus on the issue of rural crime.

Senator Cathal Byrne mentioned unexplained wealth. I think it goes without saying that one of the most successful units within An Garda Síochána is the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB. It does outstanding work to identify, investigate and recover the proceeds of crime. Every Garda division has a CAB unit - a CAB officer and a CAB office. They do good work and they are quite successful. They should be supported.

Senator Tully mentioned mental health, community supports and addiction issues in the context of prison spaces. There is a commitment within the programme for Government to provide for increased prison spaces, as she knows. Much investment has gone in over recent years to create additional prison spaces. Her points were very well made. It goes back to some of the youth diversion programmes and putting in place the proper front-line services to help people who suffer addiction and who suffer from mental health, like the CAST programme that is being piloted in Limerick that tries to intervene with people and recognise the issues and challenges they have to try to keep them away from the custodial system. At the same time, however, we have to be real about it as well. We have a growing population, and with a growing population there will be a greater prevalence of crime. Unfortunately, despite all of the issues just mentioned, the State has to have the capacity to be able to put people behind bars where the crimes so dictate or the courts so decide.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State for being here for the debate, where more than half the Seanad contributed to the very important topic of safety in our communities. When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Dee Ryan: At 10.30 a.m. tomorrow.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 7.57 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 26 Feabhra 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 7.57 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 26 February 2025.