



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**SEANAD ÉIREANN**

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

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## SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 12 Meitheamh 2025*

*Thursday, 12 June 2025*

Chuaigh an Leas-Chathaoirleach i gceannas ar 9.30 a.m.

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*Machnamh agus Paidir.  
Reflection and Prayer.*

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### Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** The Cathaoirleach has received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters:

Senator Dee Ryan - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on actions she is planning in preparation for winter 2025 and the seasonal surge in presentations at the accident and emergency department in University Hospital Limerick.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Health to immediately reinstate the out-of-hours SouthDoc services in Listowel, County Kerry.

Senator Gareth Scahill - The need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on the Government's commitment to the target in the biomethane strategy; and to confirm the timeline for the introduction of the renewable heat obligation.

Senator Victor Boyhan - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the relocation of the Mountainside Montessori school, Stepside, Dublin, for the period September 2025 to June 2026.

Senator Evanne Ní Chuilinn - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the shortage of public health nurses to complete developmental checks for children in Dublin 12 and surrounding areas.

Senator Manus Boyle - The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the improvements in rural transport systems being considered under the national sustainability mobility policy action plan, in particular in relation to routes in the Ardara and Glenties area of Donegal.

Senator Cathal Byrne - The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the provisions in place for controlled burning on mountains throughout the country, with regard to land management and reducing the risk of wildfire during the dry

periods of weather.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - The need for the Minister of State for older people to make a statement on adult safeguarding legislation in light of the recent RTE documentary which highlighted the abuse of vulnerable elderly in nursing homes.

Senator Joe Conway - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to clarify the conditions for boards of management in schools in a BAM school bundle who wish to add a special needs classroom or facility through open tendering.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and the Cathaoirleach has selected Senators Dee Ryan, Mike Kennelly, Gareth Scahill and Victor Boyhan, 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**

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I welcome to the Chamber the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

### **Hospital Overcrowding**

**Senator Dee Ryan:** An tAire Stáit is welcome to the Chamber, and I thank him for coming to take this matter. I raise this matter once more. It is the number one priority for people living in Limerick and a huge concern for people across the mid-west, including in Limerick, Clare and Tipperary. It came up at more doors than housing in Limerick during the general election campaign. That is how sincerely people in Limerick feel about the issue. If the Minister of State lived in Limerick, he would feel this way too.

To recap, there are 450,000 people across Limerick, Clare and north Tipperary. The University Hospital Limerick, UHL, group is the hospital group which operates the region with one accident and emergency department. It is the only hospital group in the country that operates with just one accident and emergency department to serve its population. We have had chronic overcrowding for the past 15 years. We have had record high numbers of patients on trolleys. Just this morning, UHL is again the hospital with the most patients on trolleys in the country. The HSE's population profiles show that more than an average number of amount of people living in the mid-west would be classed as extremely disadvantaged, very disadvantaged or disadvantaged. I will say that again. We have higher than average levels of people in the normal population in the country classed as extremely disadvantaged, very disadvantaged or disadvantaged. We know that there is a correlation between poverty and complex health needs, and, therefore, a greater number of presentations to accident and emergency departments.

I acknowledge the progress that has been made, particularly during the term of the previous Government when staffing numbers were increased by approximately 100,000 healthcare workers across the UHL group. The first 96-bed block is due to open in September, and we are very much looking forward to that. The Minister has been to Limerick and has had a tour of the facility. The second 96-bed block that was commissioned is under way. A total of 16 rapid-build beds were put in place in December last year and a further 16 have been committed to. I

understand they will go in this summer. The former Minister, Stephen Donnelly, announced last November a further 84 beds.

This all sounds like great news, and I know and understand that these measures will help to alleviate the problem. However, they are not helping in the here and now. We are already very worried about this winter. We have the highest level of patients on trolleys across the country. The majority of people presenting to accident and emergency departments are elderly people. If an elderly loved one in my family has a slip or a trip and has to go into the accident and emergency department, he or she will be facing a much longer wait, with less frequent access to care, than any other person in the country. That is simply not fair. The people of Limerick and the mid-west are very worried.

I received notice from the office of the Minister last Friday that the HIQA report into accident and emergency care across the mid-west region, commissioned by the previous Minister has been delayed. It was expected to be presented to the current Minister in May and published when she was ready to publish it. I appreciate that the Minister has a lot of important and pressing healthcare matters on her plate. However, my question is that regardless of the recommendations of the HIQA report - and I note that the programme for Government committed to putting more beds into UHL - what actions is the Minister preparing for this winter, as we face into another seasonal surge in illness and as we anxiously anticipate higher than ever trolley numbers?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan):** I thank the Senator for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I know how important University Hospital Limerick is to the people of the region. Clearly, it is a matter the Senator is passionate about and acutely aware of. She has presented her case well, especially her analysis of why there is a higher number of presentations at UHL, which is clearly the case. I will do my best to lay out the situation nationally and specifically that of University Hospital Limerick. A key priority of the Minister is to provide a seven-day health service to the public. Progress has been made over recent bank holiday weekends to ensure patients receive the care they need in a timely and efficient manner throughout the week. Services again undertook significant work in the week preceding the June bank holiday weekend to maximise discharges and patient flow, which was the key factor in ensuring most sites had sufficient capacity to meet demands over the bank holiday weekend. This resulted in 55% fewer patients waiting on trolleys at 8 a.m. over the June bank holiday weekend compared with the St. Brigid's Day bank holiday weekend this year. Out of the total 29 acute hospital sites with 24-7 emergency departments, seven sites maintained a level of zero patients waiting on trolleys at 8 a.m. throughout the weekend, Saturday to Monday, inclusive. A number of sites continue to consistently achieve good operational grip, avoiding congestion and maintaining patient flow, such as Connolly Hospital, MRH Tullamore and UH Waterford. However, on Tuesday, 3 June, UHL reported 49 patients on trolleys at 8 a.m., making it one of eight sites in red status. From January to May 2025, attendances at UHL's emergency department were up 8% compared with the same period in 2024, and it is ranked highest nationally for overall emergency department attendances and admissions. The Senator eloquently outlined why that may be the case. The impact this has on patients and their families is something this Government is deeply committed to addressing.

In preparation for winter 2025, a large and ongoing programme of work is under way focusing on increasing capacity and improving patient flow. Crucially, more than 100 new beds are due to be opened at UHL in the coming year, while 16 beds completed construction at the end

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of May 2025 and are anticipated to open in quarter 3. The first 96-bed ward block is expected to complete construction in quarter 3 of 2025 and expected to be opened as soon as possible once completed. It remains to be seen whether that will happen in time for the winter. This additional capacity will be vital as we head into the winter period. Furthermore, a 16-bed unit was completed in December 2024, already contributing to increased capacity at the hospital. Enabling works for the second 96-bed block at UHL are progressing. A planning application was submitted for the second ward block in March 2025.

To enhance patient flow and avoid unnecessary emergency department presentations, several key interventions are being implemented. The medical assessment units at Ennis and Nenagh hospitals have had extended evening service hours since October 2024, providing additional weekly capacity for 34 and 22 patients, respectively. The virtual ward at UHL can now accommodate 25 patients. Work is under way to operationalise an emergency department in the home, EDITH, service at UHL. Community rehabilitation units in Ennis and Nenagh are already operational. The HSE CEO has explicitly asked regional executive officers to continue implementing seven-day working and extended hours across all services relevant to improving patient flow. This includes ensuring senior decision-makers are rostered on-site over weekends and in the evenings, leveraging the benefits of the public-only consultant contract which provides for rostered work from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Friday and 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays. Work continues to enhance discharge processes to support patients prior to 12 p.m. seven days a week. The urgent and emergency care operational plan 2024 provides a comprehensive framework covering hospital avoidance, emergency department operations, in-hospital care delivery and discharge management. That sets out some of the plans in place to try to increase capacity at UHL prior to the winter months.

**Senator Dee Ryan:** I appreciate the Minister of State coming to the House to give me that information but, with the greatest respect to him and the Minister, I have heard all of this before. I know all of those figures and about all of those initiatives. Other than the extension of the medical assessment unit hours in Ennis and Nenagh, they are not specific to UHL. What is the Minister considering for this winter? I am not hearing about short-term interventions specifically for UHL, that the Minister is considering a temporary reopening of accident and emergency departments in Ennis or Nenagh, that she will assign additional staff to the UHL emergency department, or that she is planning on installing more temporary beds. We need a specific UHL emergency department winter plan and we need it now.

**Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan:** I completely understand Senator Ryan’s frustration and concern. This has gone on for too long in UHL. We have heard the stories and examples of long waiting times on trolleys. It is not good enough. There needs to be urgent action. I also mentioned the 100 extra beds due to come online in the coming year. I hope that will alleviate some of the pressure. The Senator mentioned the medical assessment units in Ennis and Nenagh. They should alleviate some of the pressure. There are other innovations nationally, only where appropriate, with types of virtual triage. That sometimes prevents extra numbers presenting to accident and emergency departments. That can be looked at. I will express the Senator’s frustrations directly to the Minister and ensure she is aware of the need for a UHL-specific action plan.

## Health Services

**Senator Mike Kennelly:** I welcome the Minister of State. I am speaking on a promise I made to the people of north Kerry that, when I became a voice for them in the Seanad, I would do what I could to reinstate out-of-hours SouthDoc services in Listowel. SouthDoc is an out-of-hours GP service operating across Kerry and Cork, providing urgent medical care when a person's regular GP is unavailable. It is designed for situations that require prompt attention but are not life threatening. This issue affects the everyday lives, well-being and safety of the people of north Kerry. An out-of-hours SouthDoc service needs to be reinstated in Listowel as soon as possible. As it stands, there is no out-of-hours GP service in Listowel or anywhere else in north Kerry. Residents in this large rural region from Astee to Abbeydorney - I will give the Minister of State a geography lesson - Ballylongford to Ballyduff, Ballybunion to Ballyheige, Moyvane to Kilflynn, Tarbert to Lixnaw, Duagh to Causeway, Lyracrumpane to Finuge and into Listowel town - that is the area - require this emergency service to be reinstated. This large area has a growing population, as many do, an elderly population and a large sporting population, so the need outcores any claim against it.

Right now, these people must travel to Tralee after hours to access urgent care. For many, that is a 40 km to 50 km journey one way. In a medical emergency at night with young children or for elderly and vulnerable patients, that is not safe, fair or sustainable. I mentioned Astee. If there is a game there today before 8 p.m. and there is a casualty and stitches are required for a young person, by the time they get to Tralee and back, the cut would probably have closed up itself. It is not fair.

Listowel is significant regional town. We are fortunate to have a new, modern primary care centre that provides an excellent range of wrap-around services - GPs, nurses, physiotherapists, mental health support and more - but we do not have an out-of-hours GP service. That is the missing piece in a system that should be built to serve people where they live, not force them to travel long distances in distress.

What message does that send to the people of north Kerry? That their health is less important? That their distance makes them second-class citizens? That is how many in our community feel. Parents tell me they are terrified when their children get sick in the middle of the night. Elderly residents are delaying getting help and local emergency departments are already under pressure because there is no nearby alternative for a basic out-of-hours service. This is not just a convenience issue, it is a public health issue that is only getting worse.

We are not asking for something extraordinary. We are asking of the same level of access to care that other towns of a similar size and population have. If the infrastructure is available and in Listowel, then an out-of-hours service must follow. In the Minister of State's own area of west Cork, he is well aware of the SouthDoc service in Clonakilty into Bantry and Skibbereen and even over to Macroom. We need this service, which his own area has.

I call urgently on the Minister for Health, the HSE and the management of SouthDoc to do the right thing and re-establish an out-of-hours SouthDoc space in Listowel, give the people of north Kerry what they deserve - safe, timely and local medical care no matter the hour. Healthcare access should not depend on your postcode. We need action now before this gap in service leads to even greater harm.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I thank Senator Kennelly for raising this Commencement matter, which I am again taking on behalf of the Minister for Health. He is absolutely right. We have the same service in Cork South-West. I understand that reconfigurations have



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happened over recent years and that these have caused concern. Consolidation and reconfiguration happen, and this causes concern. I hope to allay some of those concerns. If there are any questions I cannot answer, I will revert to the Minister.

I will outline how the service works. GPs are private practitioners. Most of them hold contracts with the HSE for the provision of health services on its behalf. GPs contracted under the general medical services, GMS, scheme are required to make suitable arrangements to enable contact to be made with them or with a locum or deputy for urgent care outside of normal practice hours. The GPs participate in GP out-of-hours co-operatives as a means of meeting this contractual requirement. As the Senator will be aware, the SouthDoc co-operative provides out-of-hours urgent GP care within Cork and Kerry. While they are private organisations, the HSE provides substantial funding to support out-of-hours co-operatives through service level agreements, so the HSE does have a role here. There are many factors involved in the delivery of the SouthDoc service including the availability of doctors, staff and infrastructure. Delivery of the service is supported by a bespoke patient management system and a call centre where all patient calls are acknowledged, documented and triaged. The co-operative provides a medical service to a population of approximately 736,000 in addition to visitors to the area. It dealt with over 200,000 patient contacts in 2024.

SouthDoc constantly reviews its service provision to ensure its continued viability. With specific regard to Listowel, a service consolidation plan was implemented in January 2024. Three doctor teams, those at Castleisland, Listowel and Tralee, were consolidated to provide a more sustainable out-of-hours service to the people of north Kerry. While routine appointments are scheduled in Tralee, the service plan includes the retention of the Listowel treatment centre for urgent appointments based on clinical need. A dedicated home visit division then provides care for patients unable to attend an out-of-hours treatment centre. In addition, the plan includes the direct employment of doctors to supplement the local GPs in the out-of-hours service and the addition of locum doctor supports at weekends and on public holidays.

SouthDoc has advised that these changes were essential to maintaining the SouthDoc service in the north Kerry area. It reports the implementation was necessary to alleviate service pressures that were undermining the sustainability of both the daytime and out-of-hours general practice service for patients. The HSE advises that the revised model of service is showing positive results, with both Listowel and Tralee reporting an increase in expressions of interest from GPs to join daytime practice in these areas. SouthDoc states it is committed to the long-term continuation of the provision of the out-of-hours service in the north Kerry region. All treatment centres in the area remain available to the out-of-hours service as necessary. The provision of this service will continue to be evaluated by SouthDoc and the HSE on an ongoing basis.

That is an outline of the consolidation efforts that were made. Similar efforts were made in Cork South-West, which did cause concern. From what we have seen so far, there has not been a drop-off in the level of service patients are getting. The critical point here, which the Senator alluded to, is trying to attract GPs to work in areas like north Kerry and Cork South-West. That is the key challenge. The more GPs we can get to take up positions in rural areas, the more comprehensive an out-of-hours service we can provide. I hope this consolidation will attract more GPs to the north Kerry area, which would allow the service to get back to the levels the Senator has talked about.

**Senator Mike Kennelly:** I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I have seen this before. Let us be honest. I will go back to what I said in my opening contribution; the population here

has grown nearly twofold. We should be thankful that it has. During the Covid pandemic, many of the kids came home to live and work in the area and in their family homes. They have stayed in the area. Football team numbers are increasing. Everything is increasing. However, what has unfortunately been decreasing is emergency out-of-hours care services. The out-of-hours service contract covers from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. every evening. In Listowel, it was initially from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. but that has disappeared. It is okay to say that someone will come out if it is important but, at the top end of north Kerry, that is not 25 minutes later but five hours later. It is just not good enough. For many people, it is not accessible although, if you do not have transport, someone will come out.

In the context of health, it is a case of picking and choosing. It is not sustainable. It is not something that can continue until we get a full service in the primary care centre in Listowel, as I have mentioned. To take anything else out of this is just not good enough.

On the out-of-hours service, the two areas of Ballybunion and Ballyheigue are on the Wild Atlantic Way. The population grows threefold or fourfold during the summer months. When do accidents happen and when do kids fall? It is almost always out of hours. There is nothing fast available. If I travel to Listowel tomorrow morning, the accident and emergency department will probably be clogged up. I would be clogging that system up and clogging up the whole HSE format. I ask for a written statement from the HSE that it will review this situation and what I have stated here on the floor of the Seanad as soon as possible. We need this. It is an urgent medical call from the people of north Kerry to the HSE and to SouthDoc management, who have not been forthcoming. Many councillors from the Listowel area have asked for these boys to come to the table and they have refused. I ask the HSE to review this with SouthDoc and to come back to the people of north Kerry with a positive answer.

**Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan:** I will absolutely request such a review. The Senator is right. SouthDoc has its own management structures and board. The HSE has very little input into its day-to-day running but it does fund the service so it must expect an appropriate level of service. The Senator gave a good lesson on the geography of Kerry. I am familiar enough with north Kerry. It is very similar to west Cork in many ways in that it is huge geographically. You have got peninsulas and inlets, so it is geographically awkward and requires a bespoke approach to out-of-hours services. In some instances where patients find it difficult to go to the SouthDoc centre, the idea of GPs being driven out to visit homes can work. For example, where an older person would find it difficult to make the journey, that can work. I take the Senator’s general point and will go back to the Department of Health and the Minister to ask for a review as soon as possible.

## **Renewable Energy Generation**

**Senator Gareth Scahill:** While I have the Minister of State here, I will thank him for his recent help regarding the special area of conservation in Gorthaganny in Caher, west Roscommon, following the recent gorse fires. I thank him and his Department in that regard.

My question is on the national biomethane strategy. The Government published the national biomethane strategy in 2024. It sets out an ambitious scaling up from a few plants to 200 anaerobic digester facilities with an output of 5.7 TWh annually by 2030. The strategy is agriculture-led and farmer-centric and focused on using agricultural feedstocks like slurry and silage to create a new income stream for farmers. It outlines 25 key actions across five pillars:



sustainability, demand for biomethane, bioeconomy and circular economy, economics, and enabling policy. Key supports include the upcoming renewable heat obligation to create market demand and capital grants for AD plant construction. The biogas and biomethane industry in Ireland offers significant advantages and opportunities including energy security, decarbonisation as we move away from fossil fuels, jobs and economic activity in rural areas, farm diversification in the production of silage and other feedstocks, water quality improvements, alternative organic fertilisers, and rural growth and development. Ireland's renewable heat obligation is a planned policy designed to significantly increase the use of renewable energy for heating across the country. The RHO is considered a crucial support mechanism for Ireland's broader climate targets including its ambitious biomethane strategy. It is expected to be implemented in late 2025 or early 2026. The Government has undertaken extensive consultation to finalise its design and ensure its smooth introduction.

Last autumn, with assistance from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine administered a capital grants support programme for biomethane plants. This was a 20% capital grant with a total budget of €40 million from RePowerEU funding. Some 18 projects were given letters of offer with a deadline for the completion of works of 31 December 2025. Only two or three of those projects have commenced as there is no market for biomethane because the Government is yet to publish and announce details of the renewable heat obligation, which is required to drive the market for biomethane produced and give investment certainty to the funders. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could make a statement on the Government's commitment to the biomethane strategy and confirm the timeline and steps for the introduction of the renewable heat obligation.

*10 o'clock*

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Darragh O'Brien. I am delighted to see this issue being raised in the Seanad because I see it as a key way for agriculture in particular to play its part in renewable energy provision. I always point to the example of the Timoleague anaerobic digester in my neck of the woods. It almost acts as a co-operative, where the local piggery brings manure as an input into the anaerobic digester, the local distillery supplies waste grain as an input and other waste products also go in as inputs, and gas is produced to provide energy for homes. Digestate, which is a valid form of agricultural fertiliser, is produced as well. It is the perfect example of the circular economy and something I would love to see rolled out, so I accept the urgency of this.

The Government has committed to delivering up to 5.7 TWh of indigenously produced biomethane by 2030. Delivery of this target and the use of biomethane within our energy system will have multiple cross-sectoral benefits for Ireland's economy, energy security and emissions profile. A first step to realising this ambition was the publication of the national biomethane strategy. In partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the strategy was published in May 2024. The strategy sets out a pathway to achieving Ireland's biomethane production target, addresses the challenges that need to be overcome and outlines the necessary supports and policy enablers needed to drive growth across the sector.

Implementation of the national biomethane strategy is an ongoing process of collaboration across key Departments and agencies and the biomethane implementation group has been established to oversee implementation of the strategy and delivery of the 25 key strategic actions to ensure the necessary infrastructure and supports are in place to support development of an

indigenous biomethane industry of scale. Chaired by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, with close support from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the group reports directly to the heat and built environment task force on ongoing progress. The group continues to engage with action owners and key stakeholders to monitor implementation and finalisation of a full progress report, which will provide an update on key deliverables, including publication of the biomethane charter. The development of the biomethane information hub and communications strategy is under way. It is expected that this progress report will be published on *gov.ie* shortly.

The Government has also agreed to the introduction of a renewable heat obligation, RHO, to ensure the increased use of renewable fuel types across the full heating sector, with the primary aim of supporting the achievement of Ireland's heating and cooling targets at EU level. The development of the RHO is a key priority for the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and the necessary analysis and impact assessment that has informed the design of the RHO and the RHO high-level scheme has now been finalised. The Department is drafting the RHO heads of Bill for submission to the Government shortly and, once approved by the Government, will begin drafting of the RHO primary legislation to underpin the introduction.

The Senator is right that the RHO legislation is needed and needs to be progressed quickly. It would be a shame if we missed that opportunity in terms of the December deadline for anaerobic digesters to avail of EU funding. The direction of travel is going in the right direction, though. There was no biomethane or anaerobic digestion strategy 12 or 18 months ago but there is now. I agree with the Senator that it is a key way of driving economies in rural areas, reducing emissions and making digesters sustainable.

**Senator Gareth Scahill:** I appreciate that this is not the Minister of State's brief. The opportunity for energy independence cannot be something we let go. I have some feedback. A leading industry body has warned that biomethane production in Ireland must be incentivised and supported ahead of cheaper imported biomethane. The current Government target for indigenous production of biomethane is 5.7 TWh each year but the Irish Bioenergy Association has highlighted that there is a need to urgently address the fundamental issue of fraudulent activity in the non-EU bio-liquid supply chain. This is something we need to be aware of.

The Minister of State obviously will not know this, but since I came to the Chamber, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Heydon, has announced a €10 million fund for projects under the bioeconomy demonstration initiative as part of the just transition. I hope that solutions will materialise as the day goes on.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** Fair play to the Senator. He got to announce that instead of me. That is some going. The news is welcome. Farmers want to play their part in reducing emissions. The bulk of the input into an anaerobic digester is coming from farming and we are getting renewable gas and electricity to power thousands of homes, so I have always felt that those emissions reductions should be attributed to the agricultural sector. That is not the case at the moment but it is something I would love to see. We need to ramp it up. We have far too few anaerobic digesters. When one compares our biomethane production to that of Germany and France, which have hundreds and sometimes thousands of anaerobic digesters, we can see it is a key energy source. Sometimes in Ireland, we are on red alert in terms of energy and electricity and this is because of lack of production of energy. Anaerobic digestion could play a key role in that regard. We are also importing gas, so this could reduce our reliance on international gas.

I commend the Senator on raising the matter.

### **Childcare Services**

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I welcome the Minister of State. I spoke to the Minister for Education and Youth yesterday outside the Seanad and she indicated that she hoped to be here for this Commencement matter but, clearly, she is unable to attend. I am sorry about that but I thank and welcome the Minister of State for agreeing to step in. I acknowledge that it is not his Department but I will set out the case as I understand it to be.

I was contacted by the independent councillor Michael Fleming from Stepside in Dublin who asked me to meet the parents of Mountainside Montessori in Stepside, County Dublin. I also met the management of the Montessori. Mountainside Montessori at Holy Trinity National School is an inclusive preschool provider. It is fully committed to offering equal access to all children and families and is inclusive of gender, civil status, religion, age, race, disability, family and membership of the Traveller community. It offers an open-door policy at all times throughout the school year and encourages close collaboration and partnership with the parents and guardians of the children. Mountainside operates the ECCE scheme, which offers up to two years for preschool education three hours per day to children under the age of two years and eight months. It opens from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Monday to Friday. Most of the children there follow on to Holy Trinity National School, which is on the same site, and the Montessori follows that school's calendar.

The community section of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is fully aware of the issues. They have been raised with the county childcare committee, which has engaged with Mountainside looking at various options, but nothing has been delivered. Effectively, having received notice from Holy Trinity National School in 2024 that its space would now be utilised and would no longer be available to the preschool, the preschool has not been successful in securing an alternative. Families affected by the cessation of Mountainside Montessori are very anxious about where their children will go in September. This is a reasonable, accessible and inclusive Montessori service in Stepside, an area that is growing significantly. Working parents are now thinking about possibly having to pull out of work. They do not know where their children will be going on 1 September, which is a disappointment.

It has been brought to my attention that there are a number of prefabs vacant at Stepside Educate Together Secondary School, which is very close to Holy Trinity and would be perfect for Montessori use under an agreed licence and subject to any terms and conditions required by Tusla. It is approved by Tusla and is compliant with all the regulations, so that is not an issue.

Clearly, this is about resources. I am talking about an interim measure for the next year. We, or the Government and TDs in that constituency, will have a problem on their hands on 1 September. I have seen correspondence from the Department of Education and Youth, which I had hoped to put to the Minister today, but she is not here. This is from the principal. The correspondence states:

I wish to advise that the Department of Education has instructed us that any existing rental agreement should not be renewed, and no other rental agreement should be entered into for the interim accommodation on the Stepside ETSS school site [That is the Educate Together site]. The Department is currently reviewing accommodation requirements for the

Stepaside ETSS to establish which units will be retained [these are the prefabricated units] and what will need to be removed to facilitate the construction of phase 2 of the school-building project.

In essence, those involved - all of the children and all of the parents - are anxious and need an interim facility. All that is being sought is the use of empty prefabs on a school site for less than 12 months, from September this year to next June. I hope the Department will commit to that. It needs to do something. We will of course hear pronouncements and condemnations by TDs across all parties and none in the next few weeks, but we now have time on our side to do something.

**Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan:** I thank Senator Boyhan for raising this issue. The way he describes Mountainside Montessori school sounds incredible. It sounds inclusive and open and is exactly the type of model we should have for our Montessori schools. There is clearly an urgency because September is looming and there needs to be a solution in place. I am not sure if my answer will provide much satisfaction in terms of the use of the prefabs, but I will bring it back to the Minister to try to find some solution.

This matter allows me an opportunity to provide an update to the House on the current position with regard to the school building project for Stepside Educate Together Secondary School. The school building project for Stepside Educate Together Secondary School will deliver a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school and accommodation, including six classrooms for children with special educational needs. The project is being delivered in two phases. Phase 1 of the project, delivered under the Department’s design and build programme, was completed in April 2024. The phase 1 project delivered accommodation for approximately 680 pupils and accommodation, including four classrooms for children with special educational needs and a PE hall. The phase 2 project is being delivered under the Department’s employer-led design programme, which uses a professional external project manager to co-ordinate and drive the design team to achieve the best possible timeframe for the project through the stages of architectural planning to tender and construction. Phase 2 will deliver the balance of the accommodation for approximately 320 pupils and accommodation, including two classrooms for children with special educational needs plus external classes. The phase 2 project for Stepside Educate Together Secondary School is currently at tender stage with tenders returned on 2 May 2025. Tenders are currently being evaluated by the project manager and design team and a tender assessment report will be prepared for the Department’s consideration. Projects are subject to relevant due diligence at each stage of the process, within the context of overall programme and budgetary parameters.

Stepaside Educate Together Secondary School is currently accommodated in its new phase 1 school building as well as in interim accommodation located on the permanent school site in Leopardstown. A review of the accommodation on site was undertaken by the design team to determine how the school’s accommodation needs will be managed up to and during construction of the phase 2 project. The modular units installed on site between 2020 and 2022 were to accommodate the school pending delivery of its new permanent school building. Now that the accommodation review is complete, some of the rental accommodation has been scheduled for removal in the coming weeks, with the remainder of the rental accommodation retained on site for use by the school pending delivery of the phase 2 project. The contract for the rental of the modular accommodation is between the Department and the contractor and there are no plans to enter into any third-party arrangements with regard to that contract.

The programme for Government commits to expanding the provision of after-school and childcare in school buildings and campuses, in tandem with the school building programme, to provide better access for parents and communities. The Department supports and encourages the use of school buildings for community and recreational purposes where this is feasible, including the provision of early learning and childcare services. The procedures are available for each school to refer to for guidance. Given the complexities of delivering the phase 2 school building project with a live school on site, it is unlikely that a move by Mountainside Montessori to the Stepside Educate Together Secondary School site could be facilitated, and Mountainside Montessori should consider all options available to it.

That is absolutely not the answer the Senator was looking for. I get the complexities that exist where there is a live school on site and the use of those modular buildings there at the moment. On the other hand, the suggestion makes sense for many reasons, as these modular rooms are on site and phase 2 of the Educate Together school is going ahead. I will go back to the Minister to see if there is any innovative way in which the Montessori school can be accommodated. It is probably not good enough to go back to say it has to discuss options. We have to collaborate on this to ensure those parents who are sending children to the Montessori school have a solution before September.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** As the Minister of State was reading, I was going through his reply line by line, and with the last line I wondered if we were talking about the same place at all. The last line states that “Mountainside Montessori should consider all other options available to it”. It is not very encouraging for a Government policy that is encouraging them. However, what this does, and this is what I always say about these things, is that it puts it on the record, so there is no talking out of both sides of people’s mouths in the constituency about what is actually happening. I will circulate this to the media today and to all politicians and councillors in that constituency and let them advocate for the people. I do not even live in this constituency, but it is important. One of the great benefits of a Commencement matter is that you now have it on the record.

This is not an encouraging day from the Government to the community of Stepside and this Montessori school, but I welcome and thank the Minister of State for at least agreeing to take this back. We have county childcare committees, of course, but, come hell or high water, these people want a place for their children. There are parents listening in this morning who will be contacting their employers to say they may be taking career breaks because they cannot put their two- and three-year-olds into support. That is a pity because there has been a positive partnership between the existing primary school on site and this. I want to make it clear here, on the record, that we do not want to stop phase 2. It will be interesting to see when phase 2 is actually starting. Is this another one of these phases that will be sitting there for another 12 months? However, I appreciate that the Minister of State will take this back to the Department. I will continue to talk to the public representatives this afternoon, and I will certainly be asking them, because there is time on their side, to politically mobilise and get commitments.

**Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan:** I again thank the Senator. I know he does not live in the constituency, but to be fair, he always represents his councillors and representatives in that area. He is doing so again today. My priority and concern are with the parents and the children who are all set up to avail of the Montessori school service in September. They must be anxious not knowing where they are going to be homed in future. In that spirit, I will certainly go back to talk to the Department and the Minister to see if there can at least be some co-operative effort between the Department, the school and all other stakeholders to try to find a solution. Whether



that is the modular builds on site at the moment or some alternative, I will do that.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.18 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.30 a.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 10.18 a.m. and resumed at 10.30 a.m.*

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on delivering a world-class education system that breaks down barriers and ensures every child can achieve their full potential, to be taken at 1 p.m., with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

**Senator Anne Rabbitte:** I wish to raise the issue of swimming pools. Before we broke for the June recess, I spoke about water safety but today I wish to speak about the need for swimming pools. In my constituency, there is a good active group in Loughrea trying to get a pool for the area. One of the biggest issues when we were out knocking on the doors was the fact that a population of 6,000 people did not have a pool. Due to the good work of the committee, its expression of interest was accepted by LEADER last week. Now, the group is going to make an application for capital funding to determine the feasibility of a public swimming pool in the area.

Of course there is a need for a public swimming pool because at the end of the day, we do not have a publicly funded and owned swimming pool in south Galway. All of the children are missing out on the opportunity of learning how to swim as part of their curriculum. There is a fantastic lake in Loughrea but, unfortunately, one cannot go there in the middle of November, December or January to learn basic skill sets like water survival and how to be safe in the lake. Regardless of that, the wider catchment area of 12,000 young people would say there is a need.

Building on that piece - I have no doubt that I will be helping the groups with its LEADER application - I acknowledge the relentless work of Mr. Colm O'Donnell and what he has done, but Galway County Council will need funding as well. That is why I call on the Minister with responsibility for local authorities to ensure this is in his budgetary submissions. I am talking about Loughrea, there are many Loughreas around the country where large urban centres do not have access to the basic skill sets derived from accessing a public pool. The shovel-ready funding required when the feasibility is done will be approximately €3 million. We need to put infrastructure in place so that our young people can have skill sets. When we lose 120 people annually because of tragic drownings, we have to question if we have the necessary infrastructure to ensure awareness, understanding and, most importantly, the skill set to survive. Coming from the banks of the River Shannon, I learned to swim when we went on a bus every Saturday evening to either Nenagh or Ballinasloe. That was 20 km away. I am now at the level of a lifeguard, believe it or not, and my children have learned that. We did not have a pool, so we travelled, but we were a small town. In a town the size of Loughrea, it is incumbent on all stakeholders, including the local authority, the rural development company and anyone who has a stake, to ensure we support our youth and our wider population.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Before I move on to the next speaker, I welcome the students



from New York University to the Gallery today. They are very welcome. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House and Ireland.

**Senator Aubrey McCarthy:** I have in my hand the recommendations from the report by the Housing Commission, which was recently published. The commission was established in December 2021. At that stage, there were 8,900 homeless people, including approximately 2,450 children. Today, nearly three and a half years on - that is, two and a half years of work and a year of a delay - the number of homeless has nearly doubled, with 15,580 homeless, including 4,775 children. This is the backdrop against which the commission's report lands. The report rightly concludes that housing must be seen as a national priority. There are 83 recommendations around providing shelter - not only that, but also providing social cohesion and support our economic future.

The question that was constantly asked at the housing committee the other day was, why has the commission's work not been implemented? Why has it only accepted to appear before the committee a year after the report was published? There were two and a half years of meetings and hundreds of hours with input from experts, academics and housing bodies, so what have we done with it as an Oireachtas? Have we disagreed with the findings? Were there no immediate recommendations in the findings? I have looked through them, and there certainly seem to be. Was it shelved for other reasons? It looks to me like we are in paralysis and that the way we established the commission and did not deal with it was chaotic. We say time and again that homelessness and housing are priorities but it seems we as an Oireachtas are not behaving in that way. Perhaps the most damning reality is that there were amazing experts at the commission, people who offered a game-changer. They had the knowledge and made the recommendations but, unfortunately, we are not working together. That has to change. I wonder if it is a cultural problem rather than a structural problem. When the pandemic hit, we all clicked fingers and got everything done. When 100,000 Ukrainians came to Ireland and needed refuge and accommodation, we clicked our fingers and got it done. When it comes to housing, though, the urgency does not seem to be there. The Leas-Chathaoirleach will know that, in my own work of working with people who come from addiction, homelessness, etc., we have seen amazing things happen with people turning their lives around and going against the very culture they are coming from.

It is not just about supply; it is about taking down the barriers of red tape, silos and all the delays that there are. We are facing a generation of younger people without housing. That there are 4,775 children in emergency accommodation is unforgivable. We need courage and collaboration but, above all, joined-up thinking, which I have called for before. We need a debate in this House and the commission needs to be brought in and for us to discuss the recommendations. Let us start implementing them.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I welcome Deputy Michael Murphy and his guest to the Gallery.

**Senator Pauline Tully:** The trade union Fórsa represents over 2,300 school secretaries and approximately 500 caretakers. It recently held a ballot, which closed at 12 noon yesterday, on whether to take indefinite strike action. Some 81% of the members took part in that ballot, 98% of whom voted in favour of indefinite strike action. It was practically unanimous. That is due to start on 28 August to coincide with the start of the new school year. This matter relates to pension provision under the single public service pension scheme, which is being denied to them, even though standardisation of pay was granted to school secretaries in 2023 and will be granted to school caretakers later this year. I taught in a school for many years and know the

work that secretaries and caretakers do in schools. Schools would not function without them. Many schools are not going to open in August if this strike goes ahead because teachers and SNAs will not cross the picket line. Even if they do, the schools will not function without secretaries and caretakers. I ask that the Minister for education and, more importantly, the Minister for public expenditure, resolve this dispute. They have over two months to do so before the strike goes ahead. I urge them to resolve the issues and engage with Fórsa to get a resolution as quickly as possible.

**Senator Shane Curley:** Imagine being a five-year-old in the town of Hostomel at the start of the war in Ukraine. One morning, the war reaches your door. Members of the Russian army burst in, occupy your house for weeks and you and your parents are forced to live in the basement, feeding off scraps until finally you are moved to Ireland, where you are welcomed into the town of Kinvara and the Merriman Hotel. You go to the local school and you make great friends. You engage with a speech and language therapist because you are so traumatised that you have been left with a stammer. You join the local orchestra in Gort and develop a network of friends. You have a support network around you, and you feel at home. You have been made to feel welcome in your community. Then, all of a sudden, a few months ago, you are told that you need to be moved out of the Merriman Hotel and will be moved west of Galway city to the Connemara Coast Hotel. Something does not add up in the system when people move to our country to be looked after, only for two Government agencies to fail to work in tandem and for one of them to decide that it needs to move people out in order to house other refugees who, very legitimately, need to be housed in our country. There is a breakdown in communications there.

I would also like to support Senator Rabbitte. I grew up in Loughrea. When I was four years old, people came to our door fundraising for a swimming pool. Thirty years later, there is still no pool in the town. One of the major issues we have, and I would like the Minister to come to the House to discuss it, is that only towns with populations of 10,000 or more are entitled to Government funding for swimming pools under the national planning framework. That needs to be changed. We have a lake in Loughrea. Unfortunately, over the years, there have been tragic drownings there. Any town in Ireland the size of Loughrea, whose population is approaching 7,000, deserves a swimming pool. By the time a swimming pool is built, there will be 10,000 people in the town. That is a given. It is going to take two or three years to get this over the line, and the population of Loughrea is constantly rising. It is something we need to do urgently.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** On Tuesday, I made a statement with respect to the Crotty case in Limerick. The point I made was that senior politicians rushed to condemn all the members of the Defence Forces. I also made the point that a young officer, a commissioned officer of this country, went to court because he was obliged to do so, and gave a report on Crotty's military record. Somehow or other, my friend and colleague Senator Rabbitte misconstrued that as me supporting Crotty and his thuggish behaviour. I have no time for those who commit violent acts, whether against women, men or children. It is outrageous that anybody would support such an individual. However, I again say to those who condemned that young officer that it was us who put the rules in place, namely the Defence Forces regulations that the officer is forced to live by. Condemning him was outrageous. That will follow the man in question right through his career. He deserves an apology from this House. He deserves an apology from the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence. He deserves an apology because all he did was what he was obliged to do. Crotty deserves what he got, and may he rot in jail for as long

as it takes for him to realise the impact of what he did.

Ultimately, a commissioned officer in this country is obliged to do what the Defence Force regulations lay out for him. If he is assigned by his commanding officer as the person to appear in court, then he has to go there. My heart goes out to him and the other decent men and women who serve this country 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and do so with pride. Thugs exist in every walk of life, and they all need to be weeded out.

**Senator P. J. Murphy:** I wish to draw attention to the questionable special areas of conservation, SAC, protection status of three bogs in south-east Galway, namely Ardgraigue, Barroughter and Clonmoylan bogs. These were designated to be sites of community importance, SCIs, in 2002. Under the habitats directive and EU rules, if SCIs are intended to be made SACs, this must be done within six years of them being designated SCIs. These three bogs, where local families have cut turf for decades, if not centuries, were made SCIs back in 2002 but were not made SACs until 2021. Under of the habitats directive and other EU regulations, that was 16 years too late. In April of this year, local families went to cut turf as they have done every year in the past. A High Court injunction was granted within 48 hours ordering them to desist from doing what they have done for generations. As law-abiding people, they did so. They desisted and they have not returned to save the turf that is sitting, wet, on the turf banks. These are law-abiding people. They do not want trouble.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, is attempting to force people to stay off their own property and to stop doing what they have done over for generations. I call into question the legality of the SAC status that the relevant authorities are trying to enforce here. This problem can be solved very easily, the fear can be taken from these people and they can return to their bogs if an activity requiring consent, ARC, order is signed by the Minister allowing them to return. I urge that common sense prevail. I urge the Minister to make these three boglands subject to an ARC within the next week to allow these people to get back in to save the turf that has already been cut and that is sitting wet on the banks. I call on the Minister to intervene quickly to lift the fear from these people on these three bogs in south-east Galway and to let them get back to doing what they have been doing to heat their homes for generations.

**Senator Chris Andrews:** Most of us at this point would be familiar with the contractual issue affecting Oireachtas broadcasting workers. These workers are getting a fraction of the pay of similarly qualified workers elsewhere in the industry and are denied permanent contracts that would give them the rights they are due. At present, they are forced to find additional employment or rely on social welfare to make ends meet when the Dáil and Seanad are not sitting. They perform a vital service, making sure the public is informed of events in these Houses. It is well past time they were treated with dignity and respect. The Oireachtas has a multimillion euro contract with a private company to provide staffing for this service and, yet, its broadcasting employees are only paid, on average, €12,000 annually. Given that this contract is up for negotiation, I ask that this issue be brought to the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission in order that a fair resolution can be agreed and the rights of these workers respected.

I also ask that the Minister for Justice come to the House in order that we can ask him if he is satisfied that proactive measures are being taken to identify any former Israel Defense Forces personnel who may have been involved in war crimes or genocide who are entering this State. I recognise that all Israeli citizens are required to serve in that country's military forces. Will the Deputy Leader ask the Minister to confirm whether background screening is taking place of Israeli citizens entering this jurisdiction, whether as tourists, on a work visa or in any other

capacity, to ascertain whether they have been involved in any manner in war crimes? Government members regularly say how shocked they are by what is happening in Gaza. We need real action and this would make a difference in ensuring Israel faces consequences and the people involved in genocide and war crimes are held accountable.

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** The recent RTÉ exposé on nursing homes in Dublin and Laois was heartbreaking to watch. Vulnerable elderly people - our mothers, fathers, grandparents and neighbours - were left without dignity and proper care. Yet, the Government continues to outsource elder care to private corporations, many of which put the bottom line before people. It was shocking to watch an elderly man ask repeatedly to be taken to the toilet, only to be told to stay in bed and pee in his pad. Elderly people who paid tax and contributed to the State now find themselves victims of abuse.

The provider at the centre of this scandal, now rebranded as Emeis Ireland, is due to open a new facility in Cavan later this year. The company was already in controversy in France. How in the name of God was a red flag not seen? Why did HIQA not undertake due diligence? Five years on from the start of the Covid pandemic, we are still waiting for adult safeguarding legislation to be enacted.

I have received confirmation that the older persons grant fund in County Cavan is now exhausted. The letter said it is temporarily paused but the problem, in fact, is that the fund is exhausted. This has happened because the Government has failed once again to allocate sufficient funding to help keep older people in their homes and in the communities they have built.

What is most galling is that there is action only after scandals break. The approach is all reactionary, with no prevention. It is 20 years since the Leas Cross scandal and we have learned nothing. Ireland is becoming an outlier in elder care. Other countries invest in models that allow people to age with dignity, surrounded by family and with proper support. We instead commodify care and treat people as profit margins.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I thank Senators for their contributions. Senator Rabbitte raised the very important issue of the need for swimming pools in the country generally, and in Loughrea specifically, to support people living in the hinterland. She made an excellent point. To be fair to the then Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy Thomas Byrne, he published a national swimming strategy last September, which included 55 recommendations for improving facilities, provision of new facilities, better coaching and increased safety awareness. The Senator mentioned that 120 people died by drowning last year, which is a very high number. I think of all those families, neighbours and communities left devastated. Another aspect of the national swimming strategy is to reflect our good success in the Olympic Games with our elite swimmers. It is important we give young people the opportunity to excel and come through.

It is really good news that the expression of interest by the group in Loughrea has been accepted by the LEADER programme. I acknowledge the work done by Colm O'Donnell, whom the Senator mentioned. It is so important we have volunteers like Colm and the people on the committees in different areas putting pressure on us as public representatives. I totally empathise with the Senator's point because Newbridge, with a population nearing 30,000, does not have a public swimming pool. We really need to prioritise provision in this regard. I will look for a debate with the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy McConalogue, on the report launched by his predecessor to see where the gaps are in provision, not only in

Loughrea but around the country. I really hope we get a response and some support in regard to Loughrea. Senator Rabbitte's call in this regard was endorsed by our colleague Senator Curley.

Senator McCarthy spoke about the Housing Commission report from 2021. There is no doubt that homelessness is a blight on our society. It is shocking to see the numbers going up each year but it is unfair to say the Government is not treating it as a crisis. It absolutely is doing so and it is putting many measures in place. A number of different groups of people are impacted and we need different measures to meet their needs. People who are homeless must be the priority. Renters are also a priority, which is why we had a new strategy this week that seeks to strike a balance in the sector and bring rent surety, in terms of both tenure and cost. To be fair, the Government absolutely is treating the issue as a priority. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has developed a number of initiatives since he came to office.

Senator McCarthy made a fair point in regard to the implementation of the recommendation from the Housing Commission. As a member of the housing committee, he is well positioned to address those concerns. That committee is the best place to have an in-depth conversation with the experts who made up the commission. I have no doubt this will be a key topic on the committee's agenda. We talk about housing a lot, which there certainly is a need to do, but we also need to look at developing sustainable communities, which includes provision of facilities such as swimming pools, as Senator Rabbitte raised. My county of Kildare has seen rapid development, with a lot of new housing in Kildare town and Newbridge in particular. We are not matching that housing development with provision of the infrastructural facilities we need. That must be a measure for consideration in everything we do.

Senator Tully spoke about school caretakers and secretaries and the ballot this week on industrial action. I worked closely with Fórsa as Chair of the education committee in the previous Oireachtas. The union does excellent work. I support the caretakers and secretaries in what they are trying to do. They are the heartbeat of schools in every community. I will ask the Ministers for education and public expenditure to work on this issue over the next two months to ensure there is no delay in schools reopening on 28 August. I will ask that the Minister for education come to the House to discuss where we are with this matter and look at ways we can support our whole-school communities. All the staff within a school community do excellent work and we all rely on them.

Senator Curley talked about a five-year-old in Kinvara who came from Ukraine, has experienced a lot of instability in his short life and has now developed a support network in the town. I give my thanks to the community in Kinvara and the communities right around Ireland for supporting the Ukrainians living there. We have a situation now where the demand for accommodation for Ukrainians is falling away and we must take a value-for-money approach. Contracts are not being renewed, and should not be renewed, if there is not a need for such accommodation. We must look after taxpayers' money. I do not know whether the Senator has had an opportunity to liaise with the community engagement team. In similar situations, including in Newbridge, where there were a number of students living in the IPAS centre and due to do their State examinations who were going to be moved, people have been granted leave to stay to do their examinations. I recommend that the Senator liaise with the community engagement team. I am happy to give him the contact details if he does not have them.

Senator Craughwell referred to the Crotty case, which he also raised on Tuesday. I welcome his clarification that he does not in any way support the actions of Crotty, who is a former member of the Defence Forces. It is important to acknowledge that clarification.



*11 o'clock*

In a situation where a member of the Defence Forces is carrying out instructions from senior members, they in no way should be vilified in a personal way for the actions they are taking on behalf of the Defence Forces. Knowing many of them, as I come from Kildare, we have excellent people within the Defence Forces. It is very difficult for them when one of their own is in the spotlight for wrong behaviour. It is the same in any profession. It is the same in our profession as well, so we must always stand up for professions and the good, decent and honourable men and women who are there.

Senator P. J. Murphy spoke about the three pieces of bog in Galway that were designated SCIs in 2002 and about the ban on cutting turf. Under EU laws, these should have been made SACs by 2021, but that was actually done too late. The Senator spoke about the families who went out to foot the turf in April and there was a High Court injunction. As I come from the Bog of Allen, I am very familiar with the culture and tradition of bog cutting and I always feel it was such a shame we lost that and are on the point of losing it in other areas. The Senator has questioned the legality of the status and mentioned that an ARC can be written by the Minister. I suggest Senator Murphy put in a Commencement matter very specifically on this issue to get a very specific response from the Minister. Certainly, while we have to have respect for European law, we have to have respect for our environment and the heritage of our bogs. I recommend the Lullymore Heritage Park in Kildare to anyone who has not been there. It has done tremendous work in preserving the culture and acknowledging the bogs and the importance of employment, etc. I recommend people go there. I can imagine it is a big issue in Galway and for Senator Rabbitte, but we need to get clarity on it and we need to support the families there.

Senator Andrews spoke about the Oireachtas broadcasting workers and the contract being up for negotiation. I agree with the Senator that we need to have a fair resolution while that the contract is up for renegotiation. We should absolutely be supporting everybody who works in these Houses. During Covid, it came to my attention that the cleaners, who do an excellent job and were obviously particularly busy during that time, had no place to store their coats and no place to store their items. They were not allowed into our canteen to take a break or have tea or coffee. It was shocking but we were able to rectify it by bringing it to the attention of the commission and we need to rectify this too. I thank the Senator for raising it and it is something we will write to the commission about from this Seanad.

Senator Andrews also asked about background screening for Israelis who enter the country to see if they have been complicit-----

**Senator Chris Andrews:** Screening for the Israeli military.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** Sorry, screening for the Israeli military and if they are former members of the military who are coming in. That is worthy of a very specific Commencement matter. It would be difficult to get the Minister for a two-hour debate on that but it is certainly worthy of a Commencement matter. It is also worthy of raising in the foreign affairs committee too.

Senator O'Reilly spoke about the RTÉ exposé on nursing homes. Certainly, it was heart-breaking to watch it and we have heard quite a bit on our airwaves since. We have to do everything to ensure our loved ones who are entering later stages of their lives have everything that will give them the dignity they deserve. Of course, it is not always older people. We have a



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significant number of people under 60 who are living in nursing homes too. There have to be concerns about HIQA and how long it has taken to act on this. We will have statements in the House next Tuesday with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, who is the relevant Minister of State, on the nursing homes issue. I support the Senator's call about the adult safeguarding legislation and I have raised it myself. It absolutely needs to be implemented.

The Senator spoke about the fact that money had run out in Cavan County Council, but there was money allocated last week to all local authorities to help support older people and those with disabilities. There was top-up funding awarded last week.

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** On a point of clarity, it was announced on 13 May, yet all Oireachtas Members in Cavan received a letter from the housing authority in Cavan on 28 May. That was after the announcement. Applications are in and so when the application-----

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Sorry, Senator, but it is not actually a matter for the Order of Business.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** I suggest the Senator liaises with the Department and the council and quite possibly put in a Commencement matter on the specifics of it.

Order of Business agreed to.

*Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.06 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.05 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 11.06 a.m. and resumed at 1.05 p.m.*

### **Delivering a World-Class Education System: Statements**

**An Cathaoirleach:** We now move to statements on delivering a world-class education system which breaks down barriers and ensures that every child can achieve his or her full potential. I welcome the Minister for Education and Youth back to the House. She will speak for ten minutes, as will group spokespersons, with all other Senators speaking for five minutes. I will call on the Minister to reply when all Senators have made their contributions.

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I am delighted to be in the Seanad for the second time this week and am grateful now for the opportunity to set out some of my priorities as Minister for Education and Youth. My objective, which I assume is the same for everybody, is to deliver a world-class education system which breaks down barriers and above all ensures every child can achieve his or her full potential. An education system which wraps around all children and young people in every community is essential if we are to achieve the goal that they are supported to fulfil their potential. I want the outcome of my time as Minister to be greater equity and excellence in education for all children and young people in Ireland. We cannot have one without the other.

I want to focus on specific ambitions that break down barriers and support children and young people. I want to ensure we have a world-class education system that is inclusive, equitable, and empowering for all. Every learner deserves the opportunity to thrive. Our focus is on high standards, inclusive practices, and strong supports to ensure no one is left behind. Breaking down barriers, whether social, economic, or educational is essential to helping all learners succeed. Education should open doors, build confidence and prepare every learner for

life, not just exams.

I will prioritise actions to tackle educational disadvantage. This means ensuring that the necessary resources are in place to support and retain children and young people in school to completion of leaving certificate and the junior certificate, where we know there are specific challenges, in order that they can reach their full potential.

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, programme has seen the gap in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools halved to 8.4% in recent years. Closing performance gaps further is a key part of the new 2025 DEIS plan I announced at the beginning of the term. Work is under way in respect of the development of a new plan that will be published later this year. I am also working with my team and all stakeholders to develop a new DEIS Plus scheme to put a much greater focus on those schools that have the highest levels of educational disadvantage, particularly targeting and supporting those children who are most at risk. I refer to instances where there is intergenerational trauma or where children have trauma in their lives for various complex reasons.

I am delighted to be able to say that from the start of the 2025-26 school year, for the first time ever, all children and young people enrolled in primary, special and post-primary schools in the free education scheme will be provided with schoolbooks and core classroom resources. School transport is a much-valued scheme to families, and it ensures that children living in rural and remote areas are not disadvantaged by distance by providing a safe and reliable service to their nearest school of eligibility. More than 173,000 pupils benefit from the scheme each day, making it a core component of equitable school access nationwide. The programme for Government contains a commitment to expand the school transport service to include 100,000 additional students by 2030. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I are working hard to implement the terms of the school transport review to reduce distance criteria, expand eligibility and make sure every child is supported to get to school.

We know from data trends that Traveller and Roma children have poorer educational outcomes than their counterparts in the general population. I mentioned the junior cycle earlier. Following recent engagement with representatives from these communities, it is clear that we need to focus not just on the leaving certificate but also on the junior certificate. In that regard, extra funding has been secured to increase the number of community link workers and, as part of the Traveller and Roma strategy, we will work to improve communication, promote positive relationships and to support the learning of Traveller and Roma children.

Regular attendance in school is essential, not just for academic achievement but also for well-being, social development and long-term life outcomes. The recent Tusla attendance report shows that in the 2022-23 school year, over 110,000 primary and 65,000 post-primary students missed 20 or more days of school. Everyone will agree that those numbers are alarming. To address this, I recently announced a comprehensive suite of targeted and universal actions to improve school attendance. This includes investment in the educational welfare services and the school completion programme. I acknowledge and commend the work of the home-school liaison co-ordinators and the school completion programme. Important changes need to happen in the age limits because, at the moment, they cannot support children under six. Alarming, from visiting schools recently with Senator Scahill, we know there are children as young as four and five years of age who are missing 40, 50 or 60 days of school outside the weekends, holidays or any other period. It is important that, when children are in school, we support children at as early a stage as possible. If children attend school, they continue that trend later in life as well.

The vast majority of children with special educational needs are supported to attend mainstream schools with their peers. Approximately 96% or 97% of our students are supported in mainstream education. I thank principals, teachers, including special education teachers, and SNAs for the huge amount of work they do and support they provide day in, day out in our mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. By September, the number of special classes will have doubled in the past five years; there will be more than 3,700 special classes supporting 21,000 children. We need to ensure we continue to support schools and teachers in a context where teachers are facing even more complex and challenging environments. I have asked the Teaching Council to begin work on ensuring all future graduates have a mandatory special education placement as part of their initial teacher education.

It is most important that we have places for children every year and that we do so on time. The work was done last year to prepare for next year in identifying and understanding children's needs, engaging with the relevant schools and making sure both matched. This year, we are asking for parents of children with additional needs and schools or teachers to notify the NCSE by 1 October about whether children will need a place so that we can, by the end of this year, already identify where schools need to open new classrooms to provide places for those children and we are not still unclear about where some children are going this time next year. We have to get better. We are getting better, but we need to bring forward our times every year so that every child is treated equally.

The curriculum at all levels is designed to reflect and support all learners regardless of background, ability or gender. The primary curriculum framework places a strong emphasis on inclusion and diversity. It aims to ensure all children feel they belong, are respected and safe so that they can engage fully in learning and thrive. It recognises each child's unique background, identity and strengths and is designed to support what is best for each individual child. Under this framework, foreign languages will be introduced at primary level on a phased basis from September 2025.

The work around the changes to primary school is happening. It is on my desk at the moment for me to look at and see how we can move forward to implement it. I look forward to working with teachers, principals and the whole school community in making these important changes.

Turning to the senior cycle, the number of students enrolled in the leaving certificate vocational programme link modules across fifth and sixth years has increased from 30,000 to 50,000. That is a significant increase in a few short years. The number of students participating in transition year passed 60,000 for the first time. That is 14,000 more than five to six years ago. This is due to changes that have already taken place around the senior cycle reform. In 2024, the State Examinations Commission provided an integrated set of results to leaving certificate applied students who also took leaving certificate established mathematics or a modern foreign language in 2024 for the first time. This school year, we saw the first modules from the new senior cycle level 1 and level 2 programmes introduced in schools. This is particularly important because it is for students who have specific and additional educational needs. It makes sure they go through their own exams and are presented with results in the same way as their peers.

These measures illustrate how the senior cycle redevelopment programme is already playing a key role in students reaching their full potential. We will build on this annually over the next five years, with the start of tranche 1 being introduced in September.

I will turn now to teacher supply. We cannot do this without our wonderful teachers, including special education teachers and SNAs. We are showing it is still an attractive profession for young people. First preference data from the CAO shows an increase in post-primary first preferences of 5%. This builds on similar gains in recent years. It is a testament to the very high esteem in which the teaching profession is held.

The number of allocated teaching posts and the number of registered teachers have increased significantly in recent years. There has been a 20% increase in the number of student teachers graduating between 2018 and 2023 and a 30% rise in teachers registered with the Teaching Council in recent years. There are now 78,000 qualified teachers employed in Ireland with more than 35,000 in post-primary schools, the largest number in the history of the State. However, I understand there are still challenges in certain areas, especially in post-primary education and for certain subjects. While I made a number of announcements in recent months, in particular that teachers could get a permanent position after one year as opposed to two years, I am currently working on other measures we can take to make sure it is simple for teachers to do their jobs and to be registered when they have worked abroad. I am also making sure we support those who teach subjects where we know there are challenges at post-primary level or in the Gaeltacht areas, Gaelcholáistí and Gaelscoileanna. I am examining further measures for all of these.

I will turn to well-being, including the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, and Bí Cineálta, which was introduced by my predecessor, the Minister, Deputy Foley. We will continue to implement the actions contained in Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying. Like many colleagues, I have been raising flags in schools where they were putting in place their Bí Cineálta overall strategies. This is essentially a strategy that focuses on how we can support one another, look out for one another, prevent bullying in our schools and be kind. It is as it says on the tin. It is an important strategy, being implemented and taught in our schools from the earliest possible stage. We teach understanding, acceptance and inclusion from the early stages.

It is important that we plan for the future. Thirty years ago, a convention on education was held by one of my many predecessors. It set out the direction in which education would go for the following 30 years and how we would develop many of the agencies and building blocks that created the education system we now have. Later this year, I will announce a new education convention, which will bring together all stakeholders and look at what education needs to be like in the next five, ten and, importantly, 20 years. It takes time for all of these changes to take place. I look forward to working with colleagues in that regard.

It would be hard not to mention the fact we need to continue to invest in the education system, not just in the teachers, curriculum and young people, but in the building blocks and infrastructure. I have a capital budget of €1.6 billion this year and I am currently working with the Minister for public expenditure to, I hope, increase it for the lifetime of the next NDP, which will be from 2026 to 2030. On top of that, I reaffirm my commitment and that of the Government to continuing to increase the capitation grant so that the day-to-day supports are provided for schools. I will make sure we have minor works, summer works and emergency works, are planning ahead as best we can for the future and are investing in those building blocks for young people.

I thank the House for the invitation and look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I thank the Minister for outlining the issues we are addressing on edu-

cation.

Before I call the next speaker, I welcome to the Public Gallery the Holywell Trust group from Donegal and Derry, led by Mr. Gerard Dunne and Ms Sarah Duddy. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. I thank them for being here. I hope they enjoy the day. I am sorry about the weather. I hope it will be better when they get back home to Donegal and Derry.

**Senator Gareth Scahill:** I thank the Minister for coming to the Seanad. This is an important issue and I am proud to speak about something that matters deeply to all of us, namely, ensuring that all children get a chance to learn, grow and reach their full potential. That is what our education system is all about. Ireland is working hard to build a world-class education system, not just for some children, but for all children no matter where they come from or what challenges they face. This system is built on a strong foundation, supported by dedicated professionals, and I take this opportunity to acknowledge all those working in our education system who play a part in ensuring a standard of education is delivered and the potential of our youth is fulfilled.

I listened to the Minister's words and a lot of things from her speech tick the boxes I have written down. I welcome the professional development and empowerment for teaching staff. I am glad to hear the Minister is committed to recognising the evolving needs of our world, bridging skills gaps and enhancing curriculums for our teachers. The Minister confirmed that three new upskilling programmes for post-primary teachers would commence this September, offering free and flexible two-year courses in computer science, French, and politics and society. Upon graduation, teachers will be empowered to teach these subjects at a higher level.

I will also highlight some key areas. The Minister mentioned the delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, programme. Schools in disadvantaged areas get support to help children succeed. This programme has shown considerable success in improving the outcomes of students from disadvantaged areas. Key achievements include increased retention rates, higher levels of school completion and enhanced access to higher education. The programme has also contributed to school planning and teaching practices. As the Minister said, we need to continue to invest in that programme and to further develop it.

A cornerstone of the Government's commitment is special education. Supporting children with additional needs is not just a priority but an absolute imperative for Fine Gael, and for the upcoming school year the Minister has sanctioned an incredible 399 special education classes. These classes are strategically placed in areas with identified needs and, crucially, the Minister has sanctioned them much earlier this year. This proactive approach gives schools ample time to prepare, open enrolment and ensure classrooms are fully ready for September. The Minister is working with the National Council for Special Education on this so schools can expedite the process. As she said, from September there will be 3,900 additional places in special education. Similar to the DEIS programme, we need to build on that and continue to invest in that.

Beyond teachers, our unsung heroes are probably our special needs assistants. Thousands of students in both mainstream and special education settings benefit every day from SNAs' invaluable skills, dedication and knowledge. Recognising their pivotal role, the Minister has confirmed a new SNA redeployment scheme is now under way and for the very first time SNAs in posts that may no longer be required, perhaps due to falling enrolment numbers, reduced care needs or changing demographics, will be redeployed to schools with vacant posts. This is a vital step in increasing job security for SNAs, encouraging new talent to enter this essential



workforce and ensuring our children and schools continue to benefit from their immense wealth of experience.

I heard the Tánaiste speaking recently about how we are about to embark on the transformative initiative of introducing national therapy services in education. It is an ambitious plan that will see therapists working directly in schools across the country and will begin with speech and language therapy and occupational therapy being provided in some special education schools later in the next academic year, with a further roll-out in September 2026. By providing these crucial therapies directly within the school system, we are ensuring the children who require the most intense support can access the services they need precisely where and when they need them. This seamless integration of therapy into the educational environment will be a game-changer for many families.

I also commend what has happened with the hot school meals. Almost 500,000 primary school pupils across 2,850 schools nationwide are now receiving a hot, nutritious meal every day. I mentioned to the Minister recently that I would like us to look at procurement to open up the potential for smaller, more rural caterers to deliver these meals to the schools. If the tendering thresholds can be brought up in line with Europe, we may be able to deliver better quality meals to more rural schools while also serving rural businesses as well.

We should be very proud of the world-class education system we have but we should not be getting complacent either. Regarding educational disadvantage, which the Minister mentioned, I wish to highlight the work of iScoil, as it is an organisation we can look at working more closely with to ensure every child can achieve their full potential. iScoil is just one organisation but it is a not-for-profit delivering online learning services that offer a pathway to learning, accreditation and progression for young people between the ages of 13 and 16 who, for a range of reasons, cannot attend mainstream school. As we are talking about an education system that delivers for all, we need to start looking at the really small grouping that is not currently being served. iScoil is a national service that works with some of the most vulnerable and hard to reach young people in the State and provides a safe learning environment where young people can re-engage with education, achieve recognised QQI certification and access further education, training and employment.

I, along with my fellow Fine Gael Senators, believe we need to do more in providing life skills to our students in secondary education. We have had discussions on the delivery of driver theory within secondary education and Safe Pass courses. We are looking at a programme like that because we talk about young people nowadays not having job opportunities during the summer or when they go off to third level education. If we can provide the skills within second level education, we can empower them to do what we all had the opportunity to do years ago, that is, work on building sites and drive to and from work. The Irish School of Excellence down in Clare delivers training to 30,000 transition year students annually across 727 schools. That is something that needs to be looked at seriously in conjunction with the RSA to ensure it could be rolled out as a module within transition year and supported nationally. On Safe Pass, I spoke about an initiative recently in this Chamber. It is the brainchild of a lady from Roscommon called Selina Galvin and supported by JF Hanley Limited. Transition year students were allowed complete industry standard health and safety training free or charge with a view to encouraging interest in the construction sector. The pilot scheme is being jointly sponsored by JF Hanley Limited and Shannon Valley Limited, which are both Roscommon-based companies. Selina said the idea was to remove cost barriers and provide a pathway for students to explore the industry with real, recognised certification. The equivalent of Safe Pass in the UK is the



Construction Skills Register card, training for which is delivered online. Looking at something like that would be another way of removing barriers.

Delivering a world-class education system that breaks down barriers and ensures every child can achieve their full potential is a continuous journey. Through strengthening our teacher supports, prioritising special education, valuing our SNAs, integrating vital therapy services, ensuring nourishing meals and providing free school books, we are systematically building a more inclusive, equitable and excellent educational landscape for all children in Ireland. These initiatives are not just policies but investments in our children, in our communities and in the bright future of our nation. As the Minister said, we cannot just sit still. We need to keep building on the successes and the positive numbers coming out of her Department. I hope that, through the national development plan, she will be supported with the building blocks she needs to deliver on that regionally.

**Senator Joe Conway:** Is údar aoibhnis é dom fáilte a chur roimh an Aire. Gabhaim buíochas léi as teacht chuig an Teach inniu agus as an ráiteas a thug sí ag tús na díospóireachta seo.

Some years ago, when I was a student teacher in St. Patrick College in Drumcondra, out of complete serendipity I came across a journal article. I cannot remember the headline, but it was something like “Defeating the subculture of poverty”. I read through it and, of all the articles I read in my time in the college, it made the most impression on me. It talked about this snarling, capturing, vicious circle of poverty that entraps a lot of children, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It was generated by their parents being in the same amount of entrapment, and probably their grandparents too. Towards the end, the article asked what the cure for this was. It was blindingly obvious. It said the only way to defeat the subculture of poverty is through education. As a society, with Breaking the Cycle and all the initiatives we have made in schools over the past generation or two, we have gone a long way down the road of breaking the cycle of poverty, but there is a lot more that can be done.

The Minister spoke initially about attendance at schools and the worrying figures for the year 2022-2023. If the Cathaoirleach will allow me to digress, I will tell a little story that underscores the difficulties with school attendance. The late bishop of Waterford, Michael Russell, was doing one of his pastoral visits to a school in Waterford city. He used to drive a black Ford Orion. He parked up and was locking it up in the car park and heading into the school to coincide with the teachers’ 11 o’clock break. As he walked up the avenue, the window of the principal’s office, which was at the front of school, flew open and this ten-year-old child emerged out of the window in a rather dishevelled state and began to run down the avenue in the direction of the bishop, making his bolt for freedom. The pupil, I mean, not the bishop. As the pupil was going towards the school gate, he stopped to give a word of advice of the bishop and said, “Do not go in there, Father, they are all mad in there.” That story sort of illustrates how many children consider what goes on in school as completely foreign and irrelevant to them. That is the job of us teachers, namely, to make school relevant to children who are so disaffected by what goes on in schools.

I left the classroom 20 years ago this year. In the intervening time before I was elected to the House on 31 January, I spent nearly 20 years working with the colleges of education invigilating students on their teacher practice. It also gave me, gach ár lá, the chance to go into schools, see classrooms in operation and assess not just the students, but the whole system, in a very informal way. What I can say about what has happened since 2005, when I left the classroom, is that it is a completely changed game, be it in terms of technology, the curriculum or the level

of inclusivity that makes demands of teachers. The fundamental difference I see in classrooms when I go into them is the level of inclusion of many new nationalities. If there is one thing the current cohort of teachers can be really proud of, it is the work they have done in the past generation to include people from Africa, the Middle East, eastern Europe and all over. One of the greatest sources of joy for me is to see a student teacher engaging with these children and to see a child from Africa, or whose parents are from Africa, belting out some Gaeilge as well as one of the children whose parents and grandparents were born here. That is a wonderful achievement of inclusivity, not just in the curriculum, but in the level of acceptance and warmth the children show to one another as a result of the inclusive nature of schools and the inclusive work teachers mirror and model for these students.

To be oblique, I mentioned Gaeilge. Just across the way is Senator Curley, who is a Gaeilge teacher as well. There is a worrying thing about Gaeilge in primary schools. If we look at language teaching in France, Italy, Germany or wherever, they have some teaching of foreign languages in primary schools. We take in children in junior infants who are aged four or five and they are in the primary school system for eight years. The teachers are belting out the Gaeilge for four or four and a half hours per week, although there is talk about cutting this down at the moment. The fact of the matter is, if you do that for eight years and the cigire - the inspector - comes in during the last week of the child's career in the school and asks the pupil in the front seat, "Conas atá tú inniu?", that child will look at the inspector as if he or she had been shot. One is left wondering. We invest so much time in teaching Gaeilge, and have done since the beginning of the State, and it is just not cutting it.

**Senator Shane Curley:** Hear, hear.

**Senator Joe Conway:** When I look at what is there in the teaching force - it is no fault of theirs - in many primary schools, I see teachers who are trying to deliver the national language, athbheochan na Gaeilge a chur ar aghaidh, and teach Gaeilge but, go feidhmiúil, tá siad neamhliteartha, they are effectively illiterate in the language. It is shocking but that is where we are at. We will never make an impression on the Irish language if we have people going into the teaching force who got a grade C in the leaving certificate in Gaeilge, which was probably as a result of a grinds school, but do not have a clue about how to speak or deliver the language. They are trying their best and they are being supported in the colleges, but we have to look at what we are doing in primary schools with Gaeilge. The Minister needs to think about having a specialist Gaeilge teacher in every school in the country because the general level of Gaeilge support that is given to children is not there and we might as well be blowing it out of the window. If we do not get to grips with this, we will not have a Gaeilge to support in the ordinary national schools.

A mhalairt sin, it is much different when it comes to the Gaelscoileanna. We used to talk about how Irish was a low-status, low-utility language. As a result of the Gaelscoileanna, my kids and the generation that are coming on now, however, it is beginning to be a high-status, high-utility language. A lot of that is down to the model being used in the Gaelscoileanna, where the teaching of Gaeilge has a realistic model. We have to begin to raise the standards in the ordinary national schools. Otherwise, we will have the demise of our national tongue. That is the simple fact of it.

I am almost out of time and I want to say something about the teaching force. Every one of us, be we Senators, the Minister for education, the Cathaoirleach or anyone else, loves to be told when we are doing a good job. The Minister is doing a good job, as did her predecessors,

but she will not be able to do the job she wants to do if she is not investing in the Irish education system, particularly in primary education. Ireland is the third richest country in the world, according to World Bank figures, but we are still way below the OECD average when it comes to investment in primary education. I attended a briefing by the INTO yesterday and it made requests such as increasing the primary capitation grant by €75 per pupil. That is not a very big request. Another request was to reduce the average class size. That is the kernel of success. There will be a demographic dividend in the next few years, so use that to cut the numbers. It will happen naturally provided that the Minister does not renege on it. There was a request to build on the success of the small schools pilot project. There is a lot of disadvantage in small schools around the country, but it is not recognised. When we usually talk about schools that are under pressure, they are in cities and, specifically, in inner cities but rural Ireland is in difficulty as well. The INTO also asked that we introduce a special educational needs co-ordinator so that the transition in different sections can be more easily managed.

Well done to the Minister and the wider Government. I respect what she is doing and the efforts of her predecessors. We have a great teaching force and potentially a great system but there are some areas that are creaking. I have addressed one of them, namely, the Irish language. If we get real about this, we could save it, but not by continuing to do the same thing as we have been for the past generation.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Go raibh maith agat. I call Senator Tully. I am sorry; I took the wrong order.

**Senator Shane Curley:** It is fine; Senator Tully may go ahead.

**Senator Pauline Tully:** I was not expecting to be next.

As a former teacher, I am delighted to speak on this issue. I was a teacher for nearly 30 years and most of that time was spent in Breifne College in Cavan town. I am proud of my teaching career, our education system and the good work teachers, SNAs and the whole school staff, including secretaries and caretakers, put into making our schools not only good places to learn the academic subjects, but also to develop young peoples' social skills, which is almost as important as the former.

To make it a world-class system, though, a number of steps must be taken. While there has been considerable investment and good work has been done over the past number of years and we can easily see that improvement, there are still some issues that need to be addressed. As the previous speaker mentioned, our investment in education is still considerably below the OECD average. According to a report last year, which I acknowledge was based on 2021 figures, the average investment was 5.7% of GDP across the OECD area. Our figure was only 2.8% at that time. We were last out of 34 countries, and we are seen as a wealthy country.

We need to invest in our education system. It is really important. That additional investment means the capitation grant could be increased. It means that the basic utility bills like heat and light that some schools find difficult to pay could be paid without worrying or putting pressure on parents to make contributions to the school that they can ill afford. It would also make a difference in class sizes, given they are above the average in both the EU and the OECD. The INTO addressed this issue in its pre-budget submission. It asked for a reduction in class size by one to 19. That would make an immense difference. From teaching a class of 30 and a class of 15, I know the amount of work you can do with students is immense. We want to see

more mixed ability teaching in our schools. If you have students with additional needs or from another country with language difficulties, the amount of time you can spend with them when the class size is small compared with a large class size is immense. It makes a huge difference to them and ensures that we have an inclusive education system.

On capitation, I also raise an issue that has been raised with me by schools. The capitation grant is paid depending on the number of students registered in a school on 30 September on the primary online database, POD. If a student enters the school after that date, the school does not receive any money for that student for the school year. There are different reasons for a student coming to a school. They may need to leave one school because of certain issues and have to go to another. They may move into a different area. They may come from a different country. It means the school does not receive the money. It also affects the school book grants in that they do not receive the money for those and have to go looking for it. That can sometimes be a complicated process and they have to wait a long time. It should be that when students move or join a school the capitation can be drawn down for that student even if it is a few months into the school year.

The school I taught in had DEIS status, so I know the benefits of DEIS in schools that have significant disadvantage. However, I am dealing with a school in one town where there are four primary schools. Three of them have DEIS status and one does not. They feel it puts them at a huge disadvantage to the other schools, and they do not understand why they are not deemed eligible for DEIS funding when students attending the school come from the same area as the students attending the other schools. I know there are different criteria, one of which is homelessness. The school would say it has families who are homeless, but they are not registered as homeless because they are maybe living with family in the box room or sleeping on the sofa. There is also a stigma attached to registering as homeless so people do not want to do it. There are criteria. Could this be looked at again to ensure that all schools are assessed in all areas?

I would like the Minister to expand on the DEIS plus scheme. Does it provide additional supports to schools that already have DEIS status or will it include more schools that currently do not have DEIS status in the DEIS programme? As part of the DEIS programme, the school completion programme is excellent. The cuts to that programme after austerity had a huge impact. I recall teaching in the early 2000s during what we called the Celtic tiger period. The school completion programme had significant funds and could therefore employ a number of people to work in the school. One of the people employed in the school I worked in was a school counsellor. She did immense work with students who may have had mental health issues or may have been self-harming. Unfortunately, her position and other positions were gone after austerity. I would like to see investment in the school completion programme because it has a huge part to play in ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Traveller backgrounds, stay in school longer. The benefits they reap from that will be seen in later years.

I concur with the previous speaker on Irish language education. Most of us spend 13 or 14 years in the Irish education system and when we come out of the school we cannot string together a conversation in Irish. There is huge interest at the moment among young Irish people in learning and speaking the language. The focus in our schools seems to be wrong because it is almost all on the written element. In secondary school especially, it is about passing an exam. I did not teach Irish but I had situations where students just wanted to be able to write the language. They did not even know what the words meant once they could string the sentence together on a page. I did French in school for five years and at the end of that time, I was not

great at conversation in French either. I do not think I would have headed off to France and been able to engage with French people. Maybe we need to look at how we teach languages other than English in our schools, but particularly our national language. We learn to speak a language by immersion in it, by talking to others and listening to our parents and others around us as children. The same should happen in primary school education where the focus should be more on oral skills.

Special education is obviously a big issue. We had more than 120 students with no school placement at the beginning of the school term last year. I know many of them have received school placements since then. We also have a lot of students who might have a school placement but it is not necessarily an appropriate one or it may not be in their community. I know there has been considerable investment in special education, but we need to look at how we make education more inclusive for all so that students with additional needs can attend their local school with their siblings, where possible, or attend a school in their community, if at all possible, instead of having to travel up to an hour to receive the appropriate education.

Early intervention is key. Many students are either non-verbal or pre-verbal going into schools. They are not getting the early intervention students were getting from the intervention teams some years ago. They are not getting it from the children's disability network teams, CDNTs. That is leading to huge problems where there is a lack of ability to communicate. It is leading to frustration. In some cases, it is leading to self-harm or to children causing injuries to other pupils and staff and to school placements regularly breaking down. We need to find out how we can ensure every child receives an appropriate education with the appropriate supports. I know from talking to a number of primary schools that they would love to see the Minister rolling out therapies in schools, an issue she has spoken about. They feel this is necessary to help them and help the students to learn. They do not know how to deal with students who have complex needs. I would like to see inclusive education but that cannot happen until supports for children and staff are in place and all staff are trained to teach in special education settings.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I thank the Minister for being here for part of this debate. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, is joining us now.

**Senator Shane Curley:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. Táim ag iarraidh cúig nóiméad a roinnt leis an Seanadóir Fiona O'Loughlin.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Senator Shane Curley:** Fáiltim roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu agus táim buíoch go bhfuil deis agam labhairt ar an ábhar ríthábhachtach seo. Mar a luaigh Seanadóir Conway, is múinteoir meánscoile mé agus aontaím go bhfuil géarghá le hinfheistíocht sa chóras oideachais i mbealach a thugann deis dúinn bheith ar aon chaighdeán leis na córais is fearr ar domhan. I am proud to be a member of a party, Fianna Fáil, that has a proud track record in education. From the pioneering work of the former Minister, Donogh O'Malley, in introducing free second level education in 1966, which meant people like my parents could access second level education, to the work of the former Minister, Noel Treacy, my local TD at the time, who invented science week in the early 2000s, my party has a proud record in education.

Classrooms should be places of real and active learning, where students learn and teachers teach properly. However, the workload that teachers are dealing with leaves them worn out because a large portion of the working week is spent lesson planning and correcting to give



timely feedback to students. This creates an environment in which teachers enter the classroom exhausted, constantly stretched and at the end of their tether. I know this because I have sat in staffrooms with teachers who are constantly pressed to the pins of their collars. The result is that they are far from their best when they enter the classroom to give students the best possible learning experience. It is becoming clearer that if we want a world-class, modern education system, we need to modernise and embrace what technology can do to lighten the workload of teachers. The Department of Education needs to look at the highly successful roll-out of Khanmigo in American high schools. Khanmigo is an AI tool that prepares lesson plans, curates content and corrects exams with frighteningly high levels of sophistication and adaptability, allowing teachers to focus on the real job - teaching. On the student side, Khanmigo does not just give the answers. With infinite patience, it guides learners to find the answers themselves. This has revolutionised the classroom environment in America, with entire states adopting the technology.

When I studied to be a secondary school teacher and was doing the PME, one of the most prominent buzzwords from our lecturers was the word “facilitator”, where the dream was that the teacher was a facilitator of active learning. However, the dogs on the street know this is impossible in the current system in Ireland. Instead of facilitating learning, teachers in Irish classrooms force-feed information with a view to it being spat back out on a leaving cert exam paper. Khanmigo is shovel ready to allow teachers to genuinely teach and facilitate learning. It allows them to actively roam the classroom and to guide and problem solve with students in real time while the AI tool does the teaching itself on the board. This allows for a drastically improved level of comprehension of the subject matter being discussed.

It is worth noting this is not intended to replace teachers in the classroom. Even the founder of Khanmigo has been at pains to stress this. A pilot project, with schools volunteering to take part, would lead to the conclusion that this is an example of AI being used as a tool for good and to bring education to a world-class standard in classrooms all over Ireland. From a budgetary point of view, if this were to be rolled out nationally, based on the 2024 budget for the Department of education, which was €10.467 billion, this €13 million investment would account for just 0.12% of last year’s budget. It costs €15 per head, per year, academically.

It goes without saying that if we want a world-class education system, we need world-class facilities in which to deliver it. There are, however, many barriers to delivering capital schools projects in a timely fashion in Ireland. The national public procurement tender threshold is just €50,000 in contrast to the European Union norm of €143,000. What does this mean? For small, local suppliers, not only must they dedicate long hours to tender documents and processes but they must also have €6.5 million public liability insurance, €12.7 million employer liability insurance and €6.5 million product liability insurance. The result of this bureaucracy is a small number of huge companies have a monopoly over the supply of school meals, school equipment and school books. Not only does this drive up prices but it contradicts every concept of green procurement, where a small number of companies clock up thousand of kilometres per week, subsequently driving up carbon emissions. We must cut through and drastically reduce red tape if we want to have a world-class education system to modernise and provide these resources. Driving small, local suppliers out of the market by insisting on needless red tape prevents progress. Just last week, my own local bookstore actually closed, so I have a local anecdotal example to give.

I strongly welcome the fact that, this year, the Department of education will spend in excess of €2.9 billion, or a quarter of the Department’s budget, on providing additional teaching and

care supports for children with special educational needs. That is hugely welcome and we are going in the right direction. However, world-class education should not be the luxury of neuro-typical students in any rural town and we must ensure the roll-out of special classes around the country involves regional balance. My local town of Loughrea, with a population approaching 7,000 people, does not have a single SEN classroom at second level in the entire town. This should not be the case in 2025. We need to drastically improve services for students with SEN in our schools. I do not think it is a coincidence that Ireland has the lowest levels of employment for people with disabilities when stark facts, such as the plight of students with SEN in Loughrea, are considered. Rural towns like Loughrea should not be forgotten when it comes to SEN.

While we have made huge strides in delivering a world-class education system and we have a track record that we can, in the main, be very proud of, we must ensure it is delivered in an inclusive way and no region in rural Ireland is left behind.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is very welcome. It is great to have the opportunity to say a few words about this really important subject. I am very proud of the record of my party, Fianna Fáil, on education. It is fair to say we are the party of education and, throughout our history, we have established an unmatched record of commitment to education because it is a great leveller and a great enabler. Indeed, it is the bedrock of Ireland's continued social and economic progress.

In terms of all of the significant developments and expansions in Irish education, Fianna Fáil has been at the forefront, from the establishment of free secondary schooling and the creation of special education supports to broadening access to university education and, most recently, the free schoolbooks scheme. We have one of the strongest education systems in the world and that is evidenced by our high ranking in all different forms of student achievement. This has been confirmed by the OECD and the EU.

Two of my colleagues have mentioned that Ireland is way down the list of expenditure on education but I beg to differ. Ireland actually spends 12.6% of all Government expenditure on education. That is far more than most nations. The average spend across OECD countries is 10.7% and, in the EU member states, it is 9.5%. Of course, expenditure is not everything. It is the outcomes that are really important for that and, in relation to outcomes, Ireland does very well.

There are a few extra points I would like to make. There is a very ambitious programme for Government in relation to education and I certainly welcome the commitments made there, especially on special education, the review of the DEIS scheme and investment. It is very important we also look at transversal education and the bridge between formal education, non-formal and informal. I learned quite a lot about that many years ago from Peter Hussey, who established a youth theatre called Crooked House in Newbridge. Through that and through working with young people dealing with all of the different things that are happening in society that impact on them and how to help them navigate all of the challenges and issues through drama and improvisation certainly empowered the young people I got to know through that. In fact, only two weeks ago the *Sunday Independent* had a really good article by Gabriel Byrne addressing this. He spoke about working with Leish Burke and Griese Youth Theatre, who I actually had in the audiovisual room approximately four weeks ago to talk about young people, how they interpreted climate change and what we needed to do. The work being done to help young people express their feelings and their emotions and work through these issues is certain-

ly very important and I would like to see the Department of education doing more in this area.

It is particularly important that we support the whole school community. While supporting teachers and the excellent teachers we have is vital, we are aware of the issue at the moment with school secretaries and caretakers. They have balloted for a strike, starting 28 August. I ask the Minister of State to work with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to ensure that does not happen, and I have no doubt he will. We need to support the whole school community. That is what makes a school strong.

This is something I have written to the Minister for education about and I will give an example here of supporting schools. St. Brigid's primary school in Kildare has 1,020 students, yet it only has one administrative principal and one deputy administrative principal because there is no provision after 573 pupils. However, once they hit 900 students in secondary schools, they have three administrative deputy principals. In terms of the workload principals and staff have, I would really like to see that being addressed. Another issue I would like to see progress on is the parent-student school charter. That was passed in the Seanad in 2019. There was pre-legislative scrutiny in the education committee at that point but that has never progressed in the Dáil. I see that as something that is very important for the whole-school community and it gives students and parents buy-in to decisions that are made and an ability to address grievance procedures collectively and not in a defensive way.

There is much I could say but supporting the extra capitation grants is really important because schools are finding it difficult to subsist at the moment. I ask the Minister of State to keep up his own excellent work on special education. There are so many relying on him to do that and I know he will deliver.

*2 o'clock*

**Senator Sarah O'Reilly:** At the outset, I commend the good work of many in the education system. We all want a world-class education system that allows every child to real his or her full potential. However, too many people feel that the Department of Education and Youth is ignoring the voices of those who matter most, namely students, parents and teachers, many of whom have contacted me. There are hundreds of children with special educational needs who do not have school places. There is chronic absenteeism. Teachers are warning us that leaving certificate reform is being rushed and that standards are being diluted. Parents across the country are feeling shut out of decisions about their children's education.

We are seeing a system that is no longer listening to professional experts or parents and that is not dealing with reality. This is particularly true when it comes to the roll-out of the Bí Cineálta programme. While we all support efforts to tackle bullying and promote kindness in schools, this programme introduces complex ideas about gender identity in ways that many parents and professionals feel are not developmentally appropriate. Bí Cineálta was originally developed to emphasise the importance of integrating people with disabilities and autism and children from impoverished backgrounds, many of whom are most at risk of bullying. However, it now focuses primarily on bringing gender ideology into the classroom. It forces children to accept gender ideology as fact. Gender ideology goes against progressive politics. It tells children that if they do not conform to the rigid notions of femininity or masculinity, they are really the opposite sex inside. It tells children that if they do not like dolls or football, they are outside the norm. We have a duty to ensure that what we teach children is grounded in best practice and appropriate for their age and stage of development.

We must also respect the constitutional role of parents in guiding their children's education. When more than 4,000 submissions from concerned parents are dismissed without meaningful engagement, something is very wrong. Bí Cineálta will be embedded throughout the school curriculum, so parents who do not wish for their children to be taught gender ideology will have to remove them from school altogether. There is no ability for parents to have their children opt out of learning factually incorrect information because this policy will be mandatory.

Psychiatrist and member of the Cass review clinical expert group Dr. Paul Moran has stated, "the Department of Health should reconsider some of the overly affirmative educational and training materials it is sending to schools" and has questioned the prominent role that has been given to activist organisations over clinical advice in respect of policy development and teacher training. After the Cass report was published, the North of Ireland, France, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Hungary, Poland and Italy immediately removed gender ideology from their curricula because they took the advice of experts not activists. They listened. We also seem to be behind the curve on issues like this all the time. When other countries became aware of the harm this could do to children, they acted immediately to protect them. The Government is aware of this discourse and, thankfully, dropped the idea of letting those under 16 medically transition from the programme for Government. We need the Government and the Department to lead the way on ensuring education is based solely on factual evidence rather than biased agendas. The Bí Cineálta programme has to be stopped. Every child deserves support and respect, and that must come through evidence-based age-appropriate policies. A world-class education system should not turn a blind eye to what is factually true.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I support what the Senator said 100%. Gender ideology should be kept out of education, particularly primary and post-primary education. There is only one thing I want to raise and that is the education of children in foster care and the disadvantage they face. Many children who go into foster care may not go into an emergency placement within their own jurisdiction. Very often, they are moved out of the county. Believe it or not, some of those children end up not going back into the education system for one or two years. Members might find that shocking, but I have had teenage children in my care who may not have been in school for about two years because they were being pushed on and on through the system and never found that forever home. That, and not keeping them in care, is the greatest shame.

A mileage allowance was granted to foster parents last year, and I welcomed that. However, I would get a child in school in Kildare or Wicklow, and it would be impossible for me to get him or her to school in Wicklow on a daily basis. It is not about the money. I just might not be able to spend four hours in a car every day to bring that child to school. This is something I would like the Minister of State to look at - to think of children in the foster care system who are not in continued education, particularly primary or secondary school. That is important.

The Minister left after 40 minutes. To be honest, I am so disappointed. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State but even on Commencement Matters, we are finding that senior Ministers are not coming to the House to answer the questions Senators are putting before them. This is the first time we have had the chance to address the Minister on this very important Department. I am disappointed that she left the Chamber after 40 minutes. I had a question. I rarely bring up local politics in this Chamber. I do not think I have ever done it. I have done it four or five times since I came in here, and it was to do with a secondary school in my area. I am wondering where it is, but I will send a request to the Minister. I am disappointed that she left the Chamber after 40 minutes.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan):** I welcome the opportunity to be here for statements on education. In recent months, I have worked extremely closely with the Minister to deal with the many challenges we have faced in terms of special education and school places. We have worked with the NCSE and the Department during that time to ensure we will have a place for every student come 1 September. There are some challenges still ahead, but we are very committed to making sure we have the places for them.

During the current school year, parents were asked to make contact with the NCSE on or before 1 February if they wanted additional support for their children. We moved that back by four months. The cut-off date is 1 October for the 2026 school year. This was chosen in the hope we will have school places for children with additional needs and certainty for their families prior to Christmas. That is the least we can do for vulnerable children with additional needs, and we welcome the decision to do that.

In recent months, I have travelled the length and breadth of the country. I have visited special schools, special classes and mainstream classes. I discovered the amazing work that is being done by teachers, SNAs and the wider school leadership. Breifne College was mentioned. I visited it as it was closing two or three weeks ago. I am really taken by the serious commitment on the part of school leadership to deliver an education system that is inclusive and has the child's benefit at heart. School leaders who are embracing special classes and additional supports for children are quite amazing.

We have a lot of work to do on the special classes in primary schools. The primary school education system has really embraced special education. We now face the challenge of ensuring we have places for those children as they transition from primary to post-primary education. Senator Curley mentioned his town of Loughrea. We have challenges in every part of the country with that because some students will be able to get through primary school but the transition from primary to post-primary will be difficult, so there needs to be a great deal of work, and a great deal of understanding around children's needs, to ensure they are accommodated throughout the length and breadth of the country.

I think of the special needs assistants who have done amazing work and been the foundation of special education over the past 20 or 25 years. We have gone from having no special needs assistants in the education system to having 23,000. They have embraced their job. When one meets them in schools, they talk about the commitment they have and their love for the children they are looking after. One can clearly see that.

We are embarking on providing therapists to special schools and special classes again. We will be rolling that out from September of this year. A decision was taken by the Government on Tuesday, I understand, and a number of discussions took place in the Cabinet subcommittee on disability in February. A large volume of work has been done by the Department of education, the NCSE and everybody else to ensure we can roll it out. Getting therapists back into special schools will be transformative for children, but it will also give great support to the teams working in the special schools because they will learn from the therapists. We have a lot of work to do across government, not just in the Department of education, but also in the Department of further education, to ensure there are more therapists coming on stream and that we have extra college places in September.

There is a role within the education system for assistant therapists. We all know that some



of the practitioners in the education system, especially on the special education side of it, are almost therapists themselves at this stage. It is important that we look at the assistant therapist's role and how it will be rolled into the system. Any of us who are close to the education system know quite well that some of the special needs assistants working in it are skilled way beyond what they have on paper. We need to look at ways of ensuring they are brought further into the system.

Over the past five years, the capacity for special education has doubled and the National Council for Special Education has got many more teams on the ground. This year, we have 120 special needs assistants. They are embedded into the system. As the years go by, we will be able to get better outcomes and more certainty for families. It was last September that those 120 SNAs were put into the system. We should be able to get better information.

We also need to break down barriers between the Departments of Children, Disability and Equality and Social Protection to ensure information is sent. We have all heard the dreaded words, when we are making representations or dealing with some issues, about GDPR and the silos within government. We have to break down the silos within government so the whole of government understands quite clearly the need out there in society.

We will have over 400 extra special classes throughout the country this year. We will have five additional special schools. They are in Belmayne and Lucan in Dublin, what will be known as the Carraig na bhFear school will initially start at a site in Fermoy this year before moving to Carraig na bhFear later, another will be in Nenagh in County Tipperary and another will be in Castleblayney in County Monaghan. I believe there will be 18 places in that last school to start off. These are huge initiatives. They need an awful lot of support from the NCSE, the Department and ourselves because they are taking on a very important role in society. All those who are working right across the education system are fantastic, but the staff in special schools are superhuman because of the need they are meeting.

A number of issues relating to foster care were raised. Even yesterday, we had a meeting with a principal who raised a number of issues with me concerning one or two children. We can take fierce pride in the education system that has developed in Ireland over the past century and the amount of progress we have made, especially over the past 50 or 60 years, but there are students who are outside it and who fall through the cracks. We will be measured on how good a safety net we have under them. Senator Keogan spoke about foster care, which is something I will reflect on. We will look at it and make sure we are doing right by children who are going into foster care because life is challenging enough for them. I will certainly look at that. We were given information yesterday about a student who was outside the school system and had escaped the system of the State at seven and a half or eight years of age. We all think there are excellent checks and balances in the system, and by and large there are. There is a fantastic inspectorate within the Department and there is the NCSE. However, there are always some challenges and we are going to have to ensure our education system is bringing everybody together.

Regarding the many challenges we have in society, such as antisocial behaviour, which has been discussed here and in the Lower House in recent days, the education system is crucial. Many of our predecessors in the Houses understood that the way out of poverty was to ensure we had a proper education system, and that they did. Donogh O'Malley was mentioned. In the decades before, that the vocational education system was rolled out and one Minister opened 129 schools in one year in the early 1950s. I was in Scotland recently looking at its education system, particularly the special education system. While it has a great system, the cabinet sec-

retary for education said that she would not start with what she was doing if she were us, given the challenges Scotland faced and the system we had been developing for years.

We have to ensure we are bringing everybody with us within the education system. It is the great enabler for getting people out of poverty traps and the endless cycle of poverty. We are going to have to ensure that we have a fit-for-purpose system for the most vulnerable, whether they come from very disadvantaged backgrounds or require a challenging amount of care. Sometimes, we fall short of that. The figures show we are doing very well. The OECD figures or any comparative studies will say the Irish education system is good, but we have to look at those we are not serving because if we do that right, we will have an even better system into the future. I have certainly put huge energy into my role in the past number of months. I chaired the disability committee during the previous Dáil and Senators O'Loughlin and Tully were members. We gained great insight into the challenges in the disability sector.

I will not speak all the way to 2.30 p.m.-----

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** Please do.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** In the time I have, it is important to say the experience we have and the disability issues we have learned about are going to lead us to putting actions in place to make sure people with additional needs can say the Irish education system really did them proud, whatever role they had. International studies show that for people with additional needs, one of the great things is nature. Some of the stuff we have lost over the years, such as sensory gardens, are being put in again, as are therapies such as equine therapies. Many second level schools have school dogs at the gate. That is all going back to what people did maybe centuries ago in the context of embracing nature in education. We will have to do that to make sure we get the best for our students. In recent months, we have been working on the new therapy services to which I refer. That work is going on apace. They will first go into special schools and then into special classes. They will be a great enabler for the teams in those schools, but more importantly, for the students.

We have a great deal of work to do. We have brought forward the dates for next year in order to create certainty for families and build a system in which families who have children with additional needs have confidence in the system and do not have to take to the streets to challenge it. There is a fight for everything. That is some of the anecdotal evidence we have from across the world. It is not only in Ireland. I am committed to working with the Minister. We work extremely closely to try to make sure we have a system that is fit for purpose

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** What about the ideology in Bí Cineálta?

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn):** The Senator spoke already. She does not have an opportunity to respond. The business is statements, unfortunately.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I want to ask the Minister of State-----

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn):** There is no opportunity under Standing Orders for the Senator to intervene.

That concludes the statements. I thank the Minister of State for his time. Before I call the Deputy Leader, I welcome guests of our colleague Senator McCarthy from the school of law in Quinnipiac University and New York. I hear they are studying in Trinity College, so they did

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not have to come too far. They are welcome. I hope they have a lovely day.

I also welcome guests of Senator Kelleher from the Ballincollig Tidy Towns committee, who are the all-Ireland champions of Tidy Towns. I congratulate them on their success. I am tempted to ask them to come to Tipperary to show us what we are doing wrong. I wish them well and hope they have a pleasant visit.

When is it proposed to sit again?

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Garret Ahearn):** Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 2.22 p.m. go dtí 2.30 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 17 Meitheamh 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 2.22 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 June 2025.