

Vol. 311
No. 4



Tuesday,
10 February
2026

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 10 Feabhra 2026

Tuesday, 10 February 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

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

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony - The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on plans to further recognise and enhance the role of our female farmers in 2026, International Year of the Woman Farmer.

Senator Victor Boyhan - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on commercial rates for home-based childminders, in particular engagement with Tailte Éireann and the County and City Management Association on this matter.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on social welfare payments for special school bus escorts during school holidays.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the development of an adult day services centre for County Monaghan.

Senator Tom Clonan - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the inclusion of hereditary ataxia, hereditary spastic paraplegias and myalgic encephalomyelitis in the long-term illness scheme.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to make a statement on the provision of funding to commemorate men and women who fought in the War of Independence that have not yet been acknowledged.

Senator Malcolm Noonan - The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on Ireland becoming a signatory to the Antarctic Treaty.

Senator Gareth Scahill - The need for the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to make a statement on plans for the telephone infrastructure nationwide following repeated storm damage.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on funding for the administration of the tenant in situ scheme within local authorities.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Murphy O'Mahony, Boyhan, Nelson Murray and O'Reilly 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

Agriculture Supports

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Martin Heydon, to the House.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I thank the Cathaoirleach for choosing my Commencement matter. I also thank the Minister for coming in. I am very grateful that he is attending here himself.

As the Minister will know, we would be lost without women. I just wanted to say that at the very start. As we mark 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, it is timely to reflect on both the significant contribution of women to Irish agriculture and the steps still required to recognise and strengthen their role. Women are central to the sustainability, resilience and viability of our agricultural sector, yet despite their immense contribution, they remain persistently under-represented as farm holders. According to the Farm Structure Survey 2023 conducted by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, women make up just 13.2% of farm holders in Ireland, accounting for 17,519 out of 133,174 farm holders. A related study funded by the Department of agriculture and published in March 2025 found that a similar figure of 13.4% of farm holders are women, a figure that has shown little increase since 1991.

The picture becomes even clearer when we look beyond ownership to overall labour. The CSO notes that women account for 34% of all farm workers in Ireland, highlighting that while women participate widely in farm labour, they are far less represented in positions of legal and marginal authority. Additionally, female farm holders tend to operate smaller farms, often in areas with lower land values, and remain disproportionately represented in lower income farm systems such as mixed field crops and specialist sheep. This is consistent with broader research showing that female farm incomes are consistently lower than those of their male counterparts.

As we celebrate the year of the woman farmer, it is vital to ask how we ensure this year becomes not just symbolic but a catalyst for lasting change. The Department has already recognised the importance of increasing the presence of women in the agricultural field. The Government's women in agriculture initiatives, which I welcome, the national dialogue on women in agriculture and the emerging national women in agriculture action plan all underline a clear commitment to gender equality within the sector. Furthermore, Ireland's active co-

sponsorship of this UN-designated year demonstrates leadership internationally. The International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026 aims to highlight the essential but often overlooked roles that women play throughout the agrifood systems and to promote action to close gender gaps. The Department has committed to amplifying the visibility of Irish women farmers throughout the year, recognising the persistent barriers regarding land access, finance, training and representation.

What further measures will the Department introduce during the year of the woman farmer to promote equality of access to land, training and financial supports? Will the Minister's Department commit to expanding gender-disaggregated data collection to better capture women's roles, their incomes and farm decision-making? How will the Minister's Department ensure the national women in agriculture action plan is fully implemented, with clear timelines and accountability?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Shane Curley): Before I invite the Minister to respond I must welcome the transition year students in the Public Gallery, who are here today with the Office of the Ombudsman. Tá fáilte mhór romhaibh agus go raibh míle maith agaibh as ucht teacht isteach.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Senator Murphy O'Mahony for raising this important issue, which is very topical in this early part of 2026. Before I answer on the key points she raised, I will say that I am the youngest of three and, unfortunately, my dad died when I was eight years old. Back in 1986, my mother, as a 43-year-old widow, had a choice to make as to whether to set the farm to educate her three children. She insisted on continuing to farm it with me before and after school, morning and evening, because she said that if I grew up on a farm that was set, I would never have a grá for the land. I had that experience of seeing my mother in the mid-1980s as a young female farmer. Many female farmers are there not through planned circumstance but through inheritance as a widow.

That experience is not easy. I have seen how hard it is for a female farmer in a system that is male-dominated. This is an area about which I am passionate. I am delighted to see the progress we are making on the action plan points. I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues in both Houses of the Oireachtas to ensure we make lasting change and the cultural change the Senator talked about in her opening address.

It is fair to say that women play an essential role in agriculture and agribusiness. However, they can face significant barriers to land, finance, training and decision-making. Gender equality in agriculture is, therefore, a priority of mine and features strongly in the new programme for Government, as the Senator knows. It is a core element of Ireland's domestic policy framework, including Food Vision 2030, and is central to our wider international development work.

The International Year of the Woman Farmer is an opportunity to recognise the vital role that women play across the agrifood sector. It is also an opportunity to target gaps within policy with concrete actions. Ireland is actively engaging with this global initiative by co-sponsoring the official launch ceremony at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, and taking steps domestically to raise visibility, improve participation and expand supports.

The outcomes and recommendations of the national dialogue on women in agriculture formed the basis of a 12-point national action plan, which was launched in 2024. It seeks to address issues across areas such as leadership, visibility, educational awareness, financial and legal matters and sustainability. Implementation has worked and progressed well under the stewardship of the women in agriculture working group and a final report is expected shortly. I intend to use the platform of the International Year of the Woman Farmer to build on this momentum and further improve gender equality in farming throughout the year.

Ireland was one of only two member states to formally include support for women farmers under the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, strategic plan. The most significant practical measure to support female farmers is the women farmers' capital investment scheme. It provides an enhanced grant of 60%, up to €90,000, for on-farm capital investments. Additionally, the Department funded Making Farms Work For Women, a European Innovation Partnership project. It seeks to foster a more inclusive environment for women on farms and to address physical barriers to sole female farming.

Beyond financial supports, a range of initiatives is planned for this year. Our search for a female farmer ambassador for the International Year of the Woman Farmer places women farmers at the heart of our plans for this year. It offers a unique opportunity to represent female farmers, promote existing supports and initiatives, and highlight important issues. I have seen at first-hand the incredible work of women farmers and am confident of the high calibre of entries for this important role. I will announce the outcome at the flagship International Year of the Woman Farmer event in Athlone in March.

Rising engagement in formal agricultural learning and leadership has led to an increase in the number of women taking up formal agricultural education. The establishment of the women in agricultural studies award, in association with the UCD school of agriculture and food science, is just one way in which we acknowledge and promote the involvement of women and young girls in agriculture. Through these initiatives, we celebrate women's contributions to agriculture and create lasting structural change, enhancing recognition, participation and leadership.

Senator Margaret Murphy O'Mahony: I am sorry to hear about the Minister's dad. His mum was obviously a very strong and committed woman. He did not pick that up off the stones. Fair play to her.

I thank the Minister for his commitment. As he said, he saw first hand what women in agriculture can do. Nothing changes if nothing changes. What is frightening is that where a successor is identified, that successor is predominantly male. In this day and age, that has to change. I thank the Minister for his commitment.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am leaning back into the personal element again. Happily, my wife and I continue to farm at home with four young children. I am passionately of the view that my daughter, who is only in junior infants, has every bit as much of an opportunity to inherit that farm as any of her three brothers. They will have an equal opportunity and it will depend on whoever displays the most interest in and passion for agriculture and farming. That is where we need to get to. That is why there are measures we can take. Having ambassadors will allow people to see it and be it. We need more female participation. That participation is

there. I know of situations, as the Senator does, whereby the female, perhaps the wife of the husband farmer, is an integral part of the farming system and no big management decision is made on the farm without her input. It is very much a partnership. However, because her name does not appear anywhere on a piece of paper, she does not exist in the eyes of my Department. That is wrong. Those are the types of issues we want to address. We can take practical measures that will highlight the role that women farmers play and encourage more participation into the future.

I look forward to working with the Senator and colleagues on that.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): With the Senators' agreement, we will suspend while the Dáil vote takes place. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 2.46 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.47 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.46 p.m. and resumed at 2.47 p.m.

Childcare Services

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome and thank the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan. He is coming from the Department.

In essence, this is quite a simple Commencement matter. The answer might be a bit more complex.

This relates to the imposition of commercial rates on childminders' homes. These are not necessarily crèches. These are small operations where a parent may have their own children and may take in a child or two on top of that to mind on an informal but regulated basis, in that it is a professional system.

The context of this relates to the Minister for children. By way of background, I will make some points.

Tailte Éireann indicated that, under the Valuation (Amendment) Act 2015, not-for-profit early childhood care facilities are exempt from rates but the for-profit ones may not be.

I commend the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, who has gone on record and responded when she stated that childminders should not be assessed for commercial rates of their homes. That Minister of the Government, who sits at the Cabinet table, is on the record and I congratulate her for that. I understand that the Ministers discussed this with the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, emphasising the need for absolute clarity on this issue and that is my ask here today.

This issue relates to a commercial rates issue that arose on a childminder's home in Newbridge, County Kildare. It is not appropriate to mention the individual by name. I have not spoken to her and it would not be appropriate to raise her name in this public forum without having her consent.

This happened in County Kildare. There was a valuation of rates by Tailte Éireann, which manages property registration and valuations, as the Minister of State well knows. Indeed, we have talked about Tailte Éireann previously.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, to her credit, as I say, made the case that childminding in the family home should not incur rates unless there is a very significant modification to the building itself so it becomes a big commercial enterprise or there are substantial modifications that would undermine it in terms of being primarily residential - I think that is where the Minister was coming from.

There are significant discrepancies and inconsistencies across all of the 31 local authorities. I am not saying that is deliberate. I am saying in the absence of a clear understanding of what the law and the regulations are, this may need to be tightened up in terms of interpreting the regulations.

I am calling on the Minister of State to commit to seek greater clarity on the issue and the need for uniformity among the local authorities. Tailte Éireann has indicated that under the Valuation (Amendment) Act 2015, not-for-profit early childcare facilities are exempt from rates, but for-profit ones cannot be exempted. That is the clarity.

We all know that communities, particularly rural communities, are under pressure for childcare facilities. We know that many parents living in rural areas could have the capacity to mind one or two children in addition to their own, maybe up to preschool. It is a small enterprise that supplements the family income or farm income. We have to be flexible. We want to accommodate people once they are within the regulations and meet all the other standards.

My ask is for clarity and uniformity across the 31 local authorities in this regard. The stock answer will be that Tailte Éireann is exercising its own functions. Tailte Éireann is not fit for purpose, as I told the Minister of State previously. In my latest meeting with him, he raised a number of issues. Within days of having the Minister of State in the House on that occasion, I had margins of national press with regard to Tailte Éireann. We now know there are thousands upon thousands of issues and outstanding cases, but that is for another day. This is a simple measure. While I am not expecting the Minister of State to give me a commitment today, I hope that he will consider the merits of the case, which the Minister for children is also behind. Maybe we can seek to remedy the situation in due course.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Senator for raising this important issue. In recent years, the Government has made great inroads into reducing the cost of childcare. That is one of the key measures we have taken. As we know, childcare is still expensive, but we have certainly reduced that. A key issue that remains is the provision of childcare. There are some pockets of Ireland, in regional areas in particular, where options are not available. What we need to do is encourage more people to take on these types of initiatives.

In asking for clarity on this situation, the Senator rightly referenced the 2015 Act, which I will go into in detail shortly. What is straightforward and clear is that if it is a for-profit body or individual who is running the operation in the family home, they are subject to rates. If it is a not-for-profit body, for example, a community set-up, it is exempt. That is pretty straightforward. Perhaps we can discuss it further.

I will go into more detail on the status. As the Senator rightly said, Tailte Éireann is an independent Government agency under the aegis of the Department of Housing, Local

Government and Heritage. Tailte Éireann provides a property registration system, a property valuation service and the national mapping and surveying infrastructure for the State. Tailte Éireann is independent in the exercise of its valuation functions under the Valuation Act 2001, as amended, and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has no function in decisions in this regard.

Tailte Éireann has overall responsibility under the Act for the maintenance of all valuation lists used by local authorities in the calculation of rates liability. This maintenance is carried out under the statutory process known as revision. Existing rateable properties have their valuations revised, and new properties may have their valuations entered on, or excluded from, the valuation list for the first time.

Under the Act, all property is rateable unless it falls into one of the exempt categories listed in Schedule 4 to the Act. This is a very specific range of exemptions that can be applied, and Tailte Éireann has no discretionary latitude to grant exemptions not covered by Schedule 4. Paragraph 22 of the Schedule, which is inserted by the Valuation (Amendment) Act 2015, refers specifically to early childhood care and education facilities. As the Senator noted, it provided for an exemption as follows: “Any land, building or part of a building used exclusively for the provision of early childhood care and education, and occupied by a body which is not established and the affairs of which are not conducted for the purpose of making a private profit.” That is exempt, but if it is profit-making, it is not and, therefore, while the Act provides that early childhood care and education facilities that are operated on a not-for-profit basis are exempt from rates, it does not provide a general exemption from rates for all childcare or childminding facilities operating on a for-profit basis. To avoid ambiguity, if an early childhood care and education facility is operated on a for-profit basis, it does not fulfil the criteria under paragraph 22.

With regard to childminding in the home, section 3 of the Act defines “domestic premises” as any premises used as a dwelling which is neither a mixed premises nor an aparthotel. If the property is used partly as a dwelling to a significant extent and partly for another purpose, it may be a mixed premises as defined in the Act, and consequently, may not qualify for the domestic premises exemption, in accordance with paragraph 6, Schedule 4, to the Act.

As a matter of course, Tailte Éireann examines all properties on their individual merits by reference to the relevant statutory provisions governing the operation of the Act and case law arising from the independent Valuation Tribunal in the higher courts. Applications to Tailte Éireann to consider the valuation of a property are normally submitted by the local authority in whose rating authority area the property is situated. Where a property is considered rateable, in accordance with the provisions of the Act and relevant case law, Tailte Éireann will issue a proposed valuation certificate. If the property is considered not rateable, Tailte Éireann will issue a proposed notice.

I have very little time left. There is more detail in my prepared script about the role of the local authority. In the context of the comments of the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Senator's appeal today, I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Browne. I imagine this will require legislative change if it is to proceed but I will start that conversation and we will see where it goes.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Really what I am saying is let us get it down to brass tacks: a family or a parent who decides to take a child in and make €200 a week has to pay rates. Let us keep

the message simple because that is how we communicate with our electorate: anyone listening in who is caring for a child and is in receipt of money is liable for rates. Despite all the announcements about concerns for childcare and supporting rural communities and families, people in difficulty and people who cannot access childcare or moderate supports, the position is that if an individual - I am not talking about the tax code, which is a matter for individuals and for Revenue - is caring for a child and is in receipt of money, and is making it profitable by covering more than what he or she is outlaying, he or she is liable for rates. That is a very serious issue. It has profound impact on rural communities, including the Minister of State's community and mine. It needs to be challenged. Let us cut to the case by seeking to end the ambiguity: we have to support people, particularly in rural communities, who want to reach out and provide - for a reasonable consideration, fee or contribution - care to a neighbour's child or a child in their community. That needs to be addressed as part of the bigger commitment to rural Ireland and rural communities but also communities in urban Ireland. I am particularly conscious and mindful of rural communities. Nobody wants to operate in the black economy. People want to be legitimate and compliant. This needs to be looked at again. I appreciate the Minister of State's commitment to take it up with the Minister. Deputy Foley has committed to this and, I understand, has already spoken to the relevant Minister. We now need follow-on dialogue. There is a two-way process. Sending emails and letters to the Minister and hearing nothing is not very satisfactory.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: We need to increase the provision of childcare, especially in rural areas. There may be methods and ways of looking at that. It may not be as straightforward as the Senator has presented it. At the moment, the short-term letting legislation is very topical. If someone has a bed and breakfast with planning permission, it may be subject to rates. It probably is. I refer to the old, traditional bed and breakfasts that the Senator and I would have stayed in - not together, by the way - over the years. By comparison, in most cases Airbnbs are not subject to rates. There are disparities in that regard as well. We have to think of that when talking about childcare provision. There are childcare operators who may have a premises that is subject to rates. We have to ensure there is not an issue in terms of competition and fairness. The Senator makes a good point. If the Minister, Deputy Foley, in the context of her comments is supporting looking at this again, I can raise it with her to see if some blend or tweaking of the current legislation can accommodate the type of situation the Senator is speaking about.

School Transport

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, for coming to the House to discuss this Commencement matter. I would like to discuss the issue of bus escorts and transport for special schools.

3 o'clock

When the Minister of State and I spoke at the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on 16 July last year, he gave me a commitment that he would look into this. I look forward to getting an update from him.

I am on the board of an amazing special school in Navan, County Meath. It was a big eye opener to see the work of all the staff in the school. If one is ever near the school between 8.30 a.m. and 9 a.m., one will find it is an absolute hive of activity. There is one area I did not understand, however, until I began to work with the school, namely transport to and from it, the work done by bus escorts in most special schools and the difficulties associated with this. I will go into my idea for managing the system of bus escorts further as I have done before during my time here.

My first focus is the timing of the social welfare payment. The escorts leave for the Easter holidays because they are not paid throughout the year and it can take five or six weeks to receive a social welfare payment. When they leave at Christmas, it takes the same amount of time. They leave in June, and it can be August by the time they get paid. I very much appreciate that there have been pay rises in the sector staggered over the past number of months, which is great. However, bus escorts have to fill out forms and answer questions about whether their circumstances are the same. They have filled out forms at Easter and may have to fill them out again in the summer. Jobs where people are constantly going on and off social welfare require a mechanism to be in place to speed up the process for them. Who can work up to the summer and expect to survive for five weeks without social welfare payments? I am sure a job like that is very rewarding and often very challenging. We should not add to the pressures on them by having a system whereby they do not get their payments on time.

The 24 buses at the school I work with, all of which carry vulnerable children, arrive at the same time from all over County Meath and, in some cases, Dublin. They are escorted by bus escorts who, as I have said, do an incredible job. There is a facility in the special educational needs transport scheme for the appointment of a school transport escort where a child's care and safety needs while on school transport are such as to require the support of the school transport escort. One has to see what happens in the schoolyards like the one in the school with which I work to believe it. They are packed with buses, bus escorts, children, parents and staff. It takes the principal and vice principal to stand in the yard every morning to get the children off the buses and direct them to where they need to go. They may also have to arrange for them to have a run around after having been on a bus for a long time. As one can imagine, they can be overwhelmed.

What is the issue? Very often bus escorts are unavoidably sick, take holidays or deal with an unexpected situation just like employees in any job do. When they are unwell, the calls start at 6 a.m. and it is up to the school principal and vice principal to try to sort out this among everything else, and this can be very difficult. It is left to the school to be the employer of bus escorts. They receive 5% of the bus escorts' wages for administration, but the cost is much more than that.

Special schools are at capacity. The role is challenging. Having to manage bus escorts is adding to a pot that is about to boil over. I ask the Department of Education and Youth and the Minister of State to examine this situation with a fresh approach, as I mentioned last year. I am not sure whether people realise that the management of the school is stretched enough. In cases like St. Ultan's School in Navan, this means looking after 24 extra staff which is not technically part of its work remit. I also spoke to St. Mary's Special School in Johnstown in Navan about that this. It manages 21 buses and 24 bus escorts.

Would the Department consider a transport manager to co-ordinate special buses travelling to and from schools? I have harped on about this for over a year. It is a brilliant idea. There would not be a specific transport manager for each school, but rather one that co-ordinates special schools in a locality. A handful of schools in Meath would be dealt with by a transport manager who would co-ordinate the buses and bus escorts. It would take that work from principals and vice principals and let them go about doing their job. It is a stressful and very rewarding environment. It could be an absolute game changer. One can imagine the benefits of taking away this stress each morning from the people whose goal it is to teach people in the school rather than having to look after transport.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Senator for her question. Bus escorts who travel on school buses do amazing work and have huge responsibility, but they love their job. I meet them on a number of mornings during the week and see the work they are doing. The Senator asked about pay for those working in special schools. I know full well the extraordinary work being done in special schools the length and breadth of the country by school leadership, teachers and SNAs.

Of course, we have the discussion about the co-ordination of the buses. Personally, I am not in favour of putting an overarching body over a number of special schools and then having that centralised because the autonomy has to be within the school. There is such a huge cohort and a strong unit within the special schools. I understand the point the Senator makes, which is about the amount of work that is there for the principals and the deputy principals to co-ordinate that and that they are making sure that they have school bus escorts recruited and that they are deployed in terms of their availability and so forth each day. There is a whole series of work being done there, and I know that that is extra work they do as part of their administrative role. The administration of it is brought up with us at each and every special school we visit and indeed at schools with a number of special classes. They would have buses coming in as well, and the co-ordination of it is important, as is making sure we have a system in place. It is important as well, however, that we keep the autonomy of the individual schools. Sometimes if we create another layer of bureaucracy in the system, it is not as close to the school, to the child, to the parent or to the school community. That is my own personal opinion on it. We have done a lot of work in relation to the school bus escorts and, as the Senator quite rightly pointed out, the salaries have been increased over the past while, which is very welcome. We are working to engage further in terms of making sure there is a proper system in place.

As regards the issue the Senator raised about summer, Christmas and Easter, first of all, it is an issue for the Department of Social Protection. Be that as it may, however, it is important that we understand that we must protect the school bus escorts, who are an integral part of the special classes and the special schools, and ensure we can simplify the process for them. The Senator referred in her opening remarks to the repeated form-filling. It is challenging and it is seen as over-bureaucratic and just ticking the boxes for the sake of it. I think there is something we need to look at there. There are people within the Department of Social Protection who would say that there were other professionals working within the school system heretofore, but it is important that we try to simplify the system where people can get their benefits without having the constant form-filling and the delay within the system. Year on year, they will apply for social welfare during the various breaks. The Senator spoke to me at the Oireachtas joint committee and this was something we took away. It is also something we have discussed with

school leadership around the country in the various special schools we have visited over the past 12 months to get their feedback and their ideas on it. I seriously pay tribute to all those who are working within special schools for the amazing work they do.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Sula leanaimid ar aghaidh, I would like to welcome students from UCC with Deputy Thomas Gould today in the Gallery. Tá fáilte romhaibh.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive answer. I am glad he said that the pay needs to be worked on and that he took that away from our discussion on it last year. I acknowledge that he says this is an issue for the Department of Social Protection, but the Deputy is the Minister of State working with the bus escorts and that transport side of it, so it is about the two Departments liaising on it. They cannot wait five weeks in the summer to get paid. It just has to be looked at. I am glad to hear that we are working on it but I urge the Minister of State to try to improve on this for this summer. To think that they could get paid when they finish up work would be fantastic.

With the greatest respect to the Minister of State, before he states that he does not personally want this in schools, does he not think we should research it first? If you actually go out and ask the principals and the vice principals of the schools, they do not want to manage the bus escorts. The Minister of State talks about taking that away and says it is an extra layer of bureaucracy, but it will allow them to do more within the schools. It is not something I personally feel; I listen to them, and that is what they are coming back with. They would love to have some sort of transport co-ordinator - I am not saying in every school. I have not researched every school in the country. However, is it something we should look at, maybe talking to them about it?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: It is great to be here with the students from UCC as well. I welcome them. It is great to be with Cork people when we are in the Chambers in Dublin - a little bit of support from them.

I take the Senator's point on the co-ordinator. I would be reluctant to have some external body co-ordinating a number of schools but I take the point in relation to specific co-ordinators within schools because in special schools and special classes, that often falls to the deputy principal. It is something that has been raised continuously with the Department. From my engagement with the special schools in my area over a long number of years, I know the concerns they have and some have a number of buses for students from special classes. I understand the challenge that is there.

There are two issues related to what the Senator has raised with me. The first is to make sure that the benefits are given to the school bus escorts in a speedier time. That is something that we will engage with the Department of Social Protection on. I do not absolve myself from any responsibility, it is under our remit, and it is about a whole-of-government approach. We have to have a whole-of-government approach right across the sectors to make sure we are not just ticking boxes. I accept that fully but I make the point that we have to engage with them. While it is not something that is directly under my remit, I will certainly do that.

On co-ordination, I do not have any issue with exploring co-ordination within individual schools. Sometimes we see the interaction with the various semi-State bodies, such as Bus Éireann or others, and we are informed that someone else has to complete that application and then it is back for another application. I am not sure that we should look at putting in a third application or something else. We need to simply all of the services that are around special schools and special classes to make it simpler and take out the bureaucracy as much as possible. However, I do take the Senator's points on board.

Disability Issues

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Sula dtosaíonn muid leis an Seanadóir O'Reilly, I want to welcome four guests of Deputy Cormac Devlin to the Gallery. They are transition year students Claire Pegum, Áine Wyatt, Iris McMahon and Ellen Pluck. Tá fáilte rompu. It is great to see students coming in and witnessing democracy in action. We do appreciate it. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I am really disappointed that the Minister of State could not stay for my Commencement matter because it is connected to his Department. When will a new adult day services day centre for County Monaghan be developed? Has a location for the site been selected? Can the Minister responsible for disability provide a timeline for works to be completed?

There has been a lot of confusion on this over the past few years. I am working with a group called Special Needs Active Parents, SNAP, in County Monaghan that is trying to improve facilities and services for children with special needs and to improve services for children after they leave school. We want a bit of clarity. We get several minutes in this House for a debate on a topic, which I appreciate, but I want to know what stage the Department of disability is at with progressing an adult day centre for County Monaghan?

I have been working with my colleague in Monaghan, Olivia Larkin, on this and with the SNAP organisation's Paddy McAloon and the rest of the parents in that group. They have raised a number of issues related to the lack of disability services in County Cavan, but particularly in County Monaghan, which is more poorly serviced. There is a lack of respite services, special education places and a need to increase respite provision.

We have been told that a site has been selected for an adult day services centre, but the information has been sparse on where the site is and when it will be completed. The issue here is that families and their loved ones need to plan. Continuity and consistency for children with special needs is really important.

The daily activation unit in Rooskey is fantastic but we need a building that can deliver more space and cater for different age groups and school leavers in particular. Originally, it was supposed to be a building at St. Louis convent in Monaghan and then an old fire station. In 2024, a submission for the unit to be based in St. Davnet's campus was completed and approved by the HSE for capital and by the property steering committee. We need a decision, action on the site and a timeline for opening. I ask the Minister of State to clarify those questions for me.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I would like to add to the list of TY students who are visiting the Chamber. Leo Rowley is here today with me. I also welcome Deputy Devlin's guests and all our guests to the Chamber.

I thank Senator O'Reilly for tabling this commencement matter. I would like to use this opportunity to outline exactly what is happening. I know that is something the Senator and SNAP are keen to happen.

The HSE has provided a status update. HSE Cavan-Monaghan disability services team, supported by the HSE north-east estates department made a submission for capital funding for a new day services premises to replace the existing Monaghan day activation unit premises based in the St. Davnet's campus in Monaghan town. The submission to support the development and the delivery of a new service location in County Monaghan in line with the new directions policy was approved as a capital appraisal project in 2024, as the Senator said.

HSE Cavan-Monaghan disability services is working with the HSE north-east estates to consider the best option for the delivery of the mainstream and high-support elements within the service location. They have carried out a strategic, healthcare investment framework assessment and that was completed last year. The HSE capital estates office is currently liaising with Cavan-Monaghan disability services to identify a suitable location in Monaghan town. The HSE provides specialist disability services, including day service and rehabilitative training, to people with disability who require such services and people with intellectual disabilities form the majority of service users who are supported by these services.

As the Senator will be aware, the focus is on supporting people to participate in mainstream activities and in the life of their communities in line with their wishes and needs. Day services are a vital support for adults with disabilities to be able to participate in the life of their community and to realise their own ambitions and desires.

Day service locations act as a base location for people supported to access and participate in valued roles in their communities in line with the new directions policy and UNCRPD. It is critical that new service locations comply with the core values of new directions, which are community inclusion, active citizenship, quality and person centeredness. Locations are developed in response to demographic growth as part of the annual rehabilitation school leaver process. Supports are provided from locations local to where the individuals with disabilities live. Locations are ideally centrally located within a village or town such as Monaghan, providing easy access to other community services, for example, transport, shops, leisure facilities and so on. Each location serves a local population, rather than serving the needs of a larger geographical area because each typically has capacity for no more than 25 people in the location at any one time. The expectation is that people will be away from the location and accessing local community services in line with their person-centred plan for part of the week. This recognises that much of the support is provided in the community in line with community inclusion and access to activities external to the location. That is where it is currently at in Monaghan.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for her response but I still have not got clarity. The clarity I have been asking for is whether a location has been selected for the day services unit. The Minister of State said the HSE is looking in Monaghan. Is that

Monaghan town? Do they have a location selected? There is also information that the site the HSE and the property steering group has approved for capital is deemed as a hospital setting so it cannot be used.

This means there is still this confusion, and the Minister of State has not even mentioned this in her response. If this last site selection is deemed unsuitable because it is in a hospital setting, I want to get information for those parents and children looking in. The children need to know where they are going and their parents need to know they have a space, but we still have this obfuscation of where the location is going to be, if there is a site, if there is a design and if it is going to be built at all. What is the issue that is blocking this? Is the Minister of State still telling me that St. Davnet's campus is the location of the site, when there is information to say that site is now seen as not being suitable because it is deemed a hospital setting?

Deputy Emer Higgins: What I am clearly saying is that we are looking to replace the existing Monaghan day activation unit, which is based in St. Davnet's campus in Monaghan town. Yes, we are looking at Monaghan town. The information I have from the HSE is that it is engaging locally with the HSE north-east estates department to identify a suitable site, so I do not have information that says a site has been identified. I am being told by the HSE directly that the HSE capital estates office is currently liaising with Cavan-Monaghan disability services and my Department to identify a suitable location in Monaghan town.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: So, the location has not been identified.

Deputy Emer Higgins: That is the information I have, correct.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Do we have a timeline?

Deputy Emer Higgins: There is no timeline because it is ongoing. As soon as it is identified we will have further information, because once we have an identified site, we will then know from a planning perspective how long things will take. It is really important to say that funding was approved as a capital appraisal project for this, so there is funding earmarked for this project. It is something we are very committed to delivering. We know there is a need there and we want to replace the existing facility, and this is how we do that. We engage with the local service providers to see where there is capacity and suitable premises and then we work with them to turn that suitable premises into a service for the type of people the Senator has identified and spoken about and for the people SNAP is dealing with directly in her area. This is what happens around the country.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.23 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.31 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.23 p.m. and resumed at 3.31 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the Leader to outline the Order of Business I welcome from Wexford the Newtown aqua ladies club, who are guests of the Ceann Comhairle. They are in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, as they should be.

Senator Seán Kyne: The Order of Business is No. 1, the Health Information Bill 2024 - Second Stage, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and to conclude at 6.15 p.m. with the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, any other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; No. 2, statements on apprenticeships, to be taken at 6.30 p.m. and to conclude at 8 p.m. with the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, any other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 3, statements on Storm Chandra, to be taken at 8 p.m. and to conclude at 9.30 p.m. with the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, any other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Leader for the opportunity to speak. Today is digital Internet safety day. It is an important day in the calendar because it is a day when we bring awareness to keeping children safe online. It is unfortunate that it is a day. It should be every day that we ensure we are keeping our children safe online. The protection of minors should be a priority for the Data Protection Commission. However, section 30(6) of the Data Protection Act 2018, which would make it illegal to profile minors for the purpose of targeting them with advertising, has never been commenced. This means tech platforms *à la* algorithms can use minors' data such as their age, gender or sexual orientation to target ads at them. Children and vulnerable adults can be brought to the extremes easily by harmful ads. This is despite the EU General Data Protection Regulation explicitly stating that, "Processing [of data] shall be lawful only if and to the extent that at least one of the following applies... [that] the data subject has given consent to the processing of his or her personal data for one or more specific purposes". The digital age of consent in Ireland is 16. Children under 16 cannot consent to the processing of their data. Therefore, it should be illegal to target children under 16 with advertising or algorithms. I ask that the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration come before Seanad Éireann to address that issue. On the day he is here I would also like sexual exploitation to be addressed.

That is widespread online today. It takes the form of children being dressed up as adults in sexually suggestive clothing and being made to pose for pictures and videos to be posted online. This practice should be seen as and considered child sexual abuse material. It should be treated as such in the law, and those creating this content should face harsh consequences.

On Internet digital safety day, therefore, I have raised with the Leader two solutions that would help protect our children online. One is the enacting of section 30(6) of the Data Protection Act. The other is to bring forward a law preventing sexual exploitation of our minors. That would go a long way towards protecting our children and ensuring we do not have targeting of algorithms where children have not given consent in respect to their data because they cannot as they are under 16 years of age.

Senator Manus Boyle: Following the recent news from the Department of justice of the allocation of new members of An Garda Síochána, I am very disappointed to hear that only one has been pledged to County Donegal. Geographically, Donegal is a uniquely demanding, vast rural area with a poor road network. Gardaí are regularly covering huge patrol areas on their own. Response times are extremely long. Backup can take about 30 to 60 minutes to arrive. The night shift runs on minimal cover. Single Garda units attend horrible accidents. This has effects on members and the public. It is one of the core operational risks. Donegal has a large population and seasonal surges with a massive summer increase because of tourists, festivals and holiday homes. Garda demand spikes, but staffing does not. Being a Border county adds additional strain. Crime utilises the Border. This results in more time being spent at incidents on average than other counties. The Garda has to liaise with the PSNI, which takes up a lot of time and paperwork.

Keeping our staff in Donegal is a major problem. Many leave as soon as they are eligible for transfers. Donegal's location discourages long-time placement and as a result, rapport and relationships with communities fall by the wayside. There is a demand for more members who come from Donegal to be stationed in Donegal, yet the requests are often not approved or take a very long time to reach approval. The system prioritises holding the line elsewhere. Donegal becomes the release valve. Members of the Garda are sent to other counties but, in lots of cases, are not being sent back. This directly discourages Donegal applicants from applying. Many of our gardaí are renting properties in rent pressure zones in other counties, and they have their own accommodation in Donegal. This is adding unnecessary pressure on the rental market.

The Minister was up in Donegal a couple of weeks ago and he had a very positive meeting with gardaí and with the local communities. He is an absolute gentleman. However, we really need help here. One garda for the size of Donegal is just not enough. I am not getting at the Minister here, no way, but from being up there, he sees the geographical size of the county. We really need more help and more reinforcements up there.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: When I was elected to this House last year, there were over 15,000 people in emergency accommodation. The most recent figures, which came out last year, show that there has been a 12% increase overall. There was a small drop in December, but if we take into account temporary accommodation and families taking in some of their family members, that seasonal dip does not really show, and it should not distract us. It does not change the underlying trend that we are going the wrong way with homelessness. I was delighted to see the Taoiseach and the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, open the new 75-bed Simon facility that is much needed in Dublin. However, what matters most is a housing policy that actually delivers housing for all those people, and it needs to be an absolute priority.

I also want to mention an ongoing matter. I was contacted by the fishing community in Greystones. Despite a recent High Court settlement, the reality on the ground has not changed in any meaningful way.

The conditions attached for the fishermen to secure a commercial berth are so restrictive that in practice it nearly makes it impossible. It looks like they will have to go back to court in order to continue fishing, and I know that was not the intention of the court outcome. I am deeply concerned about the fees being proposed for the use of the harbour facilities. They are

significantly higher than anywhere else in the county, but also higher than elsewhere in the State. There appears to be no consistent method of calculating these charges. That raises questions about fairness.

The issue goes well beyond the individual operators. People who know Greystones and the new marina are aware it is a fantastic facility, but families who have been involved in fishing for up to five generations have spent 15 years in the courts trying to get their fishing rights back from the very harbour that they fished out of initially, and it now looks like they will have to go back to court again. They were removed from the old harbour in 2008 for the redevelopment and they have since faced repeated attempts to push them out again. A legal settlement was reached only recently to provide a safe functional area, yet the fishing community tells me that the Department think it is fixed, but in practical terms on the ground it is actually not. The new marina is a wonderful place, but the fishermen and their activities should be able to coexist. Will the Leader request that the relevant Ministers urgently revisit the matter, engage directly with the fishing community in Greystones and ensure that the settlement that is implemented is workable, fair and respectful of a tradition that predates all of the recent development of the marina?

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome guests of Deputy Michael Collins from the Government & Politics society in UCC. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today. I thank them for coming. If they have any observations, could they please email them to my office?

Senator Maria McCormack: Today I want to talk about Coco's Law. As my colleague has mentioned, today is Safer Internet Day. It comes at a time when the scale of online risk facing children and young people in this country can no longer be ignored. New research released this morning by CyberSafeKids paints a deeply worrying picture. Over 3,300 primary schoolchildren and more than 1,700 parents were surveyed nationwide. The findings show that one in eight children is at risk of online contact with strangers. More than half the children have no parental restrictions around online contact, including chatting and gaming with people they do not know. Just 39% of eight- to 12-year-olds say their parents monitor or check their online activity and fewer than half say there are clear rules at home about privacy settings or sharing images and videos of themselves online.

This is not about blaming parents. I am a parent myself who is probably guilty of not monitoring enough. It is about recognising how fast technology is moving and how unprotected many children are in the online space, and acknowledging that the law is struggling to keep pace.

Today in the Dáil, Sinn Féin is bringing forward really important legislation to close this gap. Sinn Féin's amendment to Coco's Law would clarify that the creation of sexualised AI deepfakes is illegal by criminalising the generation and creation of non-consensual images and videos. It would also extend the statute of limitations from two to five years, which would allow victims plenty of time to come forward and would also give An Garda Síochána enough time to forensically and technically examine personal electronic devices and services in order to build a strong case. In addition, the Bill would increase the maximum penalties upon conviction to properly reflect the impact and the seriousness of these crimes.

On Safer Internet Day, I am calling for action. I am calling on the Government parties in here to support this legislation and to ensure our laws genuinely protect children and victims of online and offline abuse, as new technologies emerge.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: This week, we learned of the horrific plight of Seamus Culleton, a Kilkenny man who has been held in deplorable conditions by ICE agents for nearly five months. Seamus's sister Caroline and his wife Tiffany have been living through a complete nightmare and are deeply concerned for his physical and mental well-being.

His family have not received regular contact from the Department of foreign affairs on his case. As a core pillar of work for the Department is consular support, I am incredibly frustrated to hear that Irish citizens and their families are not receiving the proper support while in detention overseas. There are questions to be answered about this gap, particularly in light of ICE raids and detentions in the US in the past year.

ICE has been executing US citizens in the streets so we can only wonder about the conditions that Irish citizens could be held in behind gates and locked doors in ICE facilities. Has the Department been proactively reaching out to at-risk Irish communities in the US to provide legal advice in advance of potential detentions? Is the Department updating its travel advisory for the US to highlight the risk of detention? If not, why not? I would like to have an urgent debate about the safety of Irish citizens overseas, particularly in the US. It is not good enough to say that because they are overseas, we cannot do anything for them. We have a duty to protect Irish citizens wherever they may be.

Another story broke on Friday about ICE and Ireland, specifically that a plane carrying shackled-together Palestinian ICE detainees stopped over in Shannon for aircraft refuelling. Like Seamus, some of those deported have families, jobs and entire lives in the US, having lived there for years. They have now been flown to an active war zone in which Israel continues to commit genocide and ethnic cleansing. This obscenity is a violation of their human rights and it is being facilitated by Shannon Airport and, therefore, by the Irish State. There are serious questions to be answered by the Government on whether it views this as a breach of international law and the action it will take to control the situation and stop ICE deportation flights from refuelling in Shannon. I would like us to have a debate on this. It is completely unacceptable.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome guests of Senator Ryan to the Gallery, John Ring and Peter Morrissey, who are both from Newtownshandrum. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann today.

Senator Alison Comyn: I am afraid this is the second time I have raised this issue but given the plethora of emails I have received about rising crime in east Meath over the last couple of days, I have to raise the issue of Laytown Garda station again. It is currently housed in a small housing estate and it is only open on Sunday and Monday between 10 a.m. and 12 noon. These is not a sleepy, fishing or seaside village we are talking about any more; this Garda station looks after a population in excess of 15,500 people. I could be talking about many Garda stations across the country at the moment.

I am looking at some of the emails I have received. One is titled “Scared in our Own Home”, and states:

Within the last month, there have been at least three attempted break-ins on the roads of cars and homes, the most recent one last night. Along with other residents with young families trying to settle here, we are living on our nerves. It is getting lawless up here. These criminals are brazen.

Another email states:

I have personally witnessed over the last six months three serious incidents directly outside my front door. Last night at 5 a.m., there was an attempted house and car theft where three cars pulled up full of men dressed in black. I have a two-week old baby and I cannot express how frightening it is to feel so unsafe in my own home.

A new Garda station was promised for Laytown in 2022 when Deputy Helen McEntee was the Minister for Justice. These housing estates that I spoke about are three or four minutes away from Laytown Garda station. As it is, their nearest Garda station is Ashbourne, which is over 40 minutes away, and that is presuming that someone gets the call. Yes, they can call Drogheda, Duleek or Dunleer stations, but the smaller stations are only open for a couple of hours. It is clear that with huge populations across the country, small Garda stations are now completely overburdened. With regard to this Garda station in particular, it was promised in 2022 to look at a new building. We need to have a wider conversation with the Department of justice and to invite the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, in to have a debate on this particular Garda station and the many other rural ones right across the country.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I wish to discuss the issue of flood insurance and a national flood insurance scheme. I had a meeting with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, last Wednesday in which I raised this very subject with him. I was delighted that he responded in the meeting that he was anxious to do something about it. It has not been looked at here in Ireland for ten years. I was delighted to open the newspapers on Sunday to see the Minister of State’s comments about the need for this type of scheme. It is great when we can work together within the Government on things like this.

When looking at a flood insurance scheme like this, it is important we look at both the household and business sides of it. There is a flood relief scheme in the UK that I have asked the Minister of State to look at.

It looks at the housing side of things. It is reinsurance where people pay a small portion into a general insurance scheme and then when their house gets flooded in the area, there is money there for them. I strongly call for this to be applicable to businesses as well. One only has to look at what happened in Enniscorthy last week in particular. I know a lot of other areas were affected but it was especially heartbreaking in Enniscorthy. As a business person myself I cannot even imagine walking in the next day and seeing everything gutted. When we are working from week to week in business, sometimes there is not the spare money there. I know we have great schemes from the Government to support households and businesses but to be able to go to sleep at night time knowing that there is some sort of cover would make a massive difference. I am looking forward to working on this with the Minister for Finance, Deputy

Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. I welcome that we have started the conversation on it.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish to raise the issues that were highlighted on last night's "RTÉ Investigates" documentary on our prison services. We have not completed the Mental Health Bill, but this documentary raised a whole load of very serious questions about mental health in this country, how we are coping with it and how we throughout the State have aided and abetted and literally threw people out into what they call "community care". Many of them have now found themselves in our prison services. The "RTÉ Investigates" team needs to be commended on what was a very informative investigation. Part one was last night and part two is yet to come. It clearly demonstrated the surge of actively psychotic patients held in prisons across this country. It is exceptionally frightening. We saw personal testimony of people who spoke about their sons, daughters, brothers and sisters who are in these institutions and are not getting the appropriate medical interventions they need. We need to have a serious examination of how this is going on and how we are going to remedy the situation.

Every week there are documents laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. This is done for a purpose. Many of those are commitments in legislation requiring the relevant Minister to lay documents before the Houses. I can confirm that last week on 4 February 2026, the inspector's report "Follow-up inspection: Mountjoy Prison, 28 April 2025 - 2 May 2025" was laid before the Houses. I commend our Chief Inspector of Prisons, Mr. Mark Kelly on his report. It is a damning report, illustrated with photographs, statements of fact and recommendations. I appeal to the Leader. This document was laid before the Houses and I am asking for an urgent debate on this specific document. It was only laid on 4 February but it is important that we would have it. I specifically request that we would have the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, in to detail, analyse and talk about the issues and the findings in this report.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I have never been shy in this House to profess how wonderful a county I come from in Roscommon is, how safe it is with our low crime rate and how a recent report came out and said it was one of the safest counties in the country to raise a family. Last Friday, however, for the third allocation in a row, we unfortunately were not allocated any additional Garda resources. This was disappointing after raising this issue on numerous occasions. I spoke to someone last weekend and in 2023 and 2024 there was a campaign across Roscommon called Enough is Enough. This was following a spate of late-night robberies where people were coming into the county and able to get out very quickly having robbed a number of premises. I am not going to go through this issue again of trying to raise a Commencement matter or seeing how we as Oireachtas Members go about getting additional Garda resources. The debate I would like to have is about transferring experienced gardaí who have served time in other regions and are now desperate to get back to their home regions or as close to their home regions as possible. When I saw the figures last week, I realised that we had not got any young gardaí of the 167 that were allocated. I also followed up with a few Garda stations and we had not received any of the intra-region transfers from two weeks previously.

That is something we should be aiming to facilitate. We should be supporting our gardaí, making their lives easier and improving their quality of life by getting them closer to home where they might have elderly parents. They could bring their own kids back to where they

were raised and allow them to access childcare. That is the debate I would like to have in this House, going forward.

I do not want the message to come across that we are not happy with the job our gardaí are doing. We are exceptionally proud of the work they are doing. Some 11,000 people applied to join the Garda last year. That shows we have made it attractive. We have introduced the training positions. There are just over 14,000 gardaí. They need assistance in doing their roles. Transferring that experience back to the regions would assist.

Senator Mark Duffy: I lend my support to a fellow Mayo native, Ms Margaret Loftus, who has shared her horrific story as a domestic abuse survivor. I highlight that Oireachtas Members will have an opportunity tomorrow in the audiovisual room to hear her story first hand, to hear about the harrowing experience she had and to see the bravery she now has in sharing her story so that other women do not experience what she has had to go through over the past number of years. I acknowledge Senator Tully and Deputy Conway-Walsh, who are hosting tomorrow's event in the audiovisual room. Ms Loftus, along with Ms Sarah Benson, the CEO of Women's Aid, will share the harrowing story of a failure in every element of the system for Ms Loftus and her story. The event will take place between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. in the audiovisual room.

Councillor Donna Sheridan, who is a friend of Ms Loftus in Mayo, has raised the issue with the Tánaiste. I understand that there are arrangements for them to meet. Root-and-branch reform is needed. I acknowledge the work of the new Garda Commissioner, who has offered a lot of hope of reform and improvements within An Garda Síochána. Ms Loftus, as part of her story, had to face a harrowing experience. Countless times, she, her story and her family were undermined by different elements of an Garda Síochána and the State. That cannot be overstated. I encourage everyone who is available tomorrow to attend and lend their support to Ms Loftus, her case and her story so that no other women have to go through what she experienced.

Senator Chris Andrews: Last week, the Minister, Deputy Foley, announced an increase in core funding for family resource centres. That is an important and welcome initiative. Ten new community centres will come under the funding stream of family resource centres and their core funding will increase. That, too, is welcome and important. We all know how important community centres and family resource centres are across the country.

One centre that was not successful in securing this funding and designation as a family resource centre was Ringsend and Irishtown Community Centre. The Department acknowledged that the centre had a strong application and would be considered if more funding became available. Ringsend and Irishtown Community Centre is an important element of Ringsend, Irishtown and Sandymount. It is, in effect, a resource centre in all but name. Of course, like many community centres, it struggles with funding. Family resource designation and core funding would be a huge source of relief for them and would enable them to operate. It does amazing work. The people there are warm and friendly. They welcome everybody into the community centre. They work with young and old. The dementia centre there is inspiring for people in the community.

4 o'clock

There will be a lot of change in Ringsend. There is the glass bottle site. There will be 8,000 to 10,000 new residents with 3,500 new apartments there. It is vital that the Ringsend and Irishtown Community Centre get to be designated as a family resource centre. I ask that the Minister consider this when funding becomes available.

Senator Dee Ryan: I have been contacted in the last 24 hours by a number of businesses in Limerick that are having difficulties with fibre installation in the city centre, which is surprising given that the city has a significant amount of infrastructure already invested in it in this regard. While the businesses I have spoken to have their contracts with different service providers, whether Eir or another private telecoms provider, it would appear that the work to install the fibre line has been subcontracted to the same company and that that particular company has been leaving people down, I am sorry to say, over the last couple of months. Could we have an update from the Minister on the roll-out of fibre across the country, but in particular, could we discuss the resources nationally that are available to support businesses and, indeed, residents in having fibre installed in their homes? In the case of these businesses in Limerick, they are moving from one premises to another. These are employers. It is impacting on their ability to continue with the expansion they are investing in. It is limiting them and slowing them down in their increased recruitment of employees and, obviously, the development of their business. I would be grateful if we could have an update from the Minister on the subcontractors and the resources nationally that are available to support the roll-out of fibre and, indeed, if we could ask the question as to whether we are over-reliant on one or two companies providing the service around the country.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Could we prioritise the announcement by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, of road funding for national, regional and local roads in order to have it as soon as possible? There was an indication that it would be announced a number of weeks ago. This is a critical announcement in terms of infrastructure right across the country, particularly in my county, Tipperary.

As the Leader will be aware, the N24 goes right through Tipperary, between Waterford and Limerick. It has been something that I have been very vocal on over the last number of years. Unfortunately, the previous Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan, excluded half of that road from the priority list - the section from Waterford to Cahir. That has been stalled for two years. It has almost gone to planning stage. It would have gone through that stage by now if the funding had continued. In fairness, the current Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has put it back on the priority list, but what we need now is funding to get it going. The announcement needs to be made as soon as possible because Tipperary County Council is leading on the Cahir to Limerick section but Kilkenny County Council is leading on the Waterford to Cahir section and its dealings with the contractors are at the very end. They are down to weeks in terms of keeping them working and paying for their resources and we need the funding announcement as quickly as possible to continue that so there are no further delays. We have been delayed by two years because of the decision by the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, which I was absolutely against at the time, and now that we have common sense back in the Department of Transport, we just need that announcement as quickly as possible. There are people living on that road who are in a buffer zone and cannot build or develop. Children cannot build houses in those areas because they are in a buffer zone for a road that had been off the priority list for building, which is incredibly frustrating for people living between Cahir and Waterford. Will the

Minister make the announcement as soon as possible because Tipperary County Council, along with Kilkenny County Council, is ready to go again and get this moving? People in our area have been waiting over 20 years for this road to be developed.

Senator Sharon Keogan: A national issue was highlighted last week in Laois County Council.

Councillor Aisling Moran undertook Trojan work examining three decades of social housing costs, comparing homes delivered directly by the council with those delivered through approved housing bodies. What she uncovered was startling. If the approved housing body model operates as presented, our nation has drifted into financial madness.

We now have a Government that refuses to trust its own local councils to build homes. Instead, we are left with a system where the State gives a loan to a housing body, not repayable for 30 years, and then pays the same housing body every single month via the councils so that it can help to repay the loan the State gave it in the first place. Imagine lending someone money and then paying them to pay you back, and calling it innovation. It would be laughable if it were not costing the taxpayer a fortune.

Let us call out the next layer of absurdity. On top of these guaranteed State payments, the housing bodies also collect rent from the tenants, many of whom rely on social welfare. That is two income streams for one home. To top it all off, the approved housing bodies are then permitted to sell the properties after 30 years. Meanwhile, the councils, the very bodies that once built entire towns, are forced to stand back and watch this circus unfold, unable to lay a single brick, because these approved housing body projects have swallowed up all the available builders.

Is any of this cheaper? Councillor Moran's figures, even though they apply only to Laois, are shocking. Through approved housing bodies, the council paid up to €1 million per property. When the council built or purchased directly, the cost was close to €250,000.

If any of this is true, it is a total and utter scandal. We must have a proper debate and an intensive investigation into this issue. Where are our national media and investigative journalists when it comes to these approved housing bodies? We have 550 of them.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome the Taghmon active retirement group, the ladies from County Wexford. You are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Thank you for coming here today.

I call on Senator Gallagher.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in this country and worldwide, killing more people than breast cancer, prostate cancer and colorectal cancer combined. I welcome a new initiative, a pilot scheme being undertaken by a number of GPs in north County Dublin and the Beaumont RCSI cancer treatment centre, which received over €4.9 million in funding from the Irish Cancer Society.

The purpose of this screening programme is to identify at an early stage the signs of lung cancer so that treatment can be given at an early stage and more effective outcomes can happen

as a result. By offering this lung check to people at higher risk, the chances of survival are much improved, naturally, and it happens in a more effective and cost-effective manner, allowing patients to receive curative treatment, rather than facing more complex and life-limiting options at a later stage.

In my opinion, this initiative should be rolled out countrywide. I would welcome it if the Minister for Health would come to the House to discuss how we can roll out this initiative throughout the country. As everyone knows, early detection saves lives. It means less invasive treatment, faster recovery and a better chance of a long-term cure. I ask the Leader to invite the Minister for Health to the House to discuss rolling out this very worthwhile initiative at a national level.

Senator Pauline Tully: A bus operator in Cavan is set to lose three drivers this year for his school run due to the ridiculous rule of Bus Éireann whereby people cannot drive a bus once they reach 70 years of age. This is one operator in one county, so if we look at all of the operators in all of the counties, there will be many more. The ridiculous thing is that the same driver could arrive on a bus an hour after school has begun and bring those children on a tour, to a sports event or to another event. I have heard many Members raise this in this House and in the Dáil, and I have not heard anyone disagree with raising the age for school bus drivers.

The Government has announced its intention to significantly expand the school transport system between now and 2030.

It is supposed to increase year on year. How on earth are they going to get drivers for all the additional capacity needed to bring up to 100,000 or more additional children to school on the school bus transport system? Something needs to be done. I call on the Minister for Transport to address this issue with Bus Éireann immediately to allow drivers who reach the age of 70 to continue to drive until they choose to retire as long as they are capable and pass whatever tests are needed.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I raise the "RTÉ Investigates" programme last night. I am quite surprised it has not been a common feature throughout the Order of Business. A few weeks ago, I came into this Chamber and spoke quite graphically, not wanting to but sometimes speaking graphically is necessary for effect and hoping that it will land, about the number of people who have walked out of emergency departments and taken their own lives because of the lack of support and continuum in any sort of care they had or the experience they had while they were there. Last night, we saw that currently 38 people in the prison system are waiting for the Central Mental Hospital. We cannot pretend we no longer institutionalise mental health, those in need or those who experience any sort of adversity. We currently still have the institutionalisation of people who need mental health supports. It should be an absolute scandal that this the position we are in that we sit in this big grey institution in the middle of the city centre and there is another big grey institution up there where people do not have their liberty or their needs met and are waiting for acute intervention in the Central Mental Hospital. That is beyond understanding. It is traumatising not only for the people in the prison but also their families who know how much they need intervention. I think there are also 55 people actively in psychosis on remand in Cloverhill. That is a gross underestimation of how many people are actually in need of mental health care on remand. I draw attention to the documents *thejournal.ie* received in relation to the same issue, which showed that 449 people took their

own lives between 2022 and 2024 who had been in contact with the HSE within the previous three weeks. They had had some form of intervention with the HSE for them to be then flagged on the internal system for suspected suicide. That is 449 people within a two-year period whom we know had for some reason presented to a HSE professional in some guise or other and went on to take their own lives. We can also see in those figures that one third of those who arrive at the emergency department with self-harm do not get assessed or meet a mental health professional. These are atrocious statistics but, more importantly, they are people and people's lives. We have mastered the language of care without the reality of care. Until we get to the reality of care, we need to work night and day to make sure those who need our help the most are no longer institutionalised.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Moving from primary school to secondary school is a big step for any child. It is an exciting time and it is also nerve-wracking. For families in Monaghan with children who have special needs, that normal worry has turned into fear and stress because many parents still have no idea where their children will go to school in September. Pupils finishing sixth class in June have not been offered places in special education classes and have been left in limbo waiting for answers from the Department and the National Council for Special Education. The ASD classes in Largy College and St. Macartan's College are full. The three MLD classes in Castleblayney are also full. Both Largy College and St. Macartan's have been waiting for a long time for approval from the Department of Education and Youth for school extensions but nothing has happened. The lack of progress is causing huge stress for parents. These children are meant to begin their transition to secondary school in March like every other child. Instead, they are being left out because there are no places. I know of one school that had 17 people waiting for seven places.

That means that ten children have not got a place for September. Parents should not have to wait for a second tranche announcement to find out if their child will have a school place or where that school place will be.

It is also impossible to ignore the fact that the Minister for Education and Youth recently announced ten school construction-to-tender projects in her own constituency and zero in Cavan. Meanwhile, families in Monaghan are left waiting and hoping. There is huge disappointment. The Minister and Department need to liaise with the schools and families who have been left out as soon as possible. I ask the Minister to commit to an audit on the number of children currently waiting for a place in each county as it seems the Department does not collect or collate that data. We need to get a grasp on how widespread this issue is immediately.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I note what Senator Rabbitte and others had to say about Internet safety day. I want to welcome and endorse everything the Senator said. I listened to Alex Cooney of CyberSafeKids this morning who pointed out that more than half of children have no restriction on their online activity and 90% of eight to 12-year-olds are active online. I looked up the CyberSafeKids guide to parental controls. Of course it is good as far as it goes. CyberSafeKids and organisations like it are independent of big tech. However, I wonder at their timidity and the timidity of many guardians of the public good who appear not to be willing to say what needs to be said about young people and their online world.

The guide talks about the risks but then points out the benefits for children of social media and the online world. Reference is made to socialising, learning or developing creative skills.

This type of talk sounds to me like what the big tech people from Meta and TikTok had to say to the Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport. Of course there are benefits of a kind to be found, but these benefits are to be found elsewhere. Surely the big story that CyberSafeKids needs to share with us is that the risks can now be seen to far outweigh the benefits. The big story is that we need to get children offline. The big big story is one which it will not dare say but which is the truth.

Regarding the CyberSafeKids guide to parenting and all of the things parents are expected to do, many parents do not have the time or the resources or, frankly, the ability to guide their children, in particular their young children, safely through this very complex online world. We need to listen to people like Jonathan Haidt, the social psychologist. For anyone who is interested, there was an excellent interview with him on BBC 4 last Thursday. It is very clear from listening to him and others that we need to work towards a screen-free world for young children. The idea that every child should have a computer screen in class is, we now know, a bad one because they get distracted and go to other places. Parents then discover late in the day that the same devices that their children use for supposedly educational purposes in school are the same devices they are able to navigate around into distracting activities when they are at home.

The reality is that we need to make life a lot easier for parents and families by being courageous enough to say clearly what is needed and to legislate so the principals in schools are able to say, "Sorry, no phones whatsoever in school. Don't not blame us. It is now the law". That that is why the Ministers to date have been far too timid. They need to follow the example of other countries and say that we are going to legislate and not wait for Europe to legislate to ban those aged under 16 from social media. Of course, there is plenty more to be done on pornography, which I have spoken about before and will return to again. I note all of the good work that has been done, but we need to be much more courageous and determined about protecting children in the online space.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank all Senators for their contributions, starting with Senator Rabbitte who spoke about Internet safety day. I acknowledge the comments of Senators McCormack and Mullen on this matter. Senator Rabbitte spoke about the Data Protection Act and the fact that section 30(6) has not been enacted. She called for a law on the sexual exploitation of children being dressed as adults for the purpose of gratification.

She called for a debate with the Minister. I will request a debate on that.

Senator McCormack, in that vein, talked of Coco's Law and how Sinn Féin has a Bill in the Dáil today on the issue of AI, deepfakes and statutes of limitations. That would have been discussed at Cabinet today. I do not have an answer as to what decision the Cabinet made on that.

Senator Mullen spoke about CyberSafeKids, the screen-free world and how we need to move towards the banning of phones in classrooms and perhaps the banning of social media to under-16s. I will request a debate with the Minister on that whole area.

Senators Boyle and Scahill raised garda appointments to Donegal and Roscommon, respectively. As we know, 167 new gardaí were attested last week, with one appointed to Donegal. I think Senator Scahill said none were appointed to Roscommon, although he does

point out that it is historically a very safe county. Both Senators spoke of the need to bring back gardaí who may be from the Senators' home counties. In fairness, from my experience, especially where one has a partner, a child or whatever, returning to your home county is looked favourably upon. That is to be acknowledged as well. I will request a debate with the Minister for justice on the matter. Of course, it is up to the Garda Commissioner to decide where garda allocations are made, but obviously we would hope that there would be balance in these things.

Senator McCarthy talked of homelessness, housing policy and the need to deliver homes for people across the country. I will request a debate on housing again. He also mentioned the new marina in Greystones and an issue regarding fees and a court outcome. I ask him to request a debate on that. I am not sure exactly which body is responsible for that. Is it the local authority? I presume it is not the Department of the marine. He might put down a Commencement debate on that matter.

Senator Stephenson raised the case of Seamus Culleton, who has been detained by ICE for some time. I welcome the comments by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, that this is a concern and he will raise the treatment of undocumented Irish people with the US President, Donald Trump, when he visits Washington DC. The Minister for foreign affairs, Helen McEntee, has said that a small number of Irish citizens, fewer than a dozen, in similar situations to that of Seamus Culleton have sought help from Irish embassies. It is a very serious issue for those families. I certainly hope that the engagement between the embassies and consulates in the United States will take place and that Mr. Culleton will be returned to his family. The Senator also spoke about the use of Shannon Airport. I will request a debate on that matter as well.

Senator Comyn raised the rise in crime in east Meath and Laytown. She highlighted the concerns of local people, which I can imagine, with a small Garda station and a population of 15,500. I am not sure exactly how many gardaí are assigned to that area. She said that a Garda station is required. She might put down a Commencement debate on that matter to get a direct response from the Minister.

Senator Nelson Murray spoke about the need for a State-backed scheme for those who have been denied flood insurance. I acknowledge her advocacy on this matter and her recent meeting with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, on it. She called for a debate on the matter as well. I will request that. I acknowledge her advocacy on all issues of insurance.

Senators Boyhan and Ruane raised the "RTÉ Investigates" programme last night. I did not get a chance to see it but I will watch it back and see what issues can be addressed in terms of the debate. Certainly, from the Senators' testimony, there are issues surrounding patients who suffer from psychosis being held in prisons and different institutions. I will request a debate on that whole area. Senator Boyhan also requested a debate on the inspectorate's report from Mountjoy Prison, which was published on 4 February.

Senator Duffy raised the case of Margaret Loftus, who will provide testimony in the audiovisual room tomorrow. If I get a chance, I will pop in. He described the bravery of Margaret as a domestic abuse survivor and acknowledged the work of those involved. I think Senator Tully was involved in facilitating that. Margaret will be joined by representatives of Women's Aid as well.

Senator Andrews welcomed the funding from the Minister, Deputy Foley, for the family resource centres, but acknowledged that Ringsend and Irishtown Community Centre was not

provided with funding. There was an open call made to all interested parties and I am told that subsequent submissions were evaluated in a process independently chaired by a representative of the University of Limerick. There were ten announcements and five last year as well, which brings the total number of family resource centres from 126 to 136. I hope that additional funding will be provided to assist Ringsend and Irishtown Community Centre.

Senator Dee Ryan raised the issue of businesses in Limerick city that have difficulties with fibre broadband and people have been let down for a number of months. She has called for a debate with the Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, on the issue of fibre broadband roll-out around the country. I will request a debate with the Minister on that very important issue.

Senator Ahearn called on the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to publish the local and national roads funding allocations. I certainly believe it is due. It is very important and necessary funding for local authorities. In relation to the progress on our national routes, I know the Senator has been a long-time advocate for the N24 Tipperary to Waterford route via Cahir. I acknowledge his advocacy even when the then Minister, Eamon Ryan, was there and was not pushing on this project as was needed.

Senator Keogan acknowledged Councillor Aisling Moran's work in Laois in relation to the cost of housing with approved housing bodies, AHBs, versus county council houses. She also asked where is the coverage in relation to the approved housing bodies and costs. I will request a debate on housing or the Senator may wish to table a Commencement matter on that issue to get a more up-to-date answer.

Senator Gallagher raised the initiative regarding the early detection of lung cancer, a very important issue for all different types of cancer. The earlier these conditions are detected, the better the chances of survival. He called for a debate with the Minister for Health in relation to this and I will request a debate on that matter.

Senator Tully talked about the over-70s and how one company is to lose three bus drivers. She called for a debate with the Minister for Transport. I wish to acknowledge that a group has been put in place. I think the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is chairing it. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, when she was in education established that and it is a cross-departmental group with transport. I certainly hope it can find a resolution in relation to this issue. It is a sort of laughable situation, as has been pointed so often across this House. The same people can be denied from being able to drive a school bus but can bring the same children for a tour or something else like that. It does not make any sense and I hope the Ministers will be able to provide certainty on that and be able to change the rules for over-70s, subject to health checks. Senator Sarah O'Reilly raised the issue of the transition from primary to secondary school, particularly for those with special needs and expressed concern about where they will get a place next September. If the Senator has specific examples, she can put down a Commencement debate on the matter. In general, places for special needs kids have proven difficult to get but the Department has brought forward the timing of these things. I know from dealing with it a number of years ago that it was drifting on into the summer, which was totally unacceptable, however late it is now. She has also requested a comment from the Minister for education about the ten schools in the Minister's constituency being provided with funding. It is ten schools in County Galway and not in the Minister's constituency. It was across three constituencies, namely, Galway West, Galway East and Roscommon-Galway. The ten schools are deserving. Galway is the second largest county in the country and it includes the full city

of Galway. I am sure Aontú across those three constituencies would support the investment in schools in those locations.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I ask the House if it agrees with the Order of Business as outlined by the Leader, I welcome students from St. Eunan's College, Letterkenny. They are guests of Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Rónán Mullen: There is important work that needs to get funding from the State for St. Eunan's. They are a bit slow about coming up with the money in the Department.

An Cathaoirleach: I do not think it is appropriate during the welcome to the House greeting, but anyway.

Senator Rónán Mullen: We will return to that subject later.

Order of Business agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 4.31 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.46 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.31 p.m. and resumed at 4.46 p.m.

Health Information Bill 2024: Second Stage

Question proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I am pleased to present the Health Information Bill to Seanad Éireann following its recent passage through the Dáil. The Bill is about something very simple but very important - making our health service safer, more joined up and more patient centred by ensuring that health information can move securely to where it is needed. Today far too much of our health information is held in totally disconnected systems. Patients repeat their stories, clinicians lack full information and vital insights for planning their care are difficult to access. This Bill begins to change that. It puts patients in control of their information. It supports better care and it lays the foundation for a modern, digital health service. Digitising services across health and social care is a Government priority and successive budgets have provided increasing funding to develop and deliver on digital health initiatives. One such initiative is the HSE patient app, launched in February 2025, which makes us all true partners in our health journey. If Senators have not already downloaded the health app, which I am sure they all have, I take this opportunity to encourage them to do so.

The Health Information Bill provides the clear legal framework needed to support digital health initiatives such as electronic health records, secure information sharing and improved planning. Crucially, it also ensures that Ireland can meet its obligations under the EU European Health Data Space Regulation, which took effect in 2025 and gives patients across Europe greater access to, and control over, their own health information. The Bill, as passed by the Dáil in November 2025, is divided into five Parts with 25 sections. It provides a clear legal basis for the creation of electronic health records. It clarifies the HSE's authority to obtain necessary information for good planning and performance oversight. The Bill is framed around

each of us as patients, and our rights to have our health information managed in a way that supports integrated health and social care.

I will provide a brief explanation of the sections. Part 1 provides definitions of important terms used in the Bill as well as the standard provisions including commencement and regulation-making powers. It also provides that the operation of the Act must be reviewed within five years of enactment and a report laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Part 2 provides for a statutory duty to share, and contains sections 7 to 9, inclusive. Section 7 places a statutory duty on all health services providers, whether they be public, private or voluntary. Everybody has an obligation to share personal health data with other health services providers for the purposes of patient care and treatment. The HSE is tasked with setting out guidelines on the information to be shared, how it is to be shared and within what periods.

Section 8 introduces a legal obligation on a health services provider to forward a patient's personal health data to another health services provider at a patient's request. Section 9 places an obligation on any health services provider that intends to cease providing health services to notify their patients about the date on which they intend to do so, and the arrangements they are putting in place to ensure their patients' personal health data can be made available to another health services provider for care or treatment. In essence, the health services provider does not own the data. The patient is in charge of their data and the State is the manager for that.

Part 3, sections 10 to 21, inclusive, provides for the creation and assignment of electronic health records for every patient in Ireland. Ensuring that the right information is available in the right place at the right time is fundamental for delivering on Sláintecare's vision of integrated care. Electronic health records will not only support patient access to and control over their own data, but it also provides health professionals with a more complete and holistic view of patients they are treating. The creation of electronic health records will also provide vital population-based data, which will enhance the HSE's ability to carry out the core functions of service planning and management while also driving efficiency and better care.

Section 10 empowers the HSE to create and assign each person electronic health records.

Section 11 sets out the information to be contained in said health record. These contents mirror the categories under the European health data space, EHDS, regulations, such as prescriptions, dispensations, medical imaging studies, medical test results, discharge reports, etc. The patient summary contains 18 information subcategories, which together give a high-level overview of a patient's health. Those categories have been developed at EU level and contain information on diagnoses, medications, allergies, procedures, etc., while patient-provided data reflects the right of patients to insert information on their own electronic health records. That is clearly distinguishable from the information that is put in by a health services provider. The Bill provides for the best practice use of eircode and PPSN to uniquely identify patients in line with national digital strategy and public service identity management. Those stronger identification processes will help enhance patient safety, security of access and data linkage.

Section 12 confirms that providers may collect a patient's PPSN to ensure safer, more accurate information. It is really important to note that patients will not be refused a health service solely because they have not been allocated or issued with the PPSN or they are not in

a position to provide that. It is an effort to streamline health services so that we know who we are treating and that we are collecting information for a single identified person.

Section 13 provides that an electronic health record may be accessed by the patient, a health services provider or an employer or agent for the purposes of record maintenance. It also provides that patients can request rectification of information contained in their record and that a health services provider can restrict access by a patient or appropriate person to information where that would be likely to cause harm to the physical or mental health to the patient. Any such restriction has to be necessary and proportionate and should only apply to the part of the electronic health record that would give rise to concern. The HSE will also be required to adopt the necessary safeguards to ensure the security of records to guard against improper access, meeting the requirements of the EHDS regulations and complying with EU-wide legislation on cybersecurity, including the NIS2 directive.

Section 14 provides that a patient can restrict access to information in his or her record so that it cannot be seen by health services providers. The HSE is required to inform the patient that such a restriction could impact on the care that he or she receives but, again, we are trying to empower patients to make the decisions they wish to make. The section also provides that health service providers may access such restricted information in emergency situations where access is needed to protect the vital interests of the patient. Any use of that break-glass provision needs to be recorded and the details made available to the patient.

Section 15 provides that a patient has the right to obtain information on access to his or her electronic health record. The HSE will be required to put in place appropriate logging and auditing functions to enable patients to know what has been accessed, by whom and when.

Section 16 provides for the Minister's regulation powers.

Section 17 provides that electronic health records may be used by health service providers for the purposes of care and treatment and by the HSE for specified public interest purposes relevant to the statutory remit, namely, public and occupational health policymaking regulatory activities.

Section 18 provides that the HSE may enter into a reciprocal agreement with equivalent bodies and so-called third countries.

Section 19 sets out the manner which the HSE can request the provision of personal health data.

Section 20 sets out the process in the event of non-compliance with any requests.

Section 21 provides for HSE guidelines in relation to the Act and persons who have to be consulted, etc.

Part 4 is very important. It sets out a number of specified public interest purposes, including service planning and performance management, for which the HSE can request and receive health information from entities across the healthcare sector. The provisions set out under Part 4 will support greater and effective use of health information. They are an absolutely critical step to moving beyond our current, often fragmented and, may I say, even reluctant approach to information sharing. As an example of that reluctant approach, Senators may be interested to learn of the challenges we continue to have in fulfilling Ireland's obligation under EU

statistical Regulation 2294 of 2022. The objective of that regulation is to provide internationally comparable data on healthcare facilities, resources and utilisation, offering a transparent and accessible view of the broader healthcare system and population-based data sharing.

However, while there is now good engagement with the majority of private hospitals in this regard, it has taken us 18 months to get to this point and, even still, one private hospital remains unwilling to share the data required with the Department in order for Ireland to fully comply with this EU regulation. One private hospital is unwilling to share its patients' data, so that Ireland can comply with an EU regulation to gather patient data for the broader benefit of Irish patients. This is completely unacceptable. I propose to update Senators on the nature of this engagement on Committee Stage.

Likewise, Senators may be aware of the delays that I have seen, or the barriers to the implementation of the integrated financial management system, IFMS, among certain section 38 hospitals in receipt of enormous recurring public funding on an annual basis. These are hospitals like, for example, the Mater and St. James's, the voluntary hospitals. People going into a hospital may not be aware if they are in a HSE hospital or a section 38 hospital. Indeed, they may not care as long as they are getting good healthcare but what they will care about is the fact that the State funds all of those hospitals and that the legislation that we are now introducing makes absolutely clear that we expect that hospitals that benefit from the use of public funds across the health sector have a requirement for greater efficiency, oversight and, fundamentally, transparency.

IFMS is a single, integrated financial management system designed to improve financial reporting, expenditure analysis and forecasting across the health sector. It is part of the wider health service financial reform programme. It is my belief that the alignment of financial reporting across the publicly funded health sector through the use of IFMS is a crucial transparency measure for the State to ensure value for investment across the health service. As of July 2025, IFMS had been deployed to all hospital sites directly managed by the HSE, which means some 80% of all hospital expenditure is now managed through IFMS. Planning is under way on the timeline for further extending IFMS to the voluntary hospitals, as well as to other voluntary providers.

I appreciate that I am out of time. It is important that I can come back to this in the closing remarks. I am in the hands of the Cathaoirleach.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): Will it take long?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Not terribly long. This is the most important part. Is that okay?

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): All right. Yes.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: All section 38 and voluntary hospitals are expected to proactively co-operate with the implementation of IFMS and other key national systems. Service arrangements entered into between the HSE and voluntary hospitals now specifically commit to the introduction and implementation of IFMS and contain various provisions that

outline the level of co-operation required to ensure appropriate levels of monitoring and governance, without prejudice to their independence and autonomy.

As with our engagements with private hospitals, I am happy to update Senators on Committee Stage on the HSE's progress in securing sign-off on service-level agreements, SLAs. We are doing it quite differently this year. It had been the case that voluntary hospitals received their SLA too late and also signed it too late. This time, the hospitals received the SLA within 2025 for 2026 and they were given instructions that we expected them to be returned by 15 January. I will update Senators on the progress of that process on Committee Stage.

While the adoption of IFMS is progressing through the service level agreements, this legislation will provide absolute clarity in law in respect of the HSE's authority to request and receive health information. That is why it is really important. I will have to come back to the details because I do not want to go over the time.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): Before I call Senator Maria Byrne, I welcome St. Eunan's College, Letterkenny, guests of Deputy Mac Lochlainn. They are very welcome. I understand they will not have homework for the rest of the week, so that is a positive.

I also welcome the two guests of Deputy Sherlock. They will have to do their homework though. They are very welcome.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister and her departmental staff for coming here today to discuss this all-important topic. I listened to her explanation of what the Bill is about, which is transparency and bringing information together to ensure ease of access to patient records and to make sure that, for example, my records are not mixed up with Senator Costello's records or those of anybody else. The Bill is really important in terms of sharing those records but also in providing the information.

I saw a reference to prescriptions. Will there be a link with pharmacies? The Minister has encouraged greater transparency and working arrangements between pharmacies, GPs and hospitals. That is really important because many of us go to our pharmacy with minor ailments.

5 o'clock

Sometimes they can be very important when it comes to looking at medical records. When people go in for a procedure or operation, it is important that the consultant or whoever they see knows as much about their patients as possible. This legislation has a really important role to play in relation to that.

From reading through the Bill, it is about the consultant and the medical team knowing more about the patient so that they can assess them in a more transparent and proper manner. It will be easier for the person who is diagnosing or working with a patient if they have all their information in front of them.

It is disappointing to hear that there is a private hospital not willing to share its information, given that I might end up in a public hospital today and in a private hospital another day. It is very important that there should be more sharing of that information. It is about patients' health,

safe access and making sure that they have a safe stay. If the consultant or whoever is looking after a patient at the time does not have all that information in front of them, as a layperson, I expect that would impede the accuracy of diagnosis for a patient in hospital.

I hope that all hospitals come on board in terms of sharing their resources with any of the medical people we deal with, from the GP to the pharmacist, or even the dentist so that all the information is input into the one place. I also welcome the fact that the patient has access to their own information. I remember looking at my record when I was in hospital and I did not have a clue what was going on. We take the word of the doctor or the consultant. I do not say that they do not know what they are talking about but it is important for a patient to look at their own record. Overall, I recommend this Bill and support it. I thank the Minister and her Department for bringing it forward. I look forward to working with her in the future on the delivery of the Bill.

Senator Teresa Costello: I thank the Minister. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Health Information Bill. Fianna Fáil welcomes and supports this legislation. It provides, for the first time, a clear legal basis for digital health records in Ireland and it is a foundational reform for how care will be delivered into the future.

At its core, this Bill is about patients. It will give people easier and more meaningful access to their own health information, enabling them to make informed decisions about their health and their care. It establishes the legal basis for digital health records, allows greater patient access to information, and facilitates the appropriate sharing of care records to support integrated care.

Integrated care, as envisaged under Sláintecare, depends on having the right information in the right place at the right time. This Bill helps to make that a reality. It allows healthcare professionals to see a more complete and holistic picture of the patient they are treating, while reducing duplication, delays and inefficiencies across the system.

The Bill empowers the HSE to draw together health information from public, private and voluntary care settings. It is very disappointing to hear about the one hospital that has not come on board. That is essential if we are serious about delivering continuity of care and improving outcomes. Paper-based systems are no longer fit for purpose in a modern health service.

This legislation is also central to Ireland meeting its obligations under the European health data space regulation. The Bill supports the implementation of Digital for Care: A Digital Health Framework for Ireland 2024 to 2030 and the HSE's implementation roadmap. Together, they set out a clear path to the full digitisation of health records, in line with the programme for Government and the principles of Sláintecare.

We are already seeing progress. The HSE health app, launched in February 2025, has been downloaded by over 140,000 people, with more than 91,000 users accessing their personal health information, which is absolutely brilliant for people. Its expanded functionality is improving patient engagement and reducing missed appointments. That is something we often speak about. The app has been co-designed with patients, staff and advocacy groups, which is essential for public trust and uptake. The figures show that it has been successful.

The national shared care record is another critical building block. Its roll-out will allow key health information from hospitals, GPs and community services to be viewed in one place at

the point of care. That means safer clinical decisions, less time spent chasing information and more time spent caring for patients. A phased roll-out is due to begin later this year, with national expansion from 2026.

Looking ahead, the national electronic health record represents the most ambitious transformation programme in the history of the health service. Government approval to begin procurement marks a major milestone. A national EHR will give clinicians access to a patient's full medical history in real time, across all care settings, while empowering patients with access to their own records. It will reduce duplication, improve safety and support truly integrated care.

The Bill underpins all of that work. It establishes a duty to share health information for care and treatment, strengthens protections around the primary use of health data and enhances patient safety through robust identification processes, including best-practice use of eircodes and PPS numbers. It also improves the quality of health information available to the HSE for public interest purposes, including planning and service delivery.

The Bill is technical but its impact is profound. It is the legal foundation for a digital health service. It means better care, quicker access to information, greater patient control, and more cost-effective use of public resources. It allows healthcare workers to spend less time dealing with paperwork, which I am sure they would be happy about, and more time treating patients.

Ireland has lagged behind other EU countries in giving citizens access to their own electronic health records and that gap is no longer acceptable. This Bill, alongside the digital for care strategy, is how we close it. In supporting this legislation, we are laying the groundwork for a safer, more connected and more patient-centred health service. Fianna Fáil strongly supports the Health Information Bill as a landmark reform that will deliver lasting benefits for patients, healthcare professionals and the wider health system.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I welcome the Minister. We in Sinn Féin support this Bill. We support it because digital health records are not optional, they are fundamental to patient safety, accountability and the delivery of a modern health service. Accessible, integrated patient records are at the core of enabling better healthcare outcomes.

However, supporting the Bill does not mean ignoring the context in which it arrived, because it is now 2026 and the Government is only reaching the starting gate for a digital transformation of the health service. We see this failure constantly in our work. As legislators, we table parliamentary questions and are told - sometimes time and time again - that the HSE perhaps does not capture the data; sometimes it does not hold the data; or that the systems are simply not there. That can be frustrating.

What is being proposed is important but it is not the full electronic record system. It is limited in what it can do. We still do not have a fully integrated financial management system across the health service. As the Minister mentioned in her opening statement, waiting lists remain fragmented. The Minister is aware that data is powerful. When clinicians have access to accurate shared information, it provides for quick decision-making and patient outcomes. When data is not collected and not shared or not trusted, the entire system suffers. It makes no sense that GPs, community services and hospitals cannot fully integrate patient care, access complete records or see the whole picture of a person's health needs. Clinicians have

consistently told us that a lack of access means delays in diagnosis and treatment for people and sometimes things are missed altogether. That is why electronic health records are very transformative.

Primary care and community care are also significantly behind in some areas. Despite the commitments, progress in recent years has been very slow. I will ask the Minister two questions to clarify the position. She might not be able to answer them today but we can hash it out on Committee Stage. I assume there is going to be a concrete, funded plan for integration and perhaps a potential timeline for when the Minister expects it to happen. How will community providers, specifically GPs, be supported to connect and integrate into the system, especially in very remote areas? I think, for instance, of Carna in Connemara, where the infrastructure is rural, the Internet may not be fully there or it is not really accessible. All those kinds of things can be hashed out.

We also need to move beyond the fear that has paralysed progress for years, which is that past failures cannot be excuses for permanent inaction. Other countries have learned and moved forward, and Ireland has stalled, and patients have paid the price as a result. We welcome this legislation because it is a great starting point. However, it is not the whole success story. I know the Minister is going to be working towards that, and we will all work with her in this House to achieve that. As the Minister knows, patients, clinicians and communities deserve a health service that is modern, connected, safe, accountable and that does actually have the potential to really save lives properly.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank Senators and the Cathaoirleach. Last week, I secured Government approval for funding for the broad electronic health record - the completely integrated system - and to go to market. We know there are vendors interested, and I will be going back to Government once there is a sense of what the market is saying in relation to bidding for that. There are three stages to electronic health records. One is the patient app, which Senator Costello referenced. Nearly 150,000 people have downloaded that. The second stage is the shared care record. We are rolling that out in one of the regions already. We are doing it region by region. That is the complete picture of a patient's record within hospital but then, as the Senator correctly said, what we ultimately want is the integrated system ranging from GP to community provider to pharmacist. That has to be a single integrated system, so that is what we are working towards. As I said, we are literally going to market. The HSE is going to market on that. That is what we are working towards. This Bill gives us the legislative underpinning to do all of that. That is the purpose of this Bill. It is really important. I thank Senators for their support for it. I greatly appreciate it.

There are huge benefits from electronic health records. One of them is clearly that if I have had a trauma and turn up at a hospital I do not normally attend, they can access all of the details, such as what my background was, what injuries I may have, what allergies I have or what medications I am on. It is so obvious that it is in my interest that information be available and shared. Even if I choose to restrict access to my information, which I may as a citizen, that break-glass provision in an emergency situation enables people to be able to treat me in the best way. It is also really important that my health data, as much as everybody else's, is shared in an anonymised way in order that we get a better sense of a population health database so that we can learn about what the trends are and what is happening. Then, it is even more important

that we share that information at a European level in order that we are learning about where population health is going in an anonymised way, of course.

I want to be, and I want my kids to be the beneficiaries of sharing information in real time in a real way where we can benefit in terms of diagnoses, trends and everything else. There is a huge value in that. That means a couple of things. It means a legal basis for sharing data. It means that the HSE is the body that collects that data. It means that everybody shares the data and, again, I share Senators' frustration that there would be any entity in Ireland, with licensed medical practitioners with a licence to practise medicine in this State, which would not co-operate. I find it astonishing that a private healthcare provider in Ireland would not co-operate with the repeated requests of the Irish State, including at Secretary General level, and that I have to raise in the Seanad that an engagement going back to 2024 to share detailed healthcare activity in fulfilment of an EU regulation would not have been complied with. It is quite astonishing. There is an obligation on that healthcare provider to comply with the regulation. That data has been requested from 2024 for the purposes of fulfilling our EU regulatory requirement and all of the private healthcare providers have now shared their data with the Department of Health statistical team but for this private hospital. I find that unacceptable, and I am appalled that I have to bring that to the attention of the Seanad, but it is relevant to all of the patients in that hospital that their data be shared in the same broad population benefit way that I am describing.

It is just as important that we are tracking data and spend from a governance perspective, as Senator Ryan referenced, with the financial management integrated system, the IFMS. We are a small country, and we cannot have disparate financial management systems. The State funds healthcare in Ireland. That is the policy we have all adopted. We fund the section 38 hospitals, which have come from a different historical background, and that is fine. However, where they are receiving the overwhelming portion - 95%, 96% or 98% - of their funding from the State then they have to comply with the State's rules in relation to how we monitor and track spending. The benefit of that is we get insight into how we might better procure information. If we can track all of the product codes, say, product code 0001, that all the hospitals are buying and we now know how many are being bought, maybe we can get better value for the Irish State for doing that procurement in a different way. Maybe we can manage costs in a different way. Maybe we can make sure of better standardisation by having that information and being able to track that. Crucially, however, at the end of the day, if I, on behalf of the Irish taxpayer, am giving hundreds of millions of euro to any entity then I have an obligation to be able to see what that is. I have written to all of the voluntary hospitals. I am very pleased to update the Senate that I have received positive responses from all of the section 38 hospitals, as well as good progress on the ground in terms of implementation. I will call out St. James's and Tallaght hospitals in particular for very good progress in relation to the implementation of that, which is no surprise. It is a very good hospital in Tallaght. There is progress in relation to all of the others.

I want to highlight, too, because of our lived experience, the two examples I have given Senators. Notwithstanding that the IFMS is already in the service level agreement of those hospitals, it has been a challenge over the last 12 months to make progress on that. I have referenced the private hospital data sharing piece. I have to say that given our lived experience of a poor culture of data sharing across the Irish health services, I did instruct my officials to work with the Attorney General's office to review the text of this Bill. On the back of that

work, I wish to inform Senators that I will be proposing a small number of specific amendments to the Bill at the next Stage, which is Seanad Committee Stage, which will clarify again and even more precisely the duty of health services providers to share health information to the HSE. I will add to section 22 a reference to integrated service planning and effective and efficient use of resources within the public interest purpose of policymaking and regulatory activities. It would put beyond all doubt the absolute clear obligation of health services providers to implement the IFMS and share data for this purpose of policymaking, integrated service planning and the effective and efficient use of resources. There have been concerns in relation to the role of company directors and charities regulators in that. Of course, it should not be for any person in this House. Senators are more than aware that the first duty of any person in this State or any corporate entity operating in this State is, of course, to comply with the law first and foremost beyond anything else. As legislators, therefore, it requires us to make absolutely clear what that law is. I will be seeking the Seanad's support for those Committee Stage amendments in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Maria Byrne: Next Tuesday.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 17 February 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 5.17 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.34 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.17 p.m. and resumed at 6.34 p.m.

Apprenticeships: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I would also like to welcome a very special guest. The 2025 Rose of Tralee, Katelyn Cummins, an apprentice electrician, is most welcome to Seanad Éireann, along with John Dwan, her apprentice supervisor and sponsor, and his wife Noreen, from County Laois, and Steve, director of operations for the Rose of Tralee Festival. I have known Steve for many years and he has been doing great work in Kerry. I am delighted to welcome the Rose of Tralee here as an example of apprenticeships, the challenges we face and also the solutions available. The debate will follow the normal pattern. The first contributor is the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): Do I call the Cathaoirleach Cean Comhairle? I am not sure. It is my first time here.

An Cathaoirleach: I have been called way worse than that.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I have no doubt. I thank Senators for the kind invitation to address the House. I have addressed the Seanad a few times previously, but never in my capacity as Minister of State. I have spoken on behalf of other Ministers, so it is a real privilege to be here today to address the House. Like the Cathaoirleach, I welcome most sincerely our 2025 Rose of Tralee, Katelyn Cummins, an electrical apprentice. I have met her before. She has done more for the promotion of apprenticeships than any Government programme or Ministers speaking about them because when people see what they can be they understand it could be for them. While Ms Cummins might never have thought this would happen, I want to thank her for that. It has made a real impression and difference and I know it will continue to do so.

My role here today is to outline the work under way in my Department and hear the perspectives of Senators. Apprenticeships are of real interest to many in the House. I want to place a particular emphasis on them in this debate. Equally, I am happy to deal with our new further education and training, FET strategy that is in place, the careers in construction action plan, which we launched about two weeks ago, our work in the green skills area and our action plan for construction which, as the House will be aware, is still in ongoing public consultation. If anybody wants to speak to me about any of those measures, I will try to respond to their questions.

It might seem from what I have said that we have a lot of plans, but the truth is they are a follow-up to previous plans and actions that have been taken which are in place and have been achieved. We want to examine and learn lessons from them. As a relatively new Minister of State, who has not been in the job for 12 months, it is great for me to have an opportunity to shape some of what goes into those plans.

Let us talk a little bit about apprenticeships. By combining on-the-job employer-based training with off-the-job learning, apprenticeships allow individuals to earn as they learn. They provide a proven route to valuable qualifications and sustained employment. They also enable employers to build a skilled workforce that they and the country needs. Developing and expanding the apprenticeship system is a key priority for Government. In budget 2026, an additional €79 million was provided for apprenticeship delivery, bringing the total investment to just over €410 million per annum, more than double what it was in 2020. As well as that, a further €2.5 billion was allocated to reduce costs for apprentices attending higher education, permanently lowering fees by 17% for more than 14,000 apprentices.

Government investment in apprenticeship delivery is showing results. Since 2020, the year my Department was formed, there has been a 77% increase in the number of apprentices. We have moved from 19,600 to 31,165 apprentices today. It is clear that apprentices are voting with their feet because they see this as an important career pathway. The range of apprenticeships has expanded significantly, with 78 programmes now, which is nearly three times the number that existed a decade ago. That reshapes public perception and opens new pathways to qualifications that were not previously accessible. It is not just that we have more skilled apprentices; we also have an increase in the number of pathways to gain different qualifications.

In October last year I was delighted to launch the first common apprenticeship programme to be developed and delivered on an all-island basis. This apprenticeship, accounting technologist, is a strong example of productive co-operation across the island. Apprenticeships supporting construction, which is a national priority, are at the core of building capacity in the

construction sector. Last month the Minister for further education, Deputy Lawless, and I launched the updated careers in construction plan. I will not go into any detail here because there is a lot in it but if anybody is interested and wants to ask me about it, they can let me know. This plan will reduce barriers to a career in construction and build pathways so that learners can view the construction industry as a place where they can have a thriving and fulfilling career. A modern methods of construction, MMC, action plan was launched last year and is being implemented at a cross-sectoral level. The plan will help to mainstream these new building techniques which will increase productivity and widen access. Again, if anybody wants more detail, I am happy to speak about it afterwards.

During my term as Minister of State I have had the pleasure of relaunching a level 4 retrofitting course with the team at St. Andrew's Resource Centre. If any Senators know that team, they will know the excellent work they do. I attended the national scaffolding apprenticeship graduation ceremony in Tullamore. I was there when they broke ground at the national demonstration park for MMC in Mount Lucas. I have visited so many companies but will mention one in my own constituency, Vision Built in Tobercurry, which manufactures 2-D and 3-D modular units and does excellent co-operative work with the local school, St. Attracta's. Again, if anybody wants to know more, I can speak about it later.

I want to mention briefly green skills and offshore wind. The availability of green skills is key to this economy's transition to a climate-resilient and climate-neutral economy. A critical development in this regard was the publication by SOLAS of the first national strategy for FET skills in the green transition, entitled Green Skills 2030. My Department is leading the skills response to Ireland's offshore wind ambitions as well as in many other areas. Again, I am happy to provide further detail later.

A core objective of my Department is to ensure that apprenticeships are both inclusive and accessible. This means that apprenticeships are for all groups, but especially for disadvantaged and under-represented groups. We have many different supports including the gender bursary programme, the access to apprenticeship initiative, and the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation programme. I am happy to answer questions on any of those programmes. It is also important for people to know that apprenticeships are moving into the public service. The public and civil service can play a key role in the apprenticeship system, including in supporting our goal of inclusion. The public service action plan was published in 2023 and the total apprenticeship population in the public service grew from 373 in 2022 to 566 in 2025.

We have made strong progress in growing Ireland's apprenticeship system but further work, of course, is needed. A key priority of Government is ensuring that our apprenticeship model continues to evolve in line with the needs of learners, employers and the wider economy. Pay is an important factor and I am aware that it was discussed in this House last December. I am willing to come back to the issue in my responses to the debate. It is essential that all apprenticeship programmes remain fit for purpose and continue to reflect real industry skills needs. I thank the House for the opportunity to be here. It is a real honour and privilege to share the work of my Department with this House. It is also important that I listen to what Senators have to say. I look forward to hearing their contributions and to the continued engagement that I hope will strengthen our work together.

Senator Dee Ryan: Curaim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I thank her for coming in to the Chamber today and for taking the time to listen and engage with us on this really important topic. I commend the work being done in the Department and the work she has been leading on in the area of apprenticeships since her appointment. As a parent and the Fianna Fáil spokesperson in the Seanad on further and higher education and skills, I am very interested in this area. It has been a thrill and a real eye-opener to learn over the past year, in discussions at the Oireachtas education committee, about the very many areas that are open to young people now through the Earn and Learn model. I commend the Minister of State and her colleagues in the Department on increasing from 58 to 78, in just a short number of years, the number of different courses and qualifications available through the model across the country. All of these are being delivered in partnership with SOLAS and the ETBs.

On Saturday last I attended a career fair at my child's secondary school, Castletroy College in Limerick city. There are almost 1,500 students in the school and the careers fair was organised by the parents council. We invited local employers to come to the school, put up a stand and talk to the children in senior cycle - fourth, fifth and sixth year - about the potential roles that might be open to them when they finish school or when they are thinking about what courses they should apply for. We ran a number of panels, one of which was the Earn and Learn panel and I was delighted that there was great interest in it and a huge attendance. We had past pupils on the panel, including Fionn McNerney Garry, who is a third year apprentice electrician. He came to the school in his Snickers workwear and spoke to the children and parents about what his role involves and about his journey so far. We also had an apprentice auctioneer, James Carney from Rooney's Auctioneers in Limerick. We had a representative from Johnson and Johnson, which is a huge employer in Castletroy, with over 2,000 people going in and out of its manufacturing facility every day. A dedicated member of the company's management team is responsible for recruiting apprentices and promoting its apprenticeship programmes. There are four different engineering programmes that can be done via apprenticeship in Johnson and Johnson, with two intakes per annum of school leavers from secondary schools in the Limerick area. We also had one of the enterprise liaison managers, Ms Eimear Brophy, from the Limerick and Clare ETB on the panel. It was a really interesting discussion. We pulled the chairs into a semi-circle, parents and students asked lots of questions and it was so informative. I learned a huge amount.

I was there as a parent and it was great to be looking at it from the other side of the desk. We have been examining it from the State's perspective and thinking about how the programmes are run, funding within the Department and guidance for employers on pay for apprentices. We have been thinking and learning, rightly, about all the issues around off-the-job placements and the efforts being made to match the apprentices to locations that are close to their homes to help them manage the challenges around accommodation, the cost of equipment and all those issues. To hear it from the other side, for the first time, was an eye-opener.

There is great excitement from the employers' perspective about the value of these programmes. They want to develop relationships with employees. They bring people in at the age of 18, support them to learn on the job and get their qualifications, and then, later in their careers, perhaps they will take the next step to management level, having really got to know the company over the course of their first qualification.

The students wanted to know about applying for different roles. They were surprised to hear that as an apprentice electrician, for example, you can move employer during your time in training. There are advertisements and opportunities for second- and third-year apprentices. In that way, you can broaden your experience in different areas. You might spend a couple of years in residential home-building before going into an industrial setting and specialising in something else. In Limerick, for example, huge work is ongoing at the Eli Lilly plant at the moment. Fionn McNerney Garry, who was with us, told us that he moved from the area of home-building, where perhaps 30 of them were on site every day, to Eli Lilly, where there are nearly 2,000 people on the construction site, including somewhere in the region of 400 apprentices. There is a vibrancy that goes with that and a wonderful community has been built up in the workplace for young people in training and earning and learning at the same time.

It was an eye-opener for me to have some time to listen to the different experiences of people in my region of Limerick and to have the opportunity to talk about civil engineering apprenticeships, auctioneering, landscaping, accountancy, carpentry, plumbing, electrical and the many different areas that people can go into should they decide not to follow the well-worn and perhaps more conventional path to a level 7 or level 8 qualification but instead step directly into the world of work and combine the best of both worlds with their learning and qualifications.

We have, of course, heard about many of the challenges around apprenticeships. I touched on some of them already, as the Minister of State did in her speech. Before I finish, I recognise the presence of Katelyn Cummins, the Rose of Tralee. I echo the Minister of State's comments in congratulating her on her personal achievement in becoming the Rose of Tralee and thanking her for the work she has done in making female apprenticeships much more visible. Since 2020, as the Minister of State said, we have increased the number of female apprenticeships across the country by nearly 200%. In 2020, we had 1,017 female apprentices and last year, there were 3,010. That is huge growth in a short number of years and it is thanks to the Minister of State's predecessor and the work in the Department in focusing on apprenticeships. I have no doubt that the Minister of State will continue that strong trajectory and that we will see even an higher level of female participation and participation across all sectors of society, and an increase in our numbers overall in apprenticeships in the years to come.

Senator Joe Conway: Ar an gcéad dul síos, cuirim fáilte chaoin roimh an Aire Stáit atá i láthair anocht agus roimh na cuairteoirí sa Ghailearaí thall ansin.

In advertng to the people in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, I draw attention to the blueprint for what we would see as a successful apprenticeship. It is novel in some ways. I thank Samantha Long, our capa in the Seanad Independent Group, for suggesting and organising the invitation to Katelyn to be here. We can advertise and promote apprenticeships at great expense and at some length, but when it is fixed onto a personage and a personality, and somebody who is in the limelight and is conscious of an awful lot of positive images for young people, it says more than all the money that is spent on advertising campaigns.

I am delighted not just to have Katelyn here. There are many other stories there. Steve, for example, made sure she was here tonight. She has a hectic schedule. Of course, possibly the unsung heroes of the apprenticeship are John and Noreen, who afforded Katelyn the

apprenticeship. A succinct deal is done between a person who wants to enter a trade, learn and perfect it and graduate from it with high levels of qualifications.

Speaking of high levels of qualifications, a couple of years ago, I had the privilege of being the Mayor of Waterford. One of the pleasant jobs I had was that I was asked to go to the South East Technological University to confer degrees on a class of apprentices. There were approximately 80 of them and the vast majority were sparkies, electricians. If there was a small downside to the joyous occasion, it was that almost exclusively the graduates that evening were male. That tells its own story. Senator Ryan adverted to the fact that the trends are going in the right direction, from 1,000 to 3,000. In the overall context of the numbers of apprenticeships, however, we have serious questions to consider about the gender balance in apprenticeships and changing the mindset of the nation about apprenticeships. It goes back to schools. I often say, as a former teacher, that schools are far from perfect organisations. They do an awful lot of good but in the whole area of career guidance, counselling and outlining career paths for their pupils, perhaps there is a reticence in the career guidance module that does not give due credit or gravitas to the path of apprenticeships and what they can do for the economy.

I talked earlier to John, who told me that tradesmen, electricians and all sorts of people in the trades and skills sector are flying from Dublin on Sunday evening and working week on, week off and doing amazing work all around Europe. They are, in a very practical way, the new skills ambassadors for the progressive economy we have. They are saying more than the Ministers who will go abroad in a few weeks' time to tell their stories. The practical work being done by Irish skills in those economies is an unsung tale of patriotism and economic input.

Ba mhaith liom an t-éacht atá déanta ag Katelyn Cummins mar Rose of Tralee agus an jab atá á dhéanamh aici a lua. Níl mórán suime agam sa damhsa ach chuala mé ó mo bhean chéile go bhfuil Katelyn Cummins go sármhaith ag damhsa. Geallaim di go mbeidh mé ag féachaint ar an gclár an Domhnach seo chugainn.

This House is certainly not remiss. I have been in the House for only one year and one week and over the past year, we have had two evenings of debate on apprenticeships and their importance. On the most recent occasion, we were visited by the Minister, Deputy James Lawless, and this time we are joined by the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin.

7 o'clock

The Minister of State outlined the work that she and the Minister, Deputy Lawless, are doing in relation to apprenticeships and many other spheres of higher education and it is a catalogue of very impressive work. I do not often say that to Ministers who come in but it is very impressive. Deputy Harkin's heart is in the right place on this. Go n-éirí go geal léi san obair atá os a comhair.

The antithesis of this, that is, poor planning in apprenticeships, can be seen in the news from our neighbouring economy that I read last weekend. The apprenticeship module in the UK is being cut from 18 months to three. I fail to see what can be done to make an impression on apprenticeships, the economy or the skills shortage in the UK if apprenticeship programmes as short as three months are to be rolled out. The programme here can take apprenticeships to the level of a full degree, level 8, and even to levels 9 and 10. That gives status and self-esteem to

people in trades that were often looked at as the laggards of the economy. There are now 78 different disciplines in the apprenticeship system. It is the model for a successful economy.

I was very pleased to hear the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, mention skills for green initiatives. From the weather we have had for the last 30 days or so, we can see the difficulties we have with the climate. We will be talking about that later, during the next debate. It is wonderful that there are apprenticeships focused on the green economy and green skill sets. Being progressive and earning a good living does not have to be about "Drill, baby, drill". It is far more likely to be about "Skills, baby, skills". That is what we are focusing on in this debate, the plenitude of skills that are being encouraged by the apprenticeship model and the enlightened message Government is sending. I sound like a Fianna Fáil representative here---

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Senator Paul Daly: There is nothing wrong with that.

Senator Joe Conway: -----but I am delighted to have a Minister of State here who is of the Independent persuasion. She is doing an amazing job. Long may it continue.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister of State and Katelyn Cummins to the Seanad tonight. I am a very proud Kerryman. I was putting together my few words for tonight. My son is in phase 5 of an electrical apprenticeship. When Ms Cummins won the coveted crown as Rose of Tralee last year, she really elevated the apprenticeship model for the female sector. The figures in that respect are very low. We will talk about that later on. It was a really proud moment for the skills sector. It really enticed ladies into apprenticeship schemes. I really hope Ms Cummins enjoys her time here, having been invited by the Chair.

Apprenticeships are one of the few areas where we have seen real tangible progress. My contribution tonight is really about the life of an apprentice, the factors that have worked against apprenticeships and how we can make them better. I refer to funding and so forth. The increase in the number of apprenticeships is really encouraging. We now have a genuine opportunity to transform the whole system. I welcome the number of 9,461 in 2025. That is a huge number and an increase of 70% on 2020.

A major turning point came in 2025 here in the Chamber when the Government finally unlocked the National Training Fund. That decision closed the core funding gap that had been holding apprenticeships back for too long. It was not just an accounting change. It was a moment when our ambitions were finally matched with resources. If we are serious about expanding apprenticeships, modernising training, supporting employers and meeting the climate and energy commitments in the programme for Government, including the SEAI targets, unlocking that fund is the key to open the door. It gives us the financial foundation to build the skilled workforce Ireland urgently needs.

However, unlocking the fund is only the beginning. We now have to use it wisely. The recommendations of the committee, which I sit proudly on, make clear where that investment must go. The system is doing good work but it needs to move faster and be more flexible and accessible if it is to meet the demands of the next decade. I will share one example that reflects what many across the country will be hearing. A 45-year-old man recently came to me. He is married, has a family and mortgage and, with a full working life already behind him, wants to

retrain. He wants to start an apprenticeship in a sector that is crying out for workers but, when he looked at the rates for first and second-year apprentices and at his mortgage repayments, childcare costs and college fees, he realised he simply could not make the numbers work. He told me that he is willing to put in the work but just cannot afford to go backwards. That is the reality for a lot of people out there. If we want to bring in older workers, those changing careers, parents and people with real-world experience, people we absolutely need, apprenticeships must be financially viable for them.

As we move towards a single integrated apprenticeship model, we need to ensure that standards remain strong across every trade and every programme. Whether someone is training as an electrician, a software developer or a heat pump installer, they deserve the same level of quality and support. Curriculums must keep pace with industry, technology and green skills, which are evolving quickly. We cannot have programmes taking years to update. Streamlined development time is essential. AI upskilling has never been more relevant to the apprenticeship model and to all employers. That is something to be noted. With the benefit of the NTF, we need more instructors and more training facilities. Trades like mechanical automation and electrical are oversubscribed. These are exactly the skills we need to meet our climate and industry targets so expanded capacity is urgently needed. Thanks to the NTF, we finally have the means to achieve that. There is nothing holding us back.

The committee rightly emphasises the importance of listening to apprentices themselves. Course sequencing matters. Career skills modules make far more sense later in the programme, when apprentices have real workplace experience. If we want a system that works for everyone, universal design must be built in from the start. People with disabilities should not just be consulted at the end. They should be shaping programmes from day one. Pathways like those offered by the National Learning Network should be highlighted and expanded.

Financial barriers still remain one of the biggest obstacles. An increased minimum wage, the removal of student charges and targeted supports for parents, older apprentices and those with dependants would make a real difference. Even the cost of tools can be a dealbreaker. That should not be happening in a modern society. People like the 45-year-old father I mentioned who have families, mortgages and responsibilities are being locked out of apprenticeship programmes. These are people who want to contribute, to retrain and to be part of the workforce that will deliver our climate and energy transition. We cannot afford to lose them.

On apprenticeship tools, it is hugely important that the Fine Gael Senator PJ Murphy, who is not here right now, gets the full support of this House on his proposed tool theft Bill, which is to come before the Seanad next week. The Bill recognises that, when tools are stolen, it is not just equipment that is taken, but a person's ability to train, work and progress. The Bill would amend the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act 2001 to create a mandatory minimum three-year custodial sentence for serious theft offences involving work tools or equipment from all apprentices where the theft prevents someone from learning their trade. Senator Murphy has highlighted the real financial and professional damage caused when tradespeople, electricians, plumbers, carpenters and sole traders have tools stolen. He has received strong support from across the trades and from apprentices, who often invest heavily in their first set of tools and rely on them to complete their on-job training. These thefts can halt their progress instantly.

The Bill sends a clear message that stealing the tools of someone's trade is stealing his or her income, training and future. This Bill will represent an important step in protecting both qualified tradespeople and the next generation coming through the apprenticeship programme. Employers, especially at SMEs, need support too. When apprentices are off the job for training it can place real strain on small businesses. Targeted financial supports will help keep them engaged. We also need stronger sectoral bodies to co-ordinate employer involvement. The Insurance Institute model shows what is possible when an industry takes ownership of its skills pipeline. The public sector must lead by example. Social value procurement in public tenders would drive apprenticeship participation across the State. We also have to tackle the stigma that still surrounds apprenticeships. I am delighted that Katelyn is in our company tonight. In past times too many people saw them as the lesser option. A national campaign will help to shift that mindset, and that mindset is shifting. Elevating four-year craft apprenticeships to level 7 will send a strong signal about their value. Career guidance in schools needs to be viewed and reviewed, and apprenticeships should be presented as a real and equal option. As has been quoted, we need to mind our next generation of millionaires, to focus on them and deliver on them.

Senator Pauline Tully: I am a member of the Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which is quite a long name. Quite a number of us in this House are members. We have been focusing on apprenticeships for the past few months and we are in the process of publishing a report. It should be published very soon. We were examining what we could do to improve the lives of our apprentices and the apprenticeship model in Ireland. In that process we met with a lot of different people. We met with employers. We met with ETBs and SOLAS. We met with unions. However, the most important voice in all of that is the voice of the apprentice. The issue for a lot of apprentices when they are taken on, particularly in the first couple of years, is the very poor rates of pay. Apprentices who presented at the committee and those I have spoken to at home in Cavan are suggesting €7 or €8.50 per hour for the second year. I was speaking to one lad. After he finished school he did a particular job or course for a few years, and then at 23 he decided to do an electrician course. He went back to earning €7 per hour. I know the rate will increase as time goes by. I know when he is qualified he will be able to charge a high rate because plumbers and electricians are like hen's teeth. You cannot get them. We need to treat our apprentices better because they are older. An employer told me at the weekend that the average age of an apprentice is 25. They are coming in older. Many of them have families. They may have a mortgage or may be renting. We need to look at some targeted financial supports for people in those positions. The option to choose where to do the off-the-job training is not given. We were looking at some sort of ranking preference where people could choose where they might want to go, and if that is not possible, they should get additional financial supports. For example, I am from Cavan. If people are doing their off-the-job training in Dundalk, Sligo or Athlone they can travel to that place every day. However, if they have to do their off-the-job training in Waterford or Cork, that is not possible. They may end up paying double rent. They are paying the rent or mortgage where they live and then they are paying rent for the few months they are away as well. Another matter is tools or equipment. Some employers are in a position to provide the tools or equipment. Bus Éireann, for example, was before the committee. It provides tools for its apprentice mechanics. Not all employers are in a position

to do that. A grant for tools and equipment should be made available for those who find it a barrier to their participation.

We need to create positive awareness of apprenticeships and promote examples of success. Katelyn is welcome and she is a huge success. She has done more for apprenticeships and for female participation in apprenticeships than any of us talking tonight or in previous months. By the way, she is an excellent dancer, and I wish her the best of luck on "Dancing with the Stars." We need to promote stories like that, so we encourage young people to take them up. Our career guidance is curtailed. We need increased hours in career guidance at second level. We also need our career guidance teachers to promote apprenticeships as much as they promote other third level options to our students. My son is doing his leaving certificate at the moment and his career guidance teacher has not talked to him about apprenticeships. I asked him. Anything he has heard about it is from me when he is considering different options he can take up after school. We need to see a lot more done at second level.

The Minister of State mentioned the Traveller apprenticeship incentivisation programme. It is a pilot programme. I hope there are plans to make this a permanent programme, and to make sure there is long-term sustainable funding put in place to support this programme. Providing bursaries for Travellers has encouraged and increased the number of Travellers taking part. There also needs to be a link to employers for Travellers and people from other disadvantaged backgrounds, or even from rural backgrounds where there are not a lot of employers in the locality in a position to take on apprenticeships. Young people may not know who to reach out to, to get an apprenticeship. If we can put in links to employers as well it would be helpful. People with additional needs have a low representation among people taking up apprenticeships. The National Learning Network could not provide an inclusive pathway to an apprenticeship. More pre-apprenticeship places need to be made available because they are oversubscribed at the moment, and they help people from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to an apprenticeship. All information about apprenticeships needs to be provided in an accessible way for people with learning difficulties or a disability.

The curriculum needs to be adaptable to keep up with changes in modern technology and to align with what apprentices are actually doing in the on-the-job phases. We need to expand facilities and increase the number of teachers or instructors we have. There is a waiting list in certain areas for off-the-job training and people end up spending longer than they should doing their apprenticeship. It should be four years, and they may be spending five or six years.

The North has a social value procurement model, which is worth considering here as well. The committee discussed how public sector participation in apprenticeships should be mandated, with targets set for under-represented groups within that. There is 10% sectional scoring in the public sector on the basis of gender, social class and people from different areas of discrimination to encourage more to be included and taken on as apprentices in the public sector. We discussed other issues such as better support for small and medium enterprises to take on apprentices and better co-operation between the National Apprenticeship Office, SOLAS and the ETBs to avoid duplication and confusion. We mentioned a central application system for apprenticeships similar to the CAO to make it easier for people of any age to progress into an apprenticeship and find out all the information.

A Cavan-based company, Celtic Working Platforms Limited is involved in scaffolding. It won the small employers award at the 2025 apprenticeship employer of the year awards in

December. I congratulate the company and acknowledge what it has done. Scaffolding only became an apprenticeship in 2021. I acknowledge the work this company has done employing young people and people of all ages to take up scaffolding. It is something that requires training because it can be dangerous. I am delighted and welcome that it is now an apprenticeship.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I understand Senators Cosgrove and Harmon are sharing time with five minutes and three minutes each. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: The Minister of State is from my constituency, and I know the hard work she does. She has to be commended. We have met on many occasions in our own ETBs. I know the work she does in the area, and it is well recognised. Katelyn is also welcome. It is great to see more women on apprenticeships. That is what we need. I raise the issue of apprentice pay. People know I brought forward a Bill before Christmas, which would make it compulsory that apprentices be included under the national minimum wage Bill. I was disappointed that it was not supported in any way by the Government and that it was not even given a timed amendment because we did not just draft it on a whim.

We put a lot of work into it and there was a lot of consultation with different representative bodies, from Connect Trade Union to the Irish Council of Trade Unions, to SIPTU, to the National Youth Council. There have been great strides and there has been more uptake of apprenticeships, which is absolutely commendable and wonderful to see. Unfortunately, however, there is still an issue that 20% to 25% of people are dropping out - I am talking about craft apprenticeships - in their first year. This is what came-----

Deputy Marian Harkin: Which?

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Craft apprenticeships. Connect Trade Union has told me that 20% to 25% of first-years in craft apprenticeships have been leaving. It has cited low pay as the reason. These are representative bodies that have said this to me. We know that apprentices receive a huge amount of support from the educational side. I know that myself from working in Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board, MSLETB. I worked in the Sligo training centre. I was based there. The first-year apprentices have said - and this has come up already - that they are receiving as little as €7.67 per hour in their first year, which rises to €11.50 in their second year. As has been said here already, if people are living in one area and doing their apprenticeship in another, they are expected to pay double rent, expected to feed themselves and expected to pay for tools, and people do not have the bank of Mam and Dad to rely on. I know there have been strides in that there will be a more inclusive model but, unfortunately, the minimum wage is a massive issue.

I know Ben Friel. He is the president of the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland. He addressed the Oireachtas joint committee on further education and pointed out that apprentice electricians are expected to possess a basic electrician's toolkit costing a thousand euro. I know there is a Bill about that coming up. In addition, it has come up with me that female workers, particularly hairdressers, unlike their male counterparts in construction, maybe, do not even get an incremental rate of pay. Maybe 25 years ago, when the minimum wage legislation was introduced, that was okay in that possibly the reason behind it was to keep 16-year-olds in school. As has come up here many times tonight, however, the

average age in craft apprenticeships now is 23, and in hospitality, horticulture and food it is actually 30. Like Senator Kennelly said, we know that this is common sense and that people have mortgages, so it does not make sense that they are exempt in their first and second years. We know we are at a time when we need to keep apprenticeships. The Minister of State has spoken about wonderful initiatives about retrofitting and improvements. I know that in my own area. Unfortunately, however, if people within the construction sector, the housing sector and craft apprenticeships are dropping out in their first year, I do not know how we will meet our climate targets or how we are to be expected to build the number of houses we want to build. There is the Oireachtas committee on higher education, of which many people here are members, and I know that a report will be published, but will minimum wage for apprenticeships be included in that? Will a basic minimum wage for first-year and second-year apprenticeships be included in that? When is the publication date coming out?

I know we have made huge strides on this, and the Minister of State has to be commended on that, but we need to do more to ensure that first-year apprentices are not dropping out.

Senator Laura Harmon: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I welcome the guests in the Gallery and thanks and congratulations to Katelyn Cummins for all the work she does. She is a real ambassador for people in trades and apprenticeships. I myself am the daughter of a carpenter, so this issue is close to my heart as well. It goes without saying that we have to improve the diversity in terms of those taking up apprenticeships, not just in terms of gender but in terms of different abilities and those from different backgrounds. We know in Ireland that we are 20% below the EU average in terms of employment for people with disabilities, for example. There is certainly an opportunity here to get more disabled people involved in apprenticeships. Pay is certainly part of this. Pay and conditions and supports have to be key in this regard.

I will draw attention specifically to one social enterprise in Ballinlough, Cork, that I visited recently. It is called Deaf Enterprises. I visited it with Councillor Peter Horgan and Councillor Ciara O'Connor, who are working with me in the Labour Party. It was one of my favourite places I have ever visited. I saw the work it does. It is the biggest employer of people who are deaf or hard of hearing in Ireland and it does incredible work restoring furniture and reupholstering. In the past five years it has done up over 1,200 bicycles. It is a real hub of learning. It provides employment for people. They pointed out to me that we should look at Vienna, that there is a place in Vienna called Wien Work that provides 800 apprenticeship places over a four-year period. Under the one roof it has 11 trades and it is very much focused on building and construction - brickwork, plastering, joinery, electrical - and they very much encouraged us to look towards that model. I was just very struck by that particular social enterprise, Deaf Enterprises in Cork, and I thank Steve Flint and Claire O'Mahony for showing me around the vicinity. I know they have been engaging with the Government on it, but I absolutely encourage the Minister and the Minister of State to visit the site because I thought it was absolutely incredible just to see it. It was a hub of learning and of inclusivity, providing employment for people and employment for trainers. That is an area that can certainly be looked at.

We need to move away from this idea that the gold standard is to go to university, a technological university or whatever it might be. It is about people fulfilling their full potential in life and pursuing their skills regardless of whether it is in academia, working in the trades,

the arts or whatever it may be. We absolutely have to encourage more people into apprenticeships and promote it as a pathway. We need these skills. Certainly, in terms of construction, this is vital.

Senator Paul Daly: I also welcome our guests in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery and welcome the Minister of State. I think the last time I met her was when I was doing the whistle-stop tour of Ireland for the Seanad election and I stayed, while in the north west, in Sligo Park Hotel. She came in and she was working and it was late at night. I was there passing through and she was there working. I got here anyway. That is probably a bigger achievement for me. She was already here at that stage. I thank her and welcome her here this evening.

I am like many others, I think everybody who has spoken so far, on the committee. We have done our report on apprenticeships, we have put in hours and hours of deliberations and we have a list of recommendations in our draft report. I think most people here went to those recommendations when they were doing their homework for today because I have them all, or most of them, here in front of me and they have all been mentioned by others. Some of them are important enough to rehash.

I am of a vintage where apprenticeships were a big thing. You did your junior cert, or inter cert, as it was called at the time, and then you went off and did an apprenticeship. You served your time, hands-on on the job, and you will never learn anything like you will hands-on in any trade or any skill in life. However, then, of course, we had to better ourselves, or we thought we were bettering ourselves, and we gradually worked our way to a point where nearly everybody had to go to university and we left the trades, the apprenticeships and that earn-as-you-learn scenario behind us. We now have worked our way right back around and proven to ourselves, which we have to do on so many occasions, that the betterment was not that at all, that we actually had it right at the start. I am delighted to see that we are now going back to more and more of an earn-as-you-learn scenario. To hear the Minister of State say there are 78 programmes is unbelievable, and there is such a diversity.

Where the real problem for us as educators to overcome will be is with the ones who have the fine skills where there will be very few jobs but we still have to train people. Because I have a love of horses, I think of the likes of training farriers. That has to be an apprenticeship. There has to be somebody prepared to take on the apprentice and somewhere they can go then to do the learning side of it while, at the end of the day, there will not be that many vacancies for qualified farriers in the country. I am just using that as one example. Another example I use where there is a major challenge for us is in the evolving modern technologies. You could go off to become a blocklayer a few years ago with your bag on your back, with a trowel, a lump hammer, a spirit level, a tape and a role of string in it, and you would become a blocklayer. Now you will need access, in my opinion, to 3D printers. As these technologies evolve, we need to be in a position, as soon as they become available, to train people and let people serve their time on how to use and operate them.

The companies that are developing the technologies probably have a huge role to play in training operators and skilled workers to operate the new technologies.

We need a lot more emphasis in second level education on career guidance teachers, as we used to call them, or counsellors, to promote apprenticeships. I welcomed the announcement of the Minister, Deputy Lawless, of the all-island accounting technologist apprenticeship,

which the Minister of State mentioned. I am of that generation where apprenticeships are associated with blocklayers, bricklayers and electricians, but now we have accounting technologists. That this is one of the first moves on an all-island basis is ideal and brilliant to hear. It can only become more successful and I hope we will have more and more all-island initiatives such as this.

In that regard, when we are designing and formulating our qualifications, one of the big things is to have international recognition, whereby we would recognise the apprenticeships of other countries and ours would be recognised by theirs. The world is a lot smaller now and people do a lot more travelling. International recognition is an important part. It is one of our recommendations in the report I mentioned. It is vital that apprenticeships be upgraded from level 6 to level 7 on the national framework of qualifications. That would give a lot more parity of esteem with the other alternatives of education.

A long time ago, I spent some time in the education sector. I am a qualified metalwork teacher. As a councillor, I chaired the Longford-Westmeath Education and Training Board. I trained in Thomond College, which is now part of the University of Limerick. It does not exist any more, but it was a specific metalwork teacher training course. I did my leaving certificate in June and July, I went to college in October and the following February I was on four weeks' teacher training practice, standing in front of a classroom. This was six months, or a little more, after I had been on the other side of the desk in the classroom. While daunting at the time, it was hands-on working and being with fellow professionals in the staff room. I learned more in that staff room in those four weeks of the teacher practice and in the hands-on scenario than I ever learned from lectures or books. It is no different in any other trade. It is not just the skills; it is the people you are learning the skills with. Even if it is only the craic with the lads on the site, you still are actually learning. I am glad to see the apprenticeship back and long may it continue to improve and prosper.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The Minister of State is very welcome to the House this evening. I had been looking for this debate for some time so I welcome the opportunity. Senator Daly mentioned his baptism of fire in metalwork. I have to compare that to my introduction to the Seanad.

Two weeks ago, I was at the launch of a showcase for an electric vehicle maintenance skills course and a wind turbine trainee programme, which has been running in Roscommon, funded by the EU just transition fund. That is exactly what that fund was created to do, namely, to create those employment opportunities for people in those areas. Last Friday, I was invited to attend the Galway-Roscommon Education and Training Board launch of a bursary for construction by the Ballymore property group. I know the Minister of State sent her apologies to that. It was created to support the development of construction skills. The CEO of Ballymore, Mr. Sean Mulryan, a native of Roscommon, came down. He is making a sizable donation over the next five years to that sector. He spoke at the event about going on a blocklaying apprenticeship with AnCO, which he was lucky enough to get back in the day. He received a stipend of £2.50 per week and his accommodation at £7.50 was paid for as well, so £10 is what was there. That this gentleman is now putting €500,000 into apprenticeships over the next five years just shows how an investment in that sector can pay multiples back into our society.

Previous speakers spoke about capacity building and the need for more trainers. I would like to talk about the delivery of these training places where they are needed most. It is great to have Katelyn here today as a flag bearer for female apprentices. Congratulations. I did not recognise you from the dancing on Sunday night. You have less make-up on this evening. Congratulations on that show too. From the findings of the national survey of apprentices that was launched in September, we know that 8% of apprentices at the moment are female. We also know that 24% of the apprentices are between the ages of 23 and 30, and nearly 13% of them are above that age. I think that one of the barriers to a lot of older people going into apprenticeships is having to travel for their training facilities and having to go to these urban areas. Previous speakers mentioned the money that is available for apprentices, but the cost of actually going into these urban areas and paying for accommodation is not easy for these people. It is especially a barrier for older women leaving home. Maybe this is something we need to really look at.

When the Minister, Deputy Lawless, was in this Chamber for the two previous conversations, I was crying out to him for an apprenticeship centre in Roscommon. It is great to have these small initiatives that are delivering, but the Galway-Roscommon Education and Training Board is crying out for this and has been presenting for the last five years an opportunity to deliver these skills in a place like Roscommon. Giving apprentice trainees the opportunity to drive against the flow of traffic from these urban areas and probably stay at home and actually do their training in the locality is something we need to look. I believe there are three or four counties left in the country that do not have a dedicated apprenticeship training centre. We are one of them. I know the Minister of State is in a neighbouring county so she would be happy someday to visit us in Roscommon and look at the opportunity and maybe meet with the ETB in relation to that.

The reason we have to focus so much on delivering these apprenticeships where they are needed most is that we have introduced policies and strategies that have created the demand for these places. We have committed to major programmes around infrastructure, housing delivery, house adaptation and retrofitting, yet an awful lot of people who are entitled to access some of those schemes such as house adaptation or retrofitting are facing delays of 12 to 24 months, not because of a lack of funding but because of a lack of the people to actually do these jobs. I welcome the fact the Minister of State has said she will engage.

Before I finish up, I need to mention FÁS and CERT, two flag bearers for apprenticeships that we had in the past. The Minister of State would have been very familiar with them in Sligo. These entities were allowed to shut down or be wound up but they served a serious purpose. It was something that we were recognised internationally for, especially in the case of CERT for the hospitality skills. That was wound up in 2003, as far as I know. There is a huge demand for chefs, bar staff and other hospitality staff and a vehicle like CERT is needed.

We need to deliver the training places where they are needed most, potentially in rural areas. I would welcome further engagement on that.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for being here today. I welcome the chance to speak on apprenticeships. They can be very positive. However, as my colleague Senator Tully has mentioned, there are issues regarding wages, reimbursement and the allowances for buying tools. Ireland could lead the way because it is not just about skills or

the training programmes. It is also about opportunity. Senator Scahill mentioned my neighbour Sean Mulryan. He comes from Roscommon but lives beside me in Kildare. He is an example of what can be achieved when we invest in the right programmes. The mention of AnCO brought back memories.

I also want to acknowledge the Rose of Tralee, Katelyn Cummins. Even her being part of the apprenticeship programme shows leadership. It also motivates other young women. Her employer, John Dwan, is here along with his wife Noreen and the operations director of the Rose of Tralee, Steve Crowley. They are going to buy me dinner after the debate. It is wonderful to have them all here today.

What matters about the apprenticeship scheme is that it is not seen as a second option anymore. It used to be the poorer cousin, and if a person did not go to university, he or she did an apprenticeship. Now it seems everybody is taking the university pathway, whereas to get an apprenticeship is the gold ticket. I helped co-found a charity called Tiglin, which works with people who are marginalised. From my own experience in working with communities, what I have seen through the social enterprises that we have set up is that apprenticeships can turn lives around. That can be for people who have been marginalised or who have struggled with education or unemployment, and it helps them to find their feet again with real, structured training programmes and not handouts. It definitely turns their lives around.

I know from my own experience of apprenticeship schemes that they are full of people who want to work and to belong, and apprenticeships give that pathway. If we look across the country, social enterprises are doing incredible work and providing safe, supportive environments where people can learn skills and rebuild confidence as they re-enter the workplace with purpose, but they cannot do that on goodwill alone. Apprenticeship programmes can be fully integrated into the national system using social enterprises. There is huge potential there that is not realised. If we are serious about inclusion, apprenticeships have to be across the board, not only for adults, but also school leavers and *vice versa*. Second chances do matter, but we also need to be honest about where the country is at. I am on the housing committee, and we have been debating housing supply. We have targets, plans and strategies but plans will not build the homes. We need skilled people with an emphasis on more electricians, plumbers, carpenters and bricklayers. If we want houses built, it is essential that we first deliver the workforce to deliver the houses. That means expanding the apprenticeship places, giving certainty around funding, and strengthening the partnerships between the Government, industry and community organisations. It also means changing the narrative.

Apprenticeships are no longer a fallback. They are a solid, respected, well-paid career path. Well-paid is up for debate, and we need to focus on that. Apprenticeships do not just build workers. They build confidence and communities, and ultimately that will build a fairer Ireland. We need to make sure everyone, regardless of background, age, etc, gets the chance to work, learn and thrive.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have three speakers left and we have only nine minutes. If I give them three minutes each, is that agreed? Agreed. I call Senator Rabbitte.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister for being in the House this evening and for the opportunity to speak on apprenticeships. As the mother of a son who has qualified with his

degree after receiving it through an apprenticeship in finance and insurance through Atlantic Technological University Sligo, it has been an absolutely fantastic opportunity, and I cannot praise it highly enough. The opportunity was as a Covid child of the leaving certificate, who actually said to me at one stage, “I am a sprint finisher, mother”, which meant he did not have enough done when they were doing the grades at the time. This meant he might not have got what he wanted. He went through the college system because he was told he had to do it by his mother, and by Christmas he said it was not working out. What he did have was the opportunity to partake in the apprenticeship and to work in finance and insurance, and it has paid dividends. He managed to earn and learn all the way through it and sustain himself while in college. It gave him that opportunity for independence and build confidence as a person who had to take a second chance.

When I talk about second chances in the time that is left to me, there is also wonderful work going on in relation to social work, with the HSE and Tusla, where we have people with the lived experience able to partake in social care and bring their knowledge of the care system and what it is like to be in foster care to engage with young people at their level. Expansion of what is being delivered at the moment through UCC right across the country would be really welcome. It is fantastic to have the Rose of Tralee here tonight, who has been an ambassador not only for women, but women in apprenticeships. I really welcome that. It was wonderful on the night of her interview that she was able to talk so openly and fondly about her role and how she got into it. We need more ambassadors like that who can promote the role of apprenticeships.

I agree with Senator Scahill that we need to bring apprenticeships into every parish and every community where there are ETBs, and where we can ensure access to education. When we look at housing and the cost of transport, we need to ensure we are market-ready for the next steps. I have no doubt, through the Minister of State’s good leadership and with the office and the team behind him, having secured €76 million in the latest budget and having apprenticeships front and centre, meeting sectoral demands, that is where we will drive innovation and keep our youth at home. Doing an apprenticeship means that these young people are innovators as well. They are agile and willing to change. We need to show that mainstreaming all children one way gives us one result. We need to be open and versatile, and that is what the Minister of State’s good office does.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I acknowledge our guests in the Gallery, in particular the 2025 Rose of Tralee. She is most welcome here this evening. Her story serves as an inspiration for so many people across the country who are currently considering going down the apprenticeship route.

Being from Wexford, I highlight the important work the South East Technological University, SETU, does there and in the south-east. Indecon recently completed a report, which showed that 37% of the people who take up college courses through the SETU continue to work and remain in the area immediately, rather than what we have at the moment, which is a persistent brain drain of people leaving County Wexford and moving to Dublin, Waterford, or perhaps further afield. They go to third level and do not come back. This persistent issue has affected County Wexford over many generations. I particularly highlight the very important need for a designated campus at the SETU in Wexford. There is a 48.5 acre site

secured at Ballynagee in Wexford town. I visited it about seven weeks ago with the Minister, Deputy Lawless.

What we really need to see, and this is so important for future growth in the region and county, is the master plan being delivered and prioritised and the process being sped up a bit. This is a project that has been discussed for too many years. We need to see planning permission being applied for, tenders going out and construction on that site. The uniqueness about this project is that the 48.5 acres will not only host the SETU designated campus, but it will also be home to a designated campus for the WWETB. While we are discussing apprenticeships, which would be a real driver for housebuilding and for so many people and careers in Wexford, we have to get to grips with the reality of this, which is that it has dragged on for too many years. I ask that the Minister work hand in hand with the SETU, the WWETB and Wexford County Council, to ensure that this project gets the priority it needs and is actually delivered, and that we are not having to wait as the different steps drag.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome our guests from Cavan. They are guests of Deputy Smith. I hope they enjoy their evening.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I had better welcome the guests from Cavan here this evening. They are all very welcome.

This Department is doing marvellous work. It is a brand new Department, at only five years old. We have to remember that. I recall when the Minister, Deputy Harris came in here, when he first started the Department back in July 2020. I said to him that with a stroke of a pen he could create thousands of jobs. I encouraged him to go out and set up apprenticeships within the public service and that is exactly what he has done. I am glad that today we have 566 apprenticeships because of that idea. Progress has been made, but these are pockets of innovation. The reality on the ground is that momentum elsewhere remains quite slow. Uptake has increased, and that is welcome, but let us be honest with ourselves, only an estimated 5% of our school leavers entered apprenticeships, while England is already at 10% and Germany stands at an extraordinary 45%.

That comparison alone should set alarm bells ringing. A lot is done, but we have a lot more to do. I asked the Government directly what concrete actions can be taken to boost uptake and what the strategic plan is to integrate apprenticeships into sectors where Ireland should already be leading, such as our tech industry, advanced manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, the semiconductor sector, engineering and biotech. These areas rely on precision skills. They rely on a workforce trained not only in theory but in practice. Industrial development is not solely a question of tax incentives or attracting foreign capital. It is fundamentally about building technical capacity within our own population, ensuring that Irish workers, our young people, have the skills to shape and sustain the industries we hope to grow. More broadly, we also need a national cultural shift in how we speak about the value of apprenticeships. The Government has a significant role to play in this. I am delighted to see Ms Katelyn Cummins here today to champion women in apprenticeships. Many young people around this country are doing well in apprenticeships. A young man in my town left school after the junior certificate with a great result in mathematics. He left school qualified, as did a number of people at the time. At 22 years of age he bought his house. He left school at 16. I want to give him a big shout out here today.

What concrete measures and actions can be taken to boost uptake? What is the strategic plan to integrate apprenticeships into sectors where Ireland should already be leading, such as our tech industry, advanced manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, the semiconductor sector, engineering and biotech? These areas rely on precision skills and a workforce trained not only in theory but in practice. Industrial development is not solely a question of tax incentives or attracting foreign capital; it is fundamentally about building technical capacity within our population and ensuring Irish workers, our young people, have the skills to shape and sustain the industries we hope to grow. More broadly, we urgently need a national, cultural shift in how we speak about the value of apprenticeships. The Government has a significant role to play here, and I am delighted to see Katelyn here today to champion women in apprenticeships. Many young people around this country are doing so well in apprenticeships. One young man in my town did the junior certificate, got a great result in maths and then left school, as a number of people did at the time, qualified. Now, at 22 years of age, he has bought a house. He left school at 16. I want to give him a big shoutout here today.

I would take every opportunity to encourage young people, men and women, to explore apprenticeships routes. They offer dignity, experience and lifetime careers. However, without a strong national message and strong Government action, we will continue to underserve thousands of talented young people who would thrive in these pathways. It is time for Ireland to match its rhetoric with ambition. Our young people deserve nothing less.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator and call on the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach. I have heard a lot of contributions and I have been scribbling notes. I do not know how much sense they will make. I have a closing speech prepared but I am not even going to look at that. I will just try to respond as best I can to some of the points that were made.

Senator Dee Ryan spoke about the importance of earn-as-you-learn and peer-to-peer engagement so that young people can get a real sense of what apprenticeships are about. She stated that employers are interested in investing in apprentices and looking after them because they are going to be their workers. They need to keep those workers. She also mentioned how apprentices can move to a different employer, which is something we need to look at as well.

Senator Joe Conway talked about the importance of advertising and promoting the positive image of apprenticeships to tell a story such as that which Katelyn tells or some others in the building heroes programme. That is worth 100 ministers because nobody is going to listen to a middle-aged Minister of State talking about the value of apprenticeships. I am being kind to myself when I say that, but that is the truth of it, they are not. However, they will listen to their peers. They will listen to people they know and look up to. That area is important in order to get those people to talk about the challenges, yes, but also the benefits of apprenticeships. Senator Conway talked about how this Department has delivered. I am just under 12 months in the job. It is great to come into a Department where there are good, positive vibes, good work going on and I can surf on the wave of it for a little while. I am delighted to be able to do that. As I said earlier, a lot of plans are being put in place, with a lot of reading, assessments and reviewing. We are asking what we can do better, what mistakes we have made and what

more we can do. All of that is happening and it gives a great chance to all the stakeholders and my senior Minister and me to influence what is going on.

Senator Conway also mentioned green skills. A great deal of work is happening around modern methods of construction, new technologies and what they call nearly zero energy building, NZEB. We are trying to embed sustainability and carbon management modules into continuous programmes. It is not about doing a bit here and a bit there; it is about embedding all of that through the programmes. I made so many notes about the circular economy, bioeconomy and carbon accounting. It is happening and that is important.

Senator Mike Kennelly talked about the importance of women in apprenticeships. He also talked about the 45-year-old man who wanted to upskill and the cost to career changers. That is a good point because we have specific supports in place for certain groups of people. Perhaps that is something we need to look at for specific groups. If the Senator wants to come back to me about that, while I am not promising anything, it is certainly worth looking at. He also spoke about accessibility and the importance of embedding universal design in our systems.

Senator Tully spoke about the support for the Traveller apprenticeships pilot programme. It is a very good pilot programme, but the Senator is right. We need to make sure it remains there because it is needed. We will not reach critical mass with this pilot programme. We will certainly need it to continue it. The Senator also talked about funding for students with a disability. A fund has been put in place for students with disability who are attending courses in higher education. That is phases 4 and 6 of some of the apprenticeships. The next action plan for apprenticeships remains a priority for the Government. The closing date for consultation on that is 15 February. It has been open for quite a while. We want to consider how to promote participation on a wider scale. I think the Senator also mentioned public sector participation, which has seen a fourfold increase in apprenticeships. In truth, it started at a low level, so we still have a way to go. She talked about central applications such as the CAO. That has been discussed at many meetings and we are trying to find a way.

Senator Cosgrove spoke about the dropout rate. That was the only time I looked around to my advisers. Certainly, from the information I have seen, the rate seems to be 10% or 11% on average. That is actually much lower than in higher education. Nonetheless, the Senator is right in that we need to look at it. It is too high.

I will not give the detail of our position on the minimum wage because Members probably heard that before. I can say that when we look at the value of the apprenticeship model, that the highest median earnings for apprentices, for example two years after qualifying, were in the fields of engineering, at over €50,000 per annum. When apprentices qualify, they do command decent wages. However, I recognise it is not simple. All I can say is the numbers are increasing and apprentices seem to think doing it is worth their while, although we are not without considering it.

I heard what Senator Harmon said about the deaf enterprise. She might want to speak to me afterwards. I was only in Cork two or three weeks ago but I never refuse an excuse to visit Cork. I would certainly be interested in going there.

Senator Paul Daly talked about niche skills such as farriers. We need to make sure we look at that and keep those skills in place. He is right; the expertise will only be in one area. As

technologies evolve, we need to train people and be agile, and it is about hands-on and earn-as-you-learn. The Senator knows what he is talking about

In regard to Senator Scahill, I do not know what his baptism of fire was, but good luck with that. He talked about various things, such as the electrical maintenance skills and wind turbine skills programmes in Roscommon. He spoke about Ballymore Property. I was disappointed I could not be there last Friday. I had intended to be but I had another commitment in my diary. It is really something for somebody to give that kind of money. Anyone who was born or educated in Roscommon or lives there can qualify and get a certain sum to enable them to enter an apprenticeship.

8 o'clock

Senator McCarthy is absolutely right when he says that apprenticeships cannot be seen as the poor relation. We are trying to make sure that does not happen. He had a lot more there; I will come back to him again.

Senator Rabbitte has been looking for a meeting with me for several weeks. We have finally scheduled for next week to hear about the good news story she has to tell but, equally, there is more we can do. I will be happy to listen to her then.

Senator Cathal Byrne raised the important work of SETU. It is really interesting that 37% of the people who take courses remain there. That is really important from the aspect of balanced regional development.

Senator Keogan talked about how the Department is making progress. She told us, and she is right, that compared to some other countries, we have a long way to go. We are doing a certain number of things from monitoring, evaluation, research and learning skills to what schools are doing with transition year students to try to encourage visibility of apprenticeships and ensure that people see the value of them.

I am finished, I hope. I thank Senators so much for their contributions. There are some good ideas. If anybody wants to speak to me at any time, I am willing to listen. There are no promises on what can be delivered, but at least I am willing to listen. I thank everyone for their thoughtful contributions.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State and her officials for being here this evening for this all-important debate. I welcome Katelyn and our guests on my left in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery.

Storm Chandra: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an Aire, an Teachta Browne, go dtí an Seanad. Anois, we will have statements on Storm Chandra. The Minister will speak for ten minutes, group spokespersons for eight minutes and all other Senators five minutes, and the Minister will be called on to reply no later than 9.20 p.m.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Cathaoirleach and Senators very much for the invitation to be with them to discuss Storm Chandra and the extended and severe flooding events that followed in many parts of the country and to outline the whole-of-government response to the storm. I will start off by clearly stating on behalf of the Government that I recognise the very significant and very real impacts the latest storm event had on so many families and businesses and the level of distress that was caused. I am particularly attuned to this because people in my own County Wexford are very much seeing the impact first-hand. Many people I know personally were affected, and it has taken a horrendous toll on people. It is very important at the very outset of the discussion that we recognise the human impact these storms have on people.

I want to take time to review the weather event itself and, in particular, the lead-up to the weather event because what was experienced in the towns and villages that were most impacted over the last few weeks comes not just from the storm. Over the month of January 2026, Ireland, and in particular the east of the country, experienced rainfall well over what is considered the expected monthly average. In the week preceding the storm, the east of the country experienced more than four times the average amount of rainfall that would normally be expected. This level of rainfall had serious ramifications before the storm event. The land itself was intensely waterlogged and saturated, with no capacity to contain the excess rain that was continuously falling. I understand that our local authorities and councils, which are our first responders when it comes to severe weather events, were aware and were keeping a watching brief of all rising rivers in the days before the arrival of Storm Chandra and were also monitoring river levels.

The storm was named by the UK Met Office on Monday, 26 January 2026, and it was forecast to bring with it both high winds and heavy rain. The storm in and of itself would have been a manageable event. However, the storm was coupled with the already waterlogged and saturated ground and this brought with it the risk of river flooding along with flooding risk along floodplains, agricultural land and low-lying roads. I experienced first-hand the severe flooding in my home county of Wexford and what this meant not just in the days of the storm but in the aftermath, and it is continuing. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated flooding incident to one community or county. Also impacted were family homes and business in areas such as Aughrim in County Wicklow, south Dublin, Passage East in County Waterford, Graiguenamanagh in County Kilkenny and many other parts of the country. My thoughts are very much with all those families and business who are badly and deeply affected as the clean-up process continues. We in the Government want to do everything we can to help as quickly as possible.

There are two important points I especially want to cover this evening: the preparedness in advance of Storm Chandra and the response to the storm. In terms of preparedness, following Storm Éowyn, my Department, through its national directorate for fire and emergency management, undertook a wide-ranging review of our national response and moved to implement a number of key recommendations.

As part of this work we required all local authorities to submit their severe weather and flood plans. These plans were reviewed and a workshop took place to advise of best practice in relation to the development of these documents. Local authorities were tasked with reviewing and updating all plans as necessary and my Department will review these regularly going

forward. This is essential and I will ensure it happens. It is not about how often we have storms or how severe they are; we must ramp up our readiness to respond to storms in the in-between times. That is why discussions like this one are an important use of our time. We have to reflect on our readiness and responses and how we can improve all the time. All local authorities reviewed their individual plans in advance of the 2025-2026 winter season, ensured necessary contracts were in place with contractors, that salt and sand stores were full and that gullies and culverts were cleared.

I met the national emergency co-ordination group in advance of this winter season to ensure that the plans were in place and that all sectors were prepared for the season ahead. I ensured a framework for the establishment of community support centres was put in place, along with a guidance document developed in conjunction with the local authority sector. As a result of these actions, community support centres were established in Donegal in the aftermath of Storm Bert and in Aughrim and Enniscorthy following Storm Chandra. Our community support centres provide a vital focal point in the community. They are aimed at providing safe, secure places where people can gather, charge phones and other devices, get hot drinks and food and receive information and advice. My Department, in conjunction with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, will be funding the provision of a pool of generators for use by community support centres, as well as funding the costs associated with the installation of changeover switches, in pre-identified sites, for their safe use. This is all preparation carried out before this winter season commenced.

I will speak now about Storm Chandra itself and the key timelines associated with the storm and the response. First of all, a Met Éireann technical briefing was held on Monday, 26 January. The briefing was attended by local authorities, the principal response agencies, Departments, the utilities and other key and essential stakeholders. Those in attendance were updated on soil and river conditions and advised of the incoming weather. All stakeholders were advised to monitor rivers. They were also advised to follow the Met Éireann forecasts closely for updates and any changes to the forecast. Following persistent heavy rain and wind conditions overnight on 26 January, the national emergency co-ordination group was formally convened on 27 January. This role of the NECG is to get key decision-makers in the room and co-ordinate the whole-of-government response to severe weather. In this case, the event was flooding. At this stage the humanitarian response subgroup was activated and it acted rapidly. The Department of Social Protection activated its scheme for householders, with community welfare officers deployed to impacted areas to provide assistance and advice. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment's scheme for businesses impacted by flooding, administered by the Irish Red Cross, was activated and the qualifying criteria of the scheme were extended to assist as many small local businesses as possible. The amounts available were increased from €20,000 to €100,000.

The Civil Defence, Irish Red Cross and other voluntary groups provided practical assistance and essential psychosocial support to impacted communities across the country. This is really valuable work. This type of engagement by our committed and excellent voluntary groups ensured those who might be most isolated were checked on and provided with essentials, hospital transport for patients and medical staff and assistance in standing up community support centres, rest centres and other services. I genuinely thank all our community and voluntary groups for working so effectively and so closely with our local authorities during times of serious stress in people's lives, such as during storms like Storm Chandra. As well as

this, I recognise An Post also effectively collaborated with local authorities to identify vulnerable persons and contributed actively through the humanitarian subgroup. I want to see this continue.

The local authority sector, as principal response agency, was to the forefront of the response in affected counties. Before the arrival of Storm Chandra, local authorities were monitoring river levels, activating severe weather teams and crews and standing up flood mitigation measures. As the event became more protracted, mutual aid from local authorities from across the country was made available in the form of demountable flood defences, equipment and staff. As we moved into the extended flood event, local authorities had crews on the ground, pumping water to protect property, filling and distributing sandbags, managing traffic, assisting homeowners and cleaning up once the flood waters receded. Given the water levels in the reservoir at Poulaphuca it was also deemed necessary to bring together stakeholders on a Liffey catchment subgroup. This group co-ordinated a managed release of water from the reservoir down into the Liffey catchment to ensure the integrity of the reservoir and to mitigate against flooding downstream. This has been managed successfully, with further releases continuing until water levels are deemed to be within acceptable parameters.

Learnings from the Storm Éowyn review and the associated review of Departmental and agency capabilities, combined with the enhanced operational readiness of local authorities and other stakeholders ahead of winter 2025-2026, ensured what I believe to be an effective local response to this event, supported by the NECG and all relevant public sector bodies. The national emergency co-ordination group and its associated subgroups met daily until Monday, 9 February and the Government is still working closely with relevant Departments to ensure those who have been impacted are assisted. The humanitarian schemes are still operational and payments are ongoing to those who have been affected. As mentioned previously, a decision was made to extend the qualifying criteria for the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment's scheme for small business to ensure as many as possible could qualify and this has been critical for so many. Our local authorities continue to work on the ground to assist the impacted, carry on the clean-up and begin the review of infrastructural damage to estimate the resources required for remediation. My Department will continue to work on the ground to assist the impacted.

I will finish by thanking all those who worked so tirelessly during this event, including our local authority crews, who have been and continue to be on the ground throughout this period, the Civil Defence teams and Irish Red Cross volunteers for their continual support of communities as well as our principal response agencies and staff from our Departments who have also been working on the ground and through the NECG to manage and co-ordinate operations and assistance. I want to continue to review how we handle storms and how we can improve our responses. I welcome the contributions of Members on that.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister. The first Senator to speak will be Senator Flaherty.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I thank the Minister for coming into the House to address a hugely important issue across the country. I have a degree of sympathy for him as when he was appointed to his Ministry last year we had Storm Éowyn and he has just had another major storm event. It had major ramifications in his area and I congratulate him for the way he spoke so openly and candidly about that and about having first-hand experience. If we compare Storm

Chandra and Storm Éowyn the one consolation - though there is no consolation for the people who saw their properties and businesses destroyed by flooding - was we did not have the severe high winds and the multiple power cuts and loss of water supply we had due to Storm Éowyn. If we had had those same high winds again this time I do not think we would have been in a much better state or readiness for that. We are going to have another storm of this magnitude next year. They are going to be an annual issue and we need to ramp up our response to them.

As the Minister said, the national emergency co-ordination group was activated on 27 January. If you listen to Kieran Cuddihy, his show really came alive. He probably had a low-key start but he gave outstanding coverage of Storm Chandra and brought home to the nation the impact these storms had. Businesses were destroyed and family life was upturned. A grandmother had to help her newborn grandchild into a boat in the Minister's county. A man who owned a garage business built up by his father saw it flooded for, I think, the third time. Your heart really goes out to all those people. Listening to them, they knew it was coming. There must be such a sense of foreboding when you see that coming. You are effectively standing on a psychological shoreline with water coming at you and you know that water is going to reach you tonight. There is no accounting for the fear, the depression and the mental health anguish those people are going to go through. Nothing short of a complete and sustained response from us as legislators will do in this instance. The Minister mentioned some issues with gullies. There are several local authorities that have not plans for clearing gullies. They did not clear gullies in anticipation of this. It is a very easy fix and should be done. It should be mandatory for every local authority to clear its gullies.

On the ESB and Uisce Éireann, everyone in this room will say there has been no improvement from either of those service providers since Storm Éowyn and if it happened again we would have the same problems. We should have active and ongoing engagement. I mentioned at the time of Storm Éowyn we should have a dedicated committee within this House looking at how our utilities are responding, because we are very much in a changing climate landscape.

As a country and as a society, we are not prepared for it. I acknowledge the vast sums of money that are being spent on it but in many cases that spending is also dependent on the work of outside agencies such as the ESB and Uisce Éireann. I ask the Minister to outline the level of engagement with Uisce Éireann and the ESB following on from Storm Eowyn. One would expect that they would have identified the weaknesses in their infrastructure and put in place a plan to address them. They have had 12 months to do so. They are going to get another 12 months to do it now and if it is the case that they need additional funding, I am sure that will not be too big a request and will be supported by everybody in this and the other House.

The OPW is doing fantastic work on flood relief schemes. We know the challenges that present in relation to planning and trying to get these schemes through the planning system. Many of the people objecting to these schemes are the same people whose properties have been flooded and who have benefited from support and relief when it comes from the Government. By the Minister's own reckoning, it now takes 11 years to complete a flood relief scheme which, for those who faced floods over a ten-day period, is agonising to hear. The OPW has completed 56 flood relief schemes which have provided security and certainty to 13,000 properties and avoided further damages in the region of €2 billion, which is significant. There are ten schemes under construction nationwide in Athlone, Crossmolina, Glashaboy, King's Island, Morrison's

Island, and the River Mall at Templemore, among others. All of those schemes are very welcome and cannot come soon enough.

A big issue for many people is insurance. People who have been flooded now are never going to get insurance again. I welcome the fact that the Department of Finance is engaging with multiple stakeholders, including the Central Bank and the OPW, on this. We have a ready-made, white-label solution for the insurance issue. The people who cannot get flood insurance should be allowed to access the Irish Public Bodies for insurance. That does not need any discussion. It is there already and is basically our insurance company. Cover should be offered to all of those people who have no cover until we come up with a proper solution. It is the least we can do for these people. It is a very easy, quick, short-term fix and would demonstrate proactiveness on our part. I urge the Minister to give that suggestion serious consideration.

The development of the national flood forecasting and warning service, NFFWS, is obviously very welcome, as is the Government's task force on emergency planning. However, there is a sense in communities that these bodies only meet on the cusp of a crisis or when something serious is looming. These organisations need to be meeting on a regular basis. We heard many academics on radio and we read articles by them in newspapers saying that there is so much information out there on water levels. There is a whole pool of knowledge that could be shared and that needs to be collated. We need to be much more proactive on this. If these two storms have taught us anything, it is that mother nature can be horrific when she turns against us. We need to make better preparations.

We must consider the sheer scale of this. The Graiguenamanagh flood relief scheme in Kilkenny is costing €22 million and will protect 84 properties. While no amount of money is enough, we should bear in mind that this amounts to €95,000 per property. It is a significant cost but one would not begrudge it to those people. If it costs €200,000 to protect each of their homes, they should get it.

The Minister has responded very well to what has been a huge crisis. He has a very busy desk with a lot of crises on it but he has dealt very well with this. That said, I would emphasise to him that there is a sense out there that we are reacting too late. We need to make it a *raison d'être* of this Government that we are better prepared for these crises of mother nature - these natural disasters - because they are going to be coming on an annual basis. We really need to be better prepared for them.

Senator Joe Conway: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. I wish to raise a number of issues related to the recent weather problems that we had, particularly in the south east. The Minister has already adverted to that and God knows, the people of Wexford have been well scourged with the weather events of late. In Waterford we also had some notable difficulties. I was out in the community last Sunday morning meeting with the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, who visited. It was very good of him to come down. He spent his time on the road over last Friday, Saturday and Sunday going around to afflicted areas. It was as much a morale-boosting exercise as a delineation of the plan of action that he hopes to effect. I was encouraged by what he said. The tenor of what he said was that money is not a big problem at this stage. Funding has been promised and is there to be used. For people in distress after suffering flood damage, that is a very good message to hear.

Obviously, the solutions do not come quickly enough. Most of us in this room are fortunate enough to be householders but any householder who has had water coming up through the floor or down through the ceiling knows, as per the truism, that water in the wrong place is an absolute persecution. It is a nightmare when that is writ large in a town or a village, as it was in Passage East when the brook overtopped at around 2.30 a.m., coinciding with high tide. People found themselves out on the street and the place flooded very badly. This is a very settled coastal community with a lot of old people living on Post Office Square and in Brookside. The venting and slushing waters came down the hill from the brook, overtopping and running down into the streets. I was there on Sunday morning and I saw skips full of detritus, including mattresses, suites of furniture and so on. I saw older people out talking to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. They were near to tears and were trying to extract a promise from him that he really could not give. He cannot wave a magic wand over these things and correct them straightaway. It is a longish process. Water has to dry out and all of those things.

I will not rattle on here unduly, telling the local authorities how they should do their job. As the expression goes, I would not be one to tell a grandmother how to suck eggs. The local authorities have been doing this work le fada an lá and by and large, they do it very well. After autumn there is a lot of leaf litter around. Maybe, as Senator O'Flaherty said, there were errors made in terms of not cleaning gullies and so on but I do not want to concentrate on that.

As far as I can see from a layman's standpoint, all of the agencies are trying to work together with the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. The latter's background is in the Shannon floodplains and Senator Flaherty and myself, who come from that neck of the woods, know what Shannon flooding is like and the desecration it causes. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, more than most, will know what is involved in addressing these issues and I wish him well.

When I was a child growing up, we had the weather forecast which was a very generic, broad sweep of the pen. The forecast would tell us that there will be showers down along the west coast, winds will be picking up on the Irish Sea and the temperatures will be X. It was a fairly bland thing. Now we have access to a much more exact prediction of the weather on our phones. Met Éireann does a damn good job in forecasting the weather. In our county it is normally west Waterford that gets the flooding, overtopping and bad problems with estuaries but this time, it was the east of the county. In fact, it was the entire eastern coastline, which is not famed for getting rainfall at all. It just shows the unpredictability of these unprecedented weather events. When I was the principal of a small school in Waterford I used to say, in relation to staff, that everybody likes to be told when they are doing a good job. The work that Met Éireann does in preparing us for significant and unprecedented weather events should be endorsed and staff there should be told that they are doing a good job, by and large.

I do not think there is much to be gained by the Minister throwing them under the bus at a time like that. Their work should be endorsed and we should thank them in the same way that we thank him and his Department for the enlightened and very proactive way they are addressing the threats that are coming down the line.

We have things to learn from this. There is an old Irish expression with which I am sure many Members are familiar - Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb. It goes back to the time of thatching. For those who are not overly versed in the Gaeilge, it means the windy day is not

the day for thatching. It is all about preparedness and trying to get our sense of preparedness up to the best we can be. None of us are ever going to be perfectly able to address these unprecedented weather events. There is going to be flooding and grief coming down the line but if we work together co-operatively, realise what our strengths are and encourage one another to respond to these events then we are far more likely to address them in a satisfactory and provident way.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I am sharing time with my colleague, Senator Kennelly. He will join us later. I thank the Minister for his presence here today. Two weeks on from the devastation that was caused by Storm Chandra in the south and east of the country, our thoughts and concern must remain with the people of affected towns like the Minister's own town of Enniscorthy, and indeed many other parts of the country and also Dublin.

An Cathaoirleach: Do Senators Murphy and Kennelly wish to share time?

Senator P. J. Murphy: Yes, five minutes for me and Senator Kennelly has three minutes.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator P. J. Murphy: Today and for weeks to come they will be living with the mess and smell caused by floodwaters coming into their homes and businesses. I come from the west. On this occasion my area was not affected, but in south Galway we are no strangers to the devastating effects of flooding on family homes, farms and businesses, and day-to-day life in our area when the roads and railway line remained closed due to floodwater for days and weeks on end. This has happened on a number of occasions in our area over the last 30 years.

We can all see that there is a change in weather patterns, and in particular in rainfall patterns in recent years but river channels through many of our towns and cities remain exactly as they were built over two centuries ago. In my local area in south Galway, in the town of Gort and the local village of Craughwell, we have seen at first hand how successful in-stream channel improvement works can be. They have made a massive difference in preventing flooding of the towns and villages concerned. We have the engineering expertise in this country. We have the necessary experts and we have the people who can carry out the work that is needed. Unfortunately, progress is being made at a painfully slow pace. After nine years of designing and planning, and €4.3 million later, the south Galway flood relief scheme remains trapped in an environmental purgatory. It has been calculated by the competent professional bodies that in a one-in-100-year high water flood, 50 to 75 homes in my area of south Galway will flood, 175 homes and 46 businesses will be cut off for prolonged periods, and 19 rural south Galway communities will be isolated. The M18 motorway will close due to being under water. The Galway to Limerick railway line will also close due to it being under water. Crowe Street in the town of Gort will be underwater for a prolonged period. This is not something that might or might not happen. This is something that we know will happen if the south Galway flood relief scheme is not progressed.

We know that all of this is inevitable yet we continue to lose valuable time ticking environmental boxes and carrying out reports instead of getting on with this project that we know will inevitably need to be done, one way or another. When it comes to the delivery of

the flood mitigation project, a major change in pace is needed. As a matter of urgency, we need to find a means of bypassing the environmental bureaucracy that is getting in the way and preventing this work from going ahead. It is work that is inevitably going to have to happen. I urge the Minister to find a way that we can move around the planning bureaucracy so that we can get the machines on the ground to progress the work that will inevitably have to happen over the course of the next generation.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister to the Seanad. Storm Chandra has once again highlighted how exposed our communities are in relation to serious flood events. We see the disruption and the havoc that it caused, even in areas that were coded yellow. I do not know which level of warning we need to take more seriously: yellow, orange or red.

Storm Chandra caused significant damage. These flood events happened in areas other than my area, on which I have been beating the drum on the floor of the Seanad since I came here. Localised flooding incidents can happen anywhere in the country. If we can learn anything, it is from the areas that have been flooded in recent years. I will reflect on my area when Storm Bert hit Listowel in November 2024. It was a code yellow. No one gets out of their chairs for a code yellow. Some 40 hours before the storm there was a snowfall. On the night of the flood event, 40 hours or whatever later, the snow started to thaw as the temperatures rose. The code yellow was issued for the same time. Two hours' notice upstream of Listowel would have saved a lot of houses from being destroyed. It would possibly have prevented human casualties further upstream in the Killoccrim area. At that time, I cried out for an early flood detection system, an alarm system that would notify people, including first responders and the local authorities so they could get their emergency crews out because the banks are high and there is going to be an incident or episode further downstream. Abbeyfeale got hit and two hours later, we were like, "Oh my God". We were not ready. I have been crying out for it. Even at that time we were looking for protection for individual people in their own homes. That was in November 2024. We are now crying here because Enniscorthy and the east coast got destroyed.

Could the Minister take on board what happened down there? If we do not detect flood events early, then a code yellow becomes a code red. It was raining continuously in the Enniscorthy area for days. The place was saturated. We know that was the case because we had a lot of wet weather. When the ground is saturated and there is a code yellow, then alarm bells should be ringing downstream or wherever. We must ensure that some measure is put in place. I have been crying out for a detection alert system. It is simple and it does not need planning. We are on about biodiversity and everything else, but it does not need planning. It is about gauging the bank of the river and if there is danger then we are alerted. The council is alerted and the first responders. A 75-year old man should not have to be taken out by a tractor and loader at 2 p.m. Whatever recommendations are taken by the Minister from tonight's debate, could he ensure the early detection warning system is made a priority? It will save time and time saves lives.

Senator Maria McCormack: This debate is about Storm Chandra but the discussion should not be limited to one storm. Storm Chandra was not particularly remarkable as an isolated weather event. The flooding was devastating but inevitable because of the amount of rainfall preceding the storm and the lack of preparation due to the frustratingly slow progress of flood relief schemes and flood defence measures, which have been promised for far too long. This

is not about just one storm, this is about years of failure and neglect. I do not say this lightly in regard to the promises and the slow progress for people in Laois but there is no hiding from the fact that this Government has failed people in Laois for far too long in terms of getting flood defences built so that storms like Chandra and the rainfall warnings from last week do not have such catastrophic consequences for people's lives, their homes and their businesses.

We also learned last week from the public accounts committee that millions of euro allocated for the national flood forecasting warning service went unspent. Only €5.9 million out of an allocation of €19.3 million was spent on this service between 2020 and 2024. We need to know why. I hope the Minister will address that.

Storm Chandra and the recent persistent rainfall have again laid bare the failure to implement services and schemes to prevent damage from flooding, not just last week or during the storm. In County Laois, there are three towns constantly at risk of flooding. I talk about them all the time in this Chamber. Last November, Storm Claudia caused flooding once again in Mountmellick and Portarlinton. Historical reports of flooding have shown these areas to be prone to flooding for decades. Flood relief schemes in Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Clonaslee were promised after the devastation of the 2017 floods. As Senator Murphy said about a scheme in his local area, nine years later these schemes are still in the planning stages.

Schemes on paper are worth nothing to the people who fear yellow rain advisory or storm warnings. Across the country, communities have waited and waited. They are frustrated by the slow progress in these schemes, especially the people in County Laois. On behalf of those who have had their homes and businesses destroyed already, who cannot get insurance now to cover any future damage, and who live in constant fear of the destruction of what will happen once again, I ask the Minister to do more to stop talking about this and to get some action. These schemes cannot stay in the planning stage for nearly a decade. I cannot understand why they are taking so long to complete.

My thoughts are with the people across the country who are living through this destruction of their homes, their businesses and their belongings. The financial impact of it all must be mentioned alongside the sheer stress and frustration they must be feeling. They know these floods were both predictable and preventable. The extent of the flooding damage would not have been as severe if long-term flood defence plans had been fulfilled by this Government. There are excellent plans - I have seen the super flood plans for Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Clonaslee - but they are no good sitting in someone's office gathering dust. The long-term flood defence plans and flood relief schemes have been drawn up and ready to go for years, and now are really only lacking political will and funding. It is not the fault of Laois County Council, which is doing everything in its power. It is a question of the funding coming down to it.

Right now, words and statements on this are not enough. People in County Laois are really angry when it comes to flood defences. Delivery of these flood defences must happen now, not in four years time, which I am told is the projected timeframe for when the Laois schemes will get under way. How many more storms and heavy rainfall events will destroy properties and communities while we wait for these schemes to be completed? The Minister can hear that there is serious frustration here. It does not matter whether it is code yellow, red, orange, blue or pink - the progress here is too slow and it is not good enough.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): I thank Senator McCormack. Next, I call Senator Noonan. Is the Senator sharing time?

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Yes. Like others, I want to commend the emergency services and local authorities in Kilkenny County Council, as well as other local authorities, on their response in support of communities during Storm Chandra.

Prior to the Kilkenny scheme, I had family members who were caught in the flooding cycle there. Local knowledge was hugely important then. Bernadette Kiely, an artist who is based in Thomastown, spoke about that local knowledge when the floods were coming in there. We certainly knew when the floods were coming up. We were ready to put the couches and the sofas up and wait for the floodwaters to go out. It is no longer acceptable for communities to have to put up with this. Unfortunately, the frequency of these events is making the chance of it all the more prevalent.

The one thing I want to speak about in the few minutes I have relates to the use of nature-based solutions. I was a member of the local authority when we were considering the Thomastown and Graiguenamanagh schemes. At that time, I mentioned the idea of using and working with nature, because nature is our first and best line of defence against climate chaos. There are projects right across the UK, such as in Pickering in Yorkshire, that we can consider. Here in Ireland, the Inishowen Rivers Trust is using what they call "leaky dams". In Gissing in Norfolk, they are actively using and working with nature to attenuate the water and slow the flow for a period. Similar projects could be up and running while we are waiting for these schemes to be deployed. Not every community is going to be able to get the hard engineering OPW solutions. It is critically important that the Government looks at this. As we look towards the nature restoration plan and the land use review - I am not sure where that is - we should incorporate works under the nature restoration plan in with the next CAP strategic plan so that we have flood defences working with nature. We could also look at the planning code, through the Planning and Development Act, to adopt nature-based solutions in our urban areas, to install permeable paving in our car parks and to put in rain gardens. All of these proven measures could be deployed now while we are waiting for schemes to be implemented.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Minister, Deputy Browne, and I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: My heartfelt sympathies go to those whose livelihoods and businesses were affected by Storm Chandra. As Senator Murphy said, we were not affected in the north west. I grew up in Bandon and the Minister of State is from Clonakilty, so we know that flood defences actually work.

It is very welcome that the OPW is putting emergency measures in place in the area where I live, Strandhill, but unfortunately there is no sense of urgency to it. We can go around in circles saying we will put in and look at engineering solutions. I agree with my colleague about having natural water retention measures put in place. We have seen and proven they work. We are planting Sitka spruce even though we saw the devastating impacts of such plantations during Storm Éowyn. This is still happening on shallow soil. At the same time, we are talking about building LNG infrastructure even though we know this is contributing to climate change.

I am always going on about it, but a good start for us would be to look at having a moratorium on the building of data centres and LNG infrastructure, or any fossil fuel infrastructure. We should also look at fully resourcing local authorities. It has come up over and over again that local authority staff are the first people in the line of defence. I accept that work is done by voluntary and community workers, An Post, our emergency services and the Defence Forces. We need to resource local authority staff. The under-resourcing of local authorities has been raised in this House on numerous occasions. The OPW must be accountable and responsible as well. They all play a part together. We must ensure that Uisce Éireann, the ESB, the OPW and, most importantly, the local authorities, are resourced to deal with these emergencies.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: The Senator is so diligently sharing time so that we all get more.

The kind of flooding we have seen in recent weeks is not a once-off event. We cannot say we are having once-off extreme weather events. They are ordinary and are no longer extraordinary. Rain continues to fall. This has laid bare the extent to which governments have failed to take flood risk management seriously. One of the clearest failures in that regard is the absence of a modern and effective flood warning system, which other jurisdictions have and have been effective elsewhere. They have proven that such systems work. A system here could include targeted push alerts to mobile phones in high-risk areas; real-time monitoring of river and groundwater levels; and clear localised warnings to give people time to protect their homes and their livestock and to make informed decisions.

These are standard practices in many European countries, yet communities in Ireland are still left relying on informal updates and word of mouth. Beyond warnings, we must also address how we manage water itself. Increasingly, European countries are moving towards natural flood management, an approach that works with nature rather than against it. We have heard Senator Noonan make interventions around this area. These natural flood management measures include restoring wetlands and flood plains; re-meandering straightened rivers; planting trees in catchments; and creating upstream water storage areas that slow the flow of water before it reaches towns and villages.

We do not need to reinvent the wheel when we see what works in other countries. In the Netherlands, the "room for the river" programme has reduced flood risk by giving rivers space to expand safely. In the UK, the Pickering "slowing the flow" project combines woodland planting, leaky dams and restored wetlands to significantly reduce flooding in towns.

Similar schemes in Belgium and Germany have shown that these measures are cost-effective. They improve biodiversity, enhance water quality and regenerate rural landscapes.

Crucially, natural flood management avoids the problem of simply pushing water downstream and transferring risk from one community to another, which we have seen play out in Kilkenny. Kilkenny got concrete flood protection but that has simply pushed the problem downstream. It has increased higher water flow and pushed it into Graiguenamanagh, Thomastown and Inistioge, the places that were really badly affected over the past few weeks. By storing and slowing water across entire catchments, natural flood management delivers fairer and more resilient outcomes. I would really like us to consider this.

Climate change is here. Flooding is not inevitable and inaction is choice. We need early warnings that work. We need nature-based solutions that are proven economically and sustainable.

I acknowledge all of the work of local authorities across the country, in particular, in the south east, and community services and fire services. They have done incredible work over the past few weeks.

We are a year on from Storm Éowyn and I have a question on whether the households have received the information booklets that were promised to them on what to do when a storm hits. That was a promise during Storm Éowyn. We are a year on and this is this at the very least is some tangible action we could see from the Department, ensuring that people know exactly what to do and how to react in these instances.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): Senators Scahill and Byrne want to share time.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I will have two minutes and Senator Byrne will have three, if that is okay.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome the Minister. As previous speakers have said, these are no longer one-off events. This is becoming an annual occurrence for us all. My sympathies go out to the people of the south east and the south, and in the north, in Donegal, who were affected by the floods last week.

We are less than a year on from 760,000 people being without power and water across the west after Storm Éowyn affected homes, businesses and farms. While great strides have been made and a lot of initiatives have been brought on in relation to empowering communities in terms of setting up the community response networks, the communications facilities, etc., we still come to these one-off events on an annual basis and we find ourselves in a position where we ask could more have been done and should more have been done.

Senator McCormack mentioned temporary solutions and how permanent solutions are needed. My own experience of this is the temporary solutions are put in place but then a lot of work has to go in to ensuring that the planning applications are robust enough to get the permanent solutions across the line. That is something that we cannot take for granted. We have to go through that process to be able to deliver that.

Senator Noonan spoke about sustainable solutions and the solutions that are available but, because these are happening so often now, maybe need to look at something different. Maybe we need to empower local authorities and special emergency response units to be able to tackle these situations to protect human habitats as well. While the habitats directive is probably one of these issues that is holding up a lot of the infrastructure developments that we need to get communities supported in this way, maybe we need to start looking at protecting our own habitats and our own business communities and giving the people who are living in and developing these communities a little support on that as well.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming in for this important discussion.

My home county of Wexford was devastated by flooding in the past two weeks and I have to highlight a number of issues. I spoke about the Enniscorthy flood relief project previously, but we saw the impact of heavy rainfall in counties Carlow and Wicklow making its way down the River Slaney, first, with the devastation that was caused on the Ryland Road in Bunclody upstream and then making its way down to a major flooding event in my home town, Enniscorthy, where we, yet again, witnessed absolute devastation for residents on the Island Road, Shannon Quay in Templeshannon and Abbey Quay. Down further, Wexford town was on high alert.

The reality is that we have not seen action on the Enniscorthy flood relief scheme. We have been flooded 16 times since 2000. I appreciate that the Taoiseach was down with us and I appreciate that we have had the Minister of State, Deputy Boxer Moran. There is a series of interim measures. I met with the CEO of Wexford County Council last Friday and he proposed several measures that the OPW has, to its credit, committed to fund, including the installation of non-return valves and barriers put up on slipways, providing adequate protection through permanent sandbags and aquadams. These are important measures, but the reality is that these measures came too late for the people in Enniscorthy. We have to see progress on legislative change to rebalance the legislative priorities in this country between protecting protected species, such as the freshwater pearl mussel living under the old bridge in Enniscorthy, and the businesses and the residents right across the country.

Let us not forget that it was not only Bunclody, Enniscorthy and Wexford town that saw and experienced serious flood risk. It was also further south. The Minister of State visited Our Lady's Island in the summertime. They saw an absolutely catastrophic flooding event once again. Bridgetown, in south Wexford, only a few miles away, saw devastation due to flooding. We have to examine our legislative priorities.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan is the Minister of State with responsibility for heritage but I am also aware that he comes from an area that has experienced flooding and that he understands the need and the importance of reprioritising between protected species and human beings.

I will conclude by applaud the work of Slaney Search and Rescue, a voluntary organisation that carried out rescues yet again in Enniscorthy. Currently, it does not have a designated premises. It is locked out of Government grant schemes owing to the nature of the work it does. We have to have change in this area so that the resources that the organisation needs can be provided in a timely manner.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Weather events are happening, whether as predicted by Met Éireann or not, and whether it is a named storm or not. They are not a once-in-a-lifetime event. Flooding is happening regularly, especially where I live.

Every time it starts raining heavily in Cavan, a family who live near me keep watch 24-7. Water starts encircling the steps of their house, front and back. There is no consolation from the Government for these people, who are living in a flood zone and cannot escape the weather

or the rising waters. There is a river at the back of their house. The farmer cannot clean out the river, where there is a build-up of silt, because he will be prosecuted if he did so.

The level of flooding we saw across the country during Storm Chandra was shocking. In counties Cavan and Monaghan, some of the roads were so badly affected that in some cases, they collapsed and in others, they were closed for days. It caused unbelievable chaos, particularly in Ballybay, County Monaghan and outside Cootehill, County Cavan.

People were upset by how the Government seemed to put the blame on everyone else instead of engaging in a bit of self-reflection. It was Met Éireann's fault for not updating people in time and it was the weather's fault for the heavy downpour. The reality is that flood forecasting has been available in this country for the past ten years but it has not been available to the public. Who can we blame for that? We have communities that are waiting decades for flood defences and protection measures to be built. Who can we blame for that? We have a tendency in this country to protect fish life over families. Who can we blame for that? The reality is we cannot blame the weather forecasters when the State has flood defence schemes that have been in the pipeline for a decade with no sign of planning or completion. Where does the responsibility lie for that?

In 2015, people in Midleton were promised flood protection. The Minister of State should know that. Over ten years later, a planning application has not been submitted.

Enniscorthy was totally underwater during the storm. There have been 12 floods there in 25 years and still there is no planning permission for flood defences in place. Why is that?

The Cavan flood relief scheme was introduced in 2018 and eight years later, there has been no action at all. There have been workshops, plans and surveys but nothing that will protect our roads, our homes and our businesses.

It is easy to blame the weather instead of focusing on solutions the Government can actually control. Can the Minister of State commit to much needed flood defence schemes and back delivery with a timeline and funding? If he cannot, is it not all just talk?

9 o'clock

Senator Joe Conway raised the issue of cleaning out gullies and local authorities. I support what Senator Cosgrove said. She is 100% right. Local authorities are totally underfunded. They actually get the work done. Local government is brilliant for getting jobs done, but it is totally underfunded. In 2021, Cavan County Council was getting €45,000 more for ordinary maintenance than it is this year. Monaghan County Council was getting €81,000 more. The maintenance budget has been cut.

Another thing I want to highlight is that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has not, that I know of, set foot in this Chamber. He has been in it three times, but I have yet to meet him. There are serious problems with roads and roads funding. There have been promises for the past six months about additional funding and it still has not come to light. It is not right, and we deserve to have that Minister in front of us. I call on him to come before us.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, to the House. The Minister, Deputy Browne, was also welcome to the House. I know Storm Chandra has

had a significant effect in the Minister's constituency. I raise an issue on which I called for a debate ahead of the most recent flooding. I have been looking for a debate on this issue for a long time because I believe the protocols need to be re-examined and I am glad that is happening. I do not believe the necessary joined-up thinking exists between Met Éireann, the local authorities, the emergency response group and Government in general. When an emergency happens, they all click into place and they do a good job, by and large. Given what we have experienced in recent years, that needs to be homed in on and fine-tuned. Clear and understandable protocols need to exist. As Members of the Oireachtas, we should be aware of those protocols because clearly we are leaders in our communities. When natural disasters like the most recent one happen, the people called in to comment and to act as liaisons and advocates for communities are Members of the Oireachtas and councillors. We need to be on top of these issues ahead of it happening, so we have a clear understanding of what happens and what is expected of us.

In scenarios like this everyone clubs together. I experienced that in a direct way on 4 January 2014 when Lahinch, County Clare, along with much of the coast of the west of Ireland was hammered with massive waves. The damage done to the streetscape, the promenade, homes and facilities along the west coast, particularly in Lahinch and other parts of County Clare, was immense. It was a time when there were not resources in the country in the way there are today, but they were found. I am glad to say that the end result in terms of the facilities now available in Lahinch in the context of the streetscape, promenade, sporting facilities and playgrounds and rock armouring is way ahead of what was there before 2014. There was €12 million spent on rock armouring at the time and between €8 million and €10 million was spent on the streetscape, promenade, railings and lifeguard facilities. Another €7 million or €8 million was spent between the playground and the leisure centre. It is wonderful now to see it, particularly last weekend with people using it on a nice, calm Sunday.

The point I will make is that coastal protection is not at the level it really needs to be at. We have been talking about river flooding and overtopping and so on. They are extremely important. The protocols and understanding of major incidents like these need to be understood, but the investment needs to happen. I absolutely support the flood relief scheme in Enniscorthy and in the other areas because I have seen the benefit in Ennis of the investment in recent years. It has really worked. There are many parts of our coastline that are vulnerable, and they need hundreds of millions of euro of investment. I believe we need to substantially increase investment in coastal protection. I am sure there are many projects in the Minister of State's constituency. We are an island nation, and we need to protect our coastal communities. They are an important tourism product. We do not have huge amounts of natural resources in this country, but the resources we have are our céad míle fáilte, our tourism industry, our beautiful landscape and so on. We need to protect it.

I thank the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Browne, for coming to the House this evening. It has been a difficult period. I know some local authorities are excellent and others are not so good. Some local authorities are well funded, and others could do with more funding. We need to synchronise all of that. We need to have a standard approach and ensure that resources are not an issue. To be fair to the Government, over the past week or two I think resources were made available when resources were needed. Caps were lifted and increased when that was necessary too. I again thank the Minister of State, and I suggest we resume a

further discussion on this, maybe in three months' time when the new processes and procedures are worked out.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank all of the Senators for their contributions today. I have listened carefully. The Minister, Deputy Browne, and I are no strangers to the impacts of flooding, especially the Minister in the past couple of weeks in his home town. He is living it. He knows the constituents there and he knows how they have been impacted. For me, in west Cork we have had many towns subject to repeated flooding. Thankfully most have their flood relief schemes in place, like my home town of Clonakilty, as well as Skibbereen and Bandon. As has been rightly pointed out here, we have seen the incredibly positive impact of a flood relief scheme that works. We need them. Enniscorthy needs a flood relief scheme. The Government, the local authorities and everybody that can deliver this needs to come together to deliver that. The Senators are right. In many instances the statutory processes take too long, the regulations can be too stringent, and it is causing delays. We need to deliver this as quickly as possible. While flood defence does not come within our Department, it is absolutely worth talking about.

At the same time, I am kind of getting sick of the finger being pointed at nature and biodiversity when it comes to delays with schemes. I have constantly heard the freshwater pearl mussel being alluded to and pointed out as a contributing factor for the Enniscorthy flood relief scheme not being delivered. The freshwater pearl mussel had absolutely nothing to do with the Enniscorthy flood relief scheme not being delivered. That is a fact. Neither did the NPWS have anything to do with it. I often see the finger being pointed at the National Parks and Wildlife Service and this Department. They were absolutely not a contributing factor in terms of the Enniscorthy flood relief scheme not being delivered. The local authority needs to put in a good quality and robust application that will withstand any of these policies or restraints. That needs to be where the focus is.

While I am talking about nature, I firmly believe that while we need flood defences in towns like Enniscorthy to protect homes, lives and people, we need to start looking at nature as a way to provide the solutions. We need to look upstream. We need to look in the upland areas. We need to see what is happening there. What I mean is that climate change is happening. We are having more rainfall and getting storms more frequently. We are getting higher levels of rainfall. That is absolutely a contributing factor and there is no doubt about that. However, something else has happened in recent decades that we need to have a mature conversation about, and that is land use. What is happening upstream? What is happening to the land upstream that we are seeing more frequent floods? It was mentioned that Enniscorthy has flooded 16 times since 2000. That is an alarming rate, and part of that is climate change but there is something happening with the land. We have become obsessed with trying to get water off the land as quickly as we can. We need to start rethinking that strategy. Obviously, if we get the water off the land as quickly as we can, the river becomes overwhelmed and towns like Enniscorthy flood.

That is a fact. That is basic physics. We need to see how we can go back to making sure land does what it was intended to do: absorb water, act as a sponge and slowly release water into rivers, streams and other water bodies so that downstream is not overwhelmed and we do not have these flooding events anymore.

I am hearing a lot about joined-up thinking, which we need. When it comes to the delivery of flood schemes, we need joined-up thinking and we need it fast. We also need joined-up thinking in terms of what is happening upstream. There is too much of this activity happening. We need to work with landowners and farmers and we need to work with foresters on a voluntary basis so that where appropriate, we can look again at how we use land upstream. Only then can we ensure that towns downstream are protected. I am more than willing to work with any other Department or agency, be it the OPW or the Department of agriculture, to ensure we come up with a scheme that is voluntary - not compulsory - whereby landowners are incentivised to keep back a bit of water on their land. A flood plain is called a flood plain for a reason so we need to ensure they act as flood plains to protect lives and protect properties, as has been the theme throughout the debate across the House, because they must come first.

I understand there is anger out there and there is certainly a need to do more when it comes to the response. As the Minister said, we learn from every event. The Department carried out a review following Storm Éowyn. As we do after each major severe weather event, we manage it through the NECG. We used this review to enhance our response mechanisms and our preparedness. We endeavour to improve our co-ordination based on previous experiences. The review highlighted the value of community support centres as a vital focal point in communities. We developed a guide to community support centres in conjunction with the local authority sector and have put processes in place to provide for a pool of generators and the necessary electrical work to ensure they can be used at pre-identified sites. This is a valuable example of learning from experiences. Going forward, these centres will provide not only warmth, community access to charging facilities and hot drinks and food, but they will become centres to provide vital updates and information regarding humanitarian schemes and a means to obtain psychosocial and other supports.

We took the opportunity of the review to also examine local authorities' severe weather and flood plans and advised on how to strengthen them. We will continue to work with local authorities and principal response agency colleagues in regularly reviewing and exercising these plans. The response to Storm Éowyn also demonstrated the invaluable contribution of the Civil Defence, Irish Red Cross, An Post, rural bus transport and voluntary and community groups. They were instrumental in making and keeping contact with those who were isolated, vulnerable and alone, those who could easily have been missed.

Both my colleague and I are extremely grateful for all of the work they do and much of it is unacknowledged. Our Department, through its NDFEM, continues to maintain and build on relationships with all of these organisations. They are now central to our response operations and sit at the table. Communication is something we have also improved and clear, concise messaging is now channelled directly through our colleagues in the Government Information Service, GIS. This ensures that we have, in effect, a one-stop shop where all pertinent information relating to an event can be found in one trusted place. We have also worked on ensuring that information around humanitarian schemes, assistance being provided by local authorities, community support centres and other assistance is made available to the public as quickly as possible, through the use of social media, the local press, websites and mapping systems.

Local authorities play a key role. My Department continues to support local authorities. Over the past ten years, the Department has provided over €120 million to local authorities to

support them with the unbudgeted expenditure associated with storm response activity. While operational issues are a matter for the local government sector, the NDFEM continues to work with local authority fire services to ensure policies and guidance in place support an increase in resilience of fire stations, regional communication centres, mobilising and alerting equipment and radio systems to ensure they are best placed to respond and assist in all emergencies, including those associated with severe weather.

In relation to Storm Chandra, as already outlined, there was a confluence of a number of different factors, resulting in a prolonged flooding event. Saturated land, combined with persistent heavy rain and wind of the storm, meeting a high astronomical tide, led to river flooding, coastal flooding, road and surface water flooding. The impacts of this were felt all along the east of the country, most acutely in south Dublin, Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford and Kilkenny. River levels were being monitored in the days before the arrival of Storm Chandra, with a Met Éireann technical briefing called on Monday 26 January and the NECG activated on 27 January to manage the unfolding flooding event.

Our local authorities were prepared, having crews in place and ready to deploy. They undertook pumping to protect homes and properties where possible, and pumped to relieve flooding also. Sandbags and other measures were deployed and they were on the ground through the entire event. The local authorities were assisted by Civil Defence, who evacuated homes, provided drone footage to support local authority activities, filled sandbags and called to those who had been cut off by flooded roads. They also provided transport for life critical hospital appointments and to hospital staff who were cut off. The Civil Defence support is integral to our response. The same can be said for other voluntary organisations we engage with, particularly the Irish Red Cross. Years of working in the severe weather space has ensured that the NDFEM has built relationships with other Departments, utility providers, principal response agencies, voluntary sector and other stakeholders. These relationships have ensured that issues are picked up early and solved quickly.

I have spoken about our preparedness and response. I also thank everyone who has been involved. However, despite our best efforts, communities have experienced flooding and people have experienced awful damage to their homes, impacts on their businesses and loss of income. I acknowledge all of this, and commit, on behalf of the Minister and myself, that our Department will continue to strive to improve our response, continue to learn from past events and incorporate those learnings into our response plans going forward and that we will continue to support local authorities in their preparation and response to severe weather events, including flooding.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Minister of State.

When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator P. J. Murphy: Tomorrow morning, at 10.30 a.m.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 9.16 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 11 Feabhra 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 9.16 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 11 February 2026.

