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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 15 Aibreán 2026

Wednesday, 15 April 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.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 on the commencement of Seanad Éireann today:

Senator Seán Kyne - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the provision of a family resource centre for the Clifden and the north Connemara area of Galway.

Senator Malcolm Noonan - The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on establishing a network of one-stop shops in every local authority to encourage development of vacant and derelict properties.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to make a statement on liquefied natural gas projects, in particular the Shannon Estuary project.

Senator Pauline Tully - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the procedure for obtaining ankle-foot orthosis braces for children with cerebral palsy in County Cavan.

Senator Tom Clonan - The need for the Minister for Social Protection to make a statement on the impact on payment of disability allowance and invalidity pension to recipients who are availing of certain courses with the Tipperary Education and Training Board.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Kyne, Noonan, Kennelly and Tully and they will be taken now. Senator Tom Clonan may give notice on another day of the matter that he wishes to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Family Resource Centres

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Frankie Feighan, to the House. Anois, tosóidh muid leis an Seanadóir Seán Kyne. Tá ceithre nóiméad aige.

Senator Seán Kyne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. Tá mé buíoch as an deis seo a fháil inniu sa Seanad. Tá fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Feighan. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is welcome to the Chamber today to discuss the issues of family resource centres and the need for one in Clifden and the north Connemara area. The Minister of State will be familiar with Galway and Connemara. It is a large area, geographically sparse with pockets of population in many different, remote areas of the community centred around the service town of Clifden. Family resource centres are hugely important in terms of their interventions and working with the disadvantaged and those in need. Oughterard presently serves the Connemara area. However, looking at the map of the country where there are 121 family resource centres, I believe there is a gap in the north Connemara-Clifden area for a dedicated family resource centre. This would provide family support and well-being services including one-to-one support parenting programmes, low-cost counselling and youth supports such as after-school programmes, holiday activities and targeted support for young people at risk. It would provide community development initiatives including groups for older people, carers and new communities. It would also offer practical supports such as information and advocacy to help people to become more sustainable and responsive to local needs. I believe a dedicated centre would be a perfect fit for Clifden providing a non-stigmatising walk-in hub where people could access support early, before issues escalate.

The Clifden-north Connemara area has some unique challenges in terms of precarious work linked to the hospitality and tourism area, which is impacted during the winter period. There are traditional industries such as farming and fishing which have their own challenges. There are some 523 households in council houses across Connemara, alongside sheltered and housing for older people and mental health service users. There are also 500 people on the live register including a growing number of those under the age of 25. Again, that may be linked to precarious employment. I believe this would be a perfect fit for a family resource centre to engage with the services and complement the services presently in Oughterard. What I am looking for is advice in terms of how we could progress this. What engagement is needed? What would be the pathway to developing a family resource centre in the area? Obviously, it is linked to budget but there also are practicalities in respect of the capital and current budget which would be important, as well as the know-how on how these issues are decided. What criteria are in place to decide where a new family resource centre would be established? What advice can the Minister of State's Department give in relation to establishing a family resource centre for the Clifden and north Connemara area?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Senator Kyne for raising this important issue and giving me the opportunity to respond. In regard to family resource centres, I started my political career about 26 years ago through our family life centres. It was part of the outreach services of the family resource centres. The service they provide in every town, village and major city around the country is exceptional. Many times people came to my office with issues. We have certain skills but for the skills that I do not have it was reassuring to ring the family resource centre and put them in touch. They were professional

and confidential every time. I know the work they did and I thank them for the great service they give.

Commissioning a new family resource centre is an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which is responsible for day-to-day administration of the family resource centre programme. Neither the Minister nor the Department have any involvement in the assessment process for new members of the family resource centre programme or selecting the new members. The Senator rightly said that Connemara has a huge geographical spread and there is a gap there. I will take that back to the Minister.

There is a programme of Government commitment to work to increase funding and expand the capacity and network of family resource centres in budget 2026. This commitment will be honoured with funding secured for a further ten family resource centres. This has brought the family resource centre programme membership up to 126 members in 2026. It follows an increase in the membership of the programme in 2025 by five members. A comprehensive national application assessment process was undertaken in 2025 which was led by Tusla and independently chaired by a representative of the University of Limerick. A total of 49 organisations applied for membership of the family resource centre programme, following an open call from Tusla for applications.

This indicates again, as the Senator said, the strong level of interest in communities across the country in having family resource centres as part of their community infrastructure. Regrettably, funding only allowed for 15 new members to be selected, leaving 34 applications unsuccessful. I thank those organisations for their interest in joining the programme and for the important work they continue to do in their communities.

The benefits of community-based services such as family resource centres cannot be overstated and many of us will have witnessed at first hand the impacts family resource centres have on the communities they serve. They engage with vulnerable families, offer services to individuals across the whole life cycle from early years to senior citizens and, crucially, foster a positive and inclusive community spirit. The range of services they provide can be extensive as determined by the needs of the relevant communities. It is particularly important to note, and I think the Senator would agree, that many services are delivered at no cost or at low cost to families who otherwise might not be able to access them.

Also, by availing of funding schemes operated by other Government Departments and agencies, there is great potential for family resource centres to grow their scope and reach and further embed themselves in their communities. I understand there is currently no additional funding available to further expand the family resource centre programme in 2026. The Minister has previously indicated that she intends to continue to pursue the expansion of the FRC programme through the budgetary process and in line with the programme for Government commitment.

I will bring the Senator's concerns back to the Minister. He certainly has outlined with great coherence the fact that this geographically widespread area needs another family resource centre to fill the gap there.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State on behalf of the Department of children for that comprehensive response and the important role Tusla has in evaluating and adjudicating

on applications for new family resource centres. I welcome the fact that the Minister intends to pursue additional family resource centres in line with the programme for Government commitment. I will engage with Tusla following this to see what the local community in Clifden and north Connemara can do in advocating and pushing for a family resource centre.

The Minister of State quite rightly spoke of the benefits and importance in his own role, as all public representatives have, in engaging with family resource centres on behalf of vulnerable families who come across his office or clinic. I will certainly engage with Tusla and see if we can progress this issue for the benefit of the people in Clifden and north Connemara.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Once again, I thank the Senator for raising this very important issue. It is reassuring that the past two budgets have allowed for 50 new family resource centres to be established. We always want more and I think we need to do more. All those invested in seeing supports put in place for communities most in need should see these recent developments in the family resource centre programme as very good news.

The funding and expansion of services that assist people living in areas of disadvantage remain a priority for the Minister, for the Government and for all the services as well. Again, we need to work to increase funding and to expand the capacity and network of family resource centres. The Minister has signalled her intention to continue to pursue the development of the family resource centre programme over the lifetime of the Government and in recognition of the very important work these centres do in their communities. Organisations considering applying for future programme membership under an open call would be well served by examining the criteria associated with the 2025 open call, which would give them a sense of the type of preparation that is required to give an application the best possible chance at assessment stage.

I thank the Senator again for his contribution.

Vacant Properties

Senator Malcolm Noonan: We spoke here before during the introduction of our vacancy and dereliction Bill, and thankfully, some of the measures - quite a lot of the measures - outlined in our cross-party Bill have been adopted. I welcome the introduction of the grant schemes in the Department for living above the shop. It is something I feel very strongly about as I travel around the country and see the potential and the lights off in so many above-shop premises in our villages, towns and cities.

This grant scheme also adds to a suite of measures and supports for the renovation and restoration of older and historic buildings in our villages, towns and city centres. There is no doubt in my mind that these measures should have been embedded from the start in housing policy. They should have been core to it, we should have been looking to see what we have and do all in our power to prevent urban sprawl and the loss of good farming land out in the peripheries and into the countryside.

The Government put a timed delay on our cross-party group vacancy and dereliction Bill and a similar Bill, which had been brought forward by the Green Party when we were in

government, but I appreciate many of these measures have been introduced and it is very welcome to see that happen. We do not care who brings them in; I said that to the Minister of State the day we were here. They are an essential component that is missing to help animate and scale-up the restoration and renovation of these incredible buildings.

A measure that is one of the missing pieces of the jigsaw has been sought for many years by the Irish Green Building Council and the Vacant to Vibrant Building Alliance, which I think the Minister of State might have met, as well as by the architect and conservation profession more generally, namely, the establishment of a one-stop shop in every local authority to help project developers navigate their way through the legislative planning, regulatory and incentive matrix. This would ensure our councils become an enabling force to get these wonderful built heritage elements back into to productive use, to get families back living in our town centres and to help uplift those towns commercially and socially.

Since the establishment of the town centre first principles in 2021, which was based on a Scottish initiative, a suite of new roles has come into our local government system, such as architectural conservation officers, town centre first officers and vacancy officers. However, project proposers often find it tricky, to say the least, to navigate the system and there are varying interpretations from county to county regarding fire and access regulations, sometimes at the behest of the fire officer. Sometimes they have different interpretations of what can and cannot be done to a building. By establishing a network of one-stop-shops across the local government system, we can overcome and develop a consistency of approach and application, share best practice and, importantly, move these projects along.

There is also concern within the sector more widely that there is a shortage of relevant conservation skills, such as joinery, masonry and glazing, but also conservation architects. I am concerned that we may lose vernacular features on older buildings and building fabric that could be saved and, in the case of older shops and buildings, the loss of features such as shopfronts, sash windows, guttering and other features that are intrinsic to Irish town centres. The good grant schemes in the Minister of State's Department like the historic structures fund and built heritage investment schemes help in that regard. There is also a technical guidance document for restoration which was developed by the national built heritage service, which is most welcome.

I ask the Minister of State to give consideration to engaging with the CCMA, LGMA, local authority members and the Heritage Council to see if it is possible for us to establish these one-stop shops. As I said, we have a wide array of supports there and funding mechanisms are now in place but the missing piece of the jigsaw is the establishment of one-stop shops in our local authorities.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Senator for raising this important matter and giving me an opportunity to update the House. I assure the Senator that the Government absolutely recognises the importance of tackling vacancy and dereliction and we continue to be committed to addressing these issues through a range of measures and with the support of all key stakeholders, including our local authorities.

In particular, the Government has invested in the provision of dedicated vacant homes officers and town regeneration officers, working with local authorities specifically on vacancy

and dereliction-related issues locally. These staff operate in conjunction with wider local authority teams that place an emphasis on town regeneration and bringing under-utilised buildings back into use. Networking and best practice initiatives for these staff and teams are provided by my Department and the national town centre first office to support more effective service provision at a local level for citizens.

These local authority staff are key to enabling the public to access a wide range of funding streams now available in tackling vacancy and dereliction, such as the vacant property refurbishment grant, which provides up to €50,000 for the refurbishment of vacant properties for use as homes and up to €70,000 where the property is derelict.

This scheme has recently been expanded with a new vacant above-the-shop grant of up to €135,000 to support the bringing of above-the-shop vacant spaces into residential units where a commercial element is remaining at ground-floor level. An expert advice grant of up to €5,000 is also now available towards professional advice on the conversion of such former commercial floor spaces into residential units. That element - the €5,000 grant - speaks a lot to what the Senator has raised in regard to having the expert advice to ensure we are being delicate with these buildings in bringing them back into productive use. As the Senator rightly pointed out, we have a resource difficulty in expertise, and the thought within the Department is that this grant allows the person who is doing it the flexibility to be able to get that advice on board as they need it.

Support is also being provided through call 3 of the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, which consists of a €150 million revolving fund for our local authorities to acquire vacant or derelict properties and sites for reuse or sale. The fund is replenished from the proceeds received from the sale or reuse of properties, allowing a rolling fund for local authorities to tackle vacancy and dereliction.

We also have a compulsory purchase order, CPO, activation programme, which was launched by my Department in April 2023. This programme supports a proactive and systematic approach by local authorities to the reuse of vacant and derelict properties. It also includes guidance for local authorities to actively use their legislative powers, including under the Derelict Sites Act, to acquire vacant and derelict properties and to use CPO powers where engagement with the owners has been unsuccessful. Some local authorities are doing this to great effect, while other local authorities certainly need to step up their game in this space. That is one of the areas I focus on when I visit local authorities across the country.

There are obviously a few other elements such as the town centre first heritage revival scheme, THRIVE, and the commercial-to-residential exemption from planning, which I extended before Christmas up to the end of 2028. The latest data on that indicate that 3,500 homes up to the end of 2024 have been created with that exemption in place. I am bringing forward further exemptions from planning, all with the goal of streamlining our planning system and removing red tape from it so as to be able to free up planning resources within our local authorities.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I thank him for his comprehensive answer. I appreciate the conservation advice grants. They are very useful but they are very limited to the conservation element of it. That is why I think the one-stop shop, which involves having the interdisciplinary skills within the local authorities, is a really

progressive approach. I again ask the Minister of State's Department to perhaps give it consideration. This is about heritage-led regeneration and I know the Department is now working to review and broaden the definition of dereliction. It is really important to get that right as well because we see many property owners making small interventions and then trying to not have properties classified as derelict.

Within the above-the-shop scheme, the idea of removing the element of commercial on the ground floor should be given consideration, given the flux that retail is in currently across the country, to allow premises and particularly small businesses to return those buildings to full occupancy. It has to be given consideration, given the state of retail in the country at the minute. Again, I ask the Minister of State to give consideration to the one-stop shop idea.

Deputy John Cummins: There are obviously pros and cons to what the Senator is suggesting in respect of removing commercial at ground-floor level. The commercial-to-residential exemption from planning does provide for that but the vacant above-the-shop grant does exactly that by providing for residential units above a commercial unit.

Senator Malcolm Noonan: Sure.

Deputy John Cummins: That is what we are supporting from a Government perspective. We want the ground-floor retail to remain while utilising that underutilised space above the shop. It is a very significant intervention by the Government to provide up to €135,000 in grant support. There are obviously other schemes, like the repair and lease scheme, that have been used to good effect in areas, particularly in my own city and county of Waterford. The Senator mentioned the derelict property tax, which is progressing with the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Simon Harris. That is a particular focus for us because we now have many carrots across a whole suite of measures. I have said before in this House and the Dáil Chamber that my message is very clear to anybody who is sitting on vacant and derelict properties at a time of such housing need out there: it is simply unacceptable, and if you are not going to use the measures that have been introduced by the Government, then the stick is coming with the derelict property tax.

Energy Infrastructure

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to the floor this morning. We are living through an energy emergency not in theory but in reality, and the State knows it. Two years ago, the Government ran Exercise Cathal, a national simulation to test how Ireland would respond to major disruption in our gas supply. That exercise was not academic; there was a clear acknowledgment that the risk is real, that the consequences would be catastrophic for Ireland and that the Government knows lives and livelihoods will be lost. Ireland is dangerously exposed. The State has understood these risks for years. It knows the economic and societal impact of a future supply failure yet despite that knowledge, we continue to rely on a single point of gas supply. We still have no meaningful storage and we remain as vulnerable today as we were before these risks were ever formally identified. There is talk about a Gas Networks Ireland, GNI, liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal but that is years away. That is just too long.

Since the war in Iran started on 28 February, just over six weeks ago, we have seen the cost of fuel and energy costs spiral out of everyone's reach. This is the most serious energy crisis we have faced since the 1970s. Energy costs remain too high for households and businesses alike and our energy security is completely fragile. At a time when decisive action is needed, what we see instead is complete delay. I will come to one specific delay. There is one project in this country that is capable of addressing both security and cost: the Shannon LNG terminal. This is not a speculative or early-stage proposal; it is the most advanced LNG project in Ireland. It has been in the planning system since 2021. It was refused but that refusal was based solely on Government policy - the so-called fracked gas policy, which has since been removed. That project went through the courts and succeeded. All judicial reviews are now complete. The legal position is very clear, the policy landscape has changed and every obstacle that was previously cited has now been addressed, but still no decision has been made.

The project has spent many years in the planning system, years that we simply do not have right now in the context of an energy emergency. What makes Shannon LNG so important right now is not just that it enhances security of supply but also that it can be delivered quickly and without cost to the taxpayer, which is what we all want. As a commercial terminal, it introduces competition into the Irish gas market. It is competition - not a monopoly, which is feared. It will lower prices, and that is one of the key points.

While the Government proposes the strategic gas emergency reserve, we must be honest about what that is. It is a State-led, non-commercial facility intended for use in emergencies only. It will require significant public subsidy. It is years away from delivery and it will not reduce energy prices for consumers. The strategic gas emergency reserve has a role and it can follow but it is not a substitute for the Shannon LNG project. The two are not in conflict and they are not complementary. One provides emergency backup and the other provides day-to-day competition, price reduction and security of supply.

11 o'clock

Right now, however, we have neither. We are years away from the strategic gas emergency reserve and the one project that is shovel-ready to proceed, the one that is capable of delivering immediate benefits, remains stuck in limbo. The State has known the risks, tested the consequences and acknowledged a vulnerability but it has not acted. This is no longer a question of policy or law. Those issues have been resolved. It is now a question of the decision. How long must this process continue? I represent the people in this regard. I am conscious of the economic consequences for north Kerry. I am asking how long we must delay critical infrastructure while families and businesses continue to bear the cost of inaction. How long can we justify remaining dependent on a single supply route when the risks are so clearly understood? The time for analysis and delay is over. I call on An Coimisiún Pleanála to issue its decision on Shannon LNG without further delay and to bring clarity to a process that has gone on for far too long. This is critical national infrastructure. It is urgently needed and ready to proceed, and it must now be allowed to move forward.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Senator for raising this serious and indeed topical issue in the current climate. We are effectively in the middle of world war three and energy supplies and many other issues are coming to the forefront which we must deal with as a Government, not just in Ireland but across Europe and across the world.

In March 2025, the Government approved the development of a State-led strategic gas emergency reserve, SGER, in the form of a floating storage and regassification unit, FSRU. The delivery of a gas reserve is critical to Ireland's energy security as we continue to transition to indigenous, clean renewable energy, and will also ensure compliance with EU standards and regulations. The Government position on the need for a State-operated strategic gas emergency reserve, in the form of a floating storage and regassification unit that will store liquified natural gas, LNG, has been very clear. The strategic gas emergency reserve is a priority project of a strategic nature required to mitigate the major consequences for our society and our economy that would arise if Ireland was to experience an interruption to our gas supplies via subsea interconnection. It is not intended for commercial use. The LNG will be held in reserve at the appropriate scale to maintain supplies for the duration of the disruption.

In identifying this as the optimal approach, the Department built upon the extensive review of security of Ireland's gas and electricity systems which was approved by Government in the Energy Security in Ireland to 2030 plan in November 2023. The SGER will be owned and operated on behalf of the State by the transmission system operator, Gas Networks Ireland, GNI. Having assessed a range of options, the FRSU was recommended by GNI to meet the Government's criteria and requirements to quickly develop a strategic and emergency gas reserve aligned with the Climate Act. The SGER will not increase gas demand and will be divested when no longer required, thereby avoiding the risk of fossil fuel lock-in or stranded fossil fuel assets. A policy, legislative, regulatory and operating framework for the SGER is now being progressed to give effect to the Government decision and direction. Any application for an alternative commercial LNG facility will be subject to the statutory planning, consenting and regulatory approvals by relevant bodies, and the appropriate provisions of the relevant legislation will apply.

The request for comment on LNG projects, and Shannon in particular, refers to a private project. This project is currently the subject of an active application for consideration before An Coimisiún Pleanála. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for the Minister to comment at this time.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. We are in the depths of despair in relation to our energy and fuel costs right now. We have a planning project that is shovel-ready. It is at no cost to the Exchequer and will bring about a reduction in the price of fuel and energy costs to the people of this country. It has been going on. Basically what we are looking for here is a regular update on where it is. It has been going on for far too long in my area. It needs to be prioritised today. We need regular feedback on its progress to secure our energy needs for this country in a time of crisis. There is no justification for stalling this project. Everyone knows the cost of everything right now. We are in the midst of world war three, possibly. Let us avoid any further headaches in relation to the costs spiralling for everybody in this country. If we do not have emergency back-up of our fuel energy supply, it will get out of proportion altogether. I am asking for the Department just to check up on this and see where it is at, and to secure it. Let us get it over the line. It is a three-year construction job, not three months. The Germans have brought in 12 LNG terminals to secure their energy future. We cannot bring in one. It is very disappointing. I am calling for this to be prioritised with the Department and for it to be taken up the line to secure this for the future.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Senator Kennelly for raising this very important issue. The Government position on the need for a State-operated strategic gas reserve in the form of floating storage and a regassification unit that will store liquified natural gas has been very clear. The strategic gas emergency reserve is a priority project of a strategic nature, required to mitigate the major consequences for our society and our economy that would arise if Ireland was to experience an interruption to our gas supplies via the subsea interconnection. As I said, it is not intended for commercial use. As the planning application for the Shannon LNG project currently with An Coimisiún Pleanála is a private project, the Minister for climate and the Department have no function. However, there are difficult, choppy waters ahead. The Government must have cool heads and we must all try to work together to navigate this very important issue and many other important issues we will face in the future. I thank the Senator again.

Health Services

Senator Pauline Tully: I want to raise the issue of obtaining an ankle-foot orthosis, AFO, brace for a child with cerebral palsy in Cavan. I was contacted by the mother of a four-year-old child who has cerebral palsy. Children grow very fast and muscle grows faster than bone. These braces become too tight and non-workable as a child grows, so they have to be replaced on a regular basis. The mother realised that she was outgrowing the brace last November so she contacted her CDNT and informed them of this. They referred the child for new braces to Ottobock, a company based in Cappagh Hospital that has an outreach clinic in Cavan. That referral was made in November. In January, she received correspondence that there was an appointment on 13 February, so already we have a two-and-a-half-month wait for this appointment. When the child attended the appointment, she met a very experienced person who measured her for the brace, and said if she could order it directly she would have it within a week. However, it could not be ordered directly because there is a requirement to get a purchase order from the HSE to cover the cost of the brace. She applied for the purchase order that day. It was granted last week, into the middle of April. We have a two-month delay in getting the purchase order. In the meantime, the child has outgrown the brace completely and can no longer wear it. She is trying to walk as best she can without the brace. Her mother and father have seen regression in her legs. Her physiotherapist has seen regression in her muscles and in her legs as well. Due to this delay, the child is suffering this regression. When the purchase order was granted and they contacted the mother, they wanted to order the brace straight away but the mother pointed out that two months had passed and the child had grown again since then. The brace may not fit so she needs another appointment. She has an appointment for this Friday to have the brace remeasured but they have informed her it could take three weeks after that before the brace is delivered. They are made here in Ireland but it will still take about three weeks. The mother is really worried. She has seen the regression in the child. She said that her daughter may now need to go for serial casting, although hopefully she will not. That would mean that she would have to go to Cappagh, get a cast on her leg, and go back the following week to get the cast off and see how much the leg has moved back into the correct position, and get another cast put on.

It is a procedure that would have been totally avoidable had the brace been ordered on time and given to the little girl to allow her to walk.

Now you might say that maybe this is just a once-off, but it is not because the mother had to wait three months last year for the same thing. This is the second time it has happened so it is likely happening to other children as well. I therefore want to highlight this. I ask for a much better procedure in having leg braces replaced. A mother should not have to wait months for an initial appointment, first of all. Okay, this mother allows time for that because when she realised that the child was growing out of the brace she notified the CDNT straight away to ensure that a new brace could be ordered, but there is no excuse for the two-month delay on a purchase order for something the child will need on an ongoing basis. When the mother tried to follow up on this to see who was responsible for this delay, she could not get an answer. She contacted Cavan General Hospital because she was told it was a matter for the paediatric department there. Everyone she talked to said, "No, it is not me, but I will try to find out who it is." She was passed from pillar to post, and it is not good enough, so I want to know what can be done about this situation.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Senator Tully for raising this very important issue. I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of my colleague the Minister for Health. I thank the Senator for the opportunity to address the House on this matter. As she has outlined, it is simply not good enough that somebody has to wait two months, going back and forward and back. Somebody should be able to make a decision there, so I thank her for highlighting this. I will bring it back to the Minister immediately.

I will outline in general terms the current position on the provision of aids and appliances. The HSE provides a wide range of aids and appliances free of charge to eligible people following assessment by a relevant health professional. These are provided through community services known as community-funded schemes and play a key role in assisting and supporting people to maintain everyday functioning and to remain living in their homes and local communities. A national list, including prescribing criteria, can be found on the HSE website.

Separately, under the long-term illness scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness free of charge. Under the drugs payment scheme, no individual pays more than €80 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines and medical appliances. The DPS, as the Senator knows, is not means tested and is available to anyone ordinarily resident in Ireland. The DPS significantly reduces the cost burden for individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

I turn to the specific issue raised by the Senator this morning. Officials from the Department have reached out to the HSE directly on this issue, and the latter is engaging with relevant personnel at a local level. As this matter is particular to the provision of specific service in a local area, it is a matter the HSE will need to investigate in further detail at local level. To that end, I invite Senator Tully to share any further detailed information regarding this case, if available, in order that Department officials can liaise with HSE colleagues to further investigate the matter.

Again, I thank the Senator for raising this issue and thank her in advance for any additional information she can share. Officials in the Department of Health will continue to engage with HSE officials on this matter and will be happy to provide the Senator with a further update should additional relevant information become available. There are people out there who are

paid good money to deliver a service. For a parent or a child to have to wait two months and then, by the time they get the aid, for the child to have outgrown it is simply not good enough. I know the Minister will act with her officials to try to resolve this issue immediately. I thank the Senator for coming into the Seanad to raise it. She should not have to do so; it should have been sorted out on the ground and it was not.

Senator Pauline Tully: I thank the Minister of State. I will certainly share the details with the Minister. I presume the Minister of State is talking about the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The little girl's mother did reach out to the Minister for Health on this issue and did not receive a response. She reached out to primary care and she reached out to the hospital. She contacted everybody and was, as I said, sent around from one person to the other, and nobody knew or would take responsibility for what had happened. She does not know if this was just a slip-up by one person who missed something on their desk and did not sign off on it or whether there is a backlog in how the procedure operates, so she does not know if she is the only one. However, the fact that she had to wait three months last year as well indicates that the system is not working properly in the interest of the child or of any children. She therefore wants this highlighted. Obviously, she wants the brace for her own child as quickly as possible, but she made the point to me as well that there is no screening at birth for cerebral palsy. Her child has turned four. While she and her husband realised there were issues or there was something wrong, she did not get a diagnosis until her daughter was two. If the child had been screened at birth, this could have been picked up faster and supports put in place faster because, as she said, as soon as she was referred to someone to be diagnosed, they could immediately tell that there were issues and it was most likely cerebral palsy. It is a matter of even just having screening or a scan at birth for this condition as well.

I will send on the details but I hope I will receive a prompt reply from the Minister's office on this.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Shane Curley): Just before we get the Minister of State back in, I want to welcome guests of Deputy Cormac Devlin, students from Loreto Primary School, Dalkey, who are in the Gallery. You are all very welcome. Tá fáilte romhaibh.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Again, I thank Senator Tully for raising this and the attention she has given to this important matter. As noted previously, given the particular nature of the matter at hand, it is necessary for the HSE to investigate this in further detail. If the Senator wants, I will raise it with the Minister, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. I will also raise it with her myself this evening when I meet her. If the Senator wants to send that information on to me as well, we will make sure that this gets dealt with as quickly as possible.

Again, I thank the Senator for raising this issue. If there are any blockages in the area, they need to be sorted out sooner rather than later.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.17 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.33 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.17 a.m. and resumed at 11.33 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Cathaoirleach: Before I ask the Leader to outline the Order of Business, I welcome interns of Deputy Cormac Devlin to the Gallery; Conor Eyre, Sam Casey, Paddy English, Eoin Fallon and John McCann.

Senator Seán Kyne: The Order of Business is No. 1, Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025 - Second Stage, to be taken at 1 p.m. and to conclude at 2.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; No. 2, Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2024 - Second Stage to be taken at 2.30 p.m. and to conclude at 4 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; No. 3, statements on homelessness to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude at 6.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed four minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 55, motion 2, Private Members' Business, motion regarding investment in youth work, to be taken at 6.30 p.m. with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I congratulate the new Hungarian Prime Minister and I welcome the results at the weekend. It is very clear that the people of Hungary decided to choose liberal democracy and a pro-European party. This election really mattered. It was probably the most important election in Europe in 2026. It solidifies the European response to Russia and to Putin and is a very clear rejection of Viktor Orbán. I pass every good wish to the new Prime Minister, Péter Magyar, and the Tisza Party.

I ask for a debate with the Minister for education. I am concerned about increasing financial pressures being placed on families across the country specifically in relation to rising school transport costs and the reintroduction of State examination fees. A parent contacted me the week before Easter about these fees which were brought back in. I accept they were stopped for a period but were brought back in about three days before the oral examinations started. Students were told if they could not pay, they could still do the orals but they would not get the results until the fees were paid. I am concerned about that. We have to ask whether any of these increasing costs are fair and sustainable. Are they in keeping with our commitment to equality of opportunity? At a time of a growing cost of living when households are grappling with rising rent, higher grocery bills and increased energy costs, the reintroduction of these costs is not insignificant. I would appreciate if the Minister could come for a debate on it.

The night before last, I watched the playback of Kathryn Thomas's documentary, "Young Forever: The Death of Ageing?". It was really interesting and there were also some interesting articles in the *Irish Independent*. It has brought renewed attention to a growing and concerning issue; the rise in cosmetic procedures in children under the age of 18. Obviously, we are living

in a world of treatments, plastic surgery, supplements, etc., and adults can make their own choices. I make no judgment on that as long as people make sure they go to the right person for these types of surgeries. Unfortunately, there are too many unregulated operators in the market. It was very concerning to listen to a young man who said he started getting these treatments at 16. He literally became addicted to it and was spending €1,400 a month on different types of plastic surgery. The problem is that there is no regulation. I would like a debate with the Minister for Health on how we can regulate these products better. It is a concern when social media is driving image so much. We can all fall under the spell of that.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: If there is one learning, to use the modern jargon, we can take from the internationally caused fuel crisis in the country and the recent protests, it is the need to augment and develop public transport in this country. Before I go further, I acknowledge that we are very lucky in Cavan with the hourly service on the N3 to Dublin, which is excellent, and Local Link does good work, but there is much more need for connectivity in public transport. I give the practical example of Carton Brothers' Manor Farm, a poultry processing place in Shercock, County Cavan. It is an example that repeats everywhere in the country. It has two shifts a day starting at particular times with a large cohort of workers coming from the various centres around. There needs to be public transport into that place to coincide with the beginning of these shifts. The same applies to all the major employers in the country.

In light of what has happened in the last few weeks, there is a real need to review the level of availability of public transport, and to look at the linkages between towns and major centres of education and employment. If people sat down and did good logistical studies on it, it could be done. Great strides were made on public transport during the period of the previous Government and this needs to be further developed and continued. I would like us to debate this on some occasion as soon the Leader is able to accommodate it. In the interim, he might convey to the Ministers that this should be the great learning from the recent problem.

We need Local Link services augmented.

We need rail connectivity and, sadly, we do not have in my region. We need more bus services for towns and villages and serving hospitals and other healthcare establishments, education establishments and workplaces. Apart from global warming or the environmental element of carbon emissions, it is an issue of efficiency and cost as regards fuel. This is a logical thing to do. We have to go at this with gusto. Let us do so now. With God's help, there may be a settlement in the coming days in Lebanon and Iran. Even with a settlement, however, who knows when the next situation will erupt, so it is critical that we do this. I expect and hope for a positive response because this could be a game changer.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Craughwell.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Senator Clonan is next.

An Cathaoirleach: To be clear, the Senator who comes in first gets called first.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Yesterday, I spoke about the protests and blockades that occurred over the last couple of weeks. Both the Iranians and the United States are locking

down the Strait of Hormuz. We may as well prepare today. Fuel prices will spiral in the coming weeks and months. We cannot allow a situation to develop again whereby local gardaí are pitted against their fellow citizens and local members of the Defence Forces are called out. That was erroneous in the first instance. What we really need to do now is to prepare.

We have been asking for the national security strategy for years. It is always a couple of days away or it will come out the following week. It is a bit like Donald Trump's alternative to Obamacare in the United States, which we hear will come out next week or the week after or maybe they are working on the last paragraph. It is simply not good enough. We need the national security strategy urgently. That is the first thing we need.

Second, we are about to head into a period of extreme industrial unrest. The teachers' conferences are just over and demands have been made for higher pay, better facilities in schools, etc. The Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, met at the weekend, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, will meet soon and the Garda representative body is meeting this week. We are heading into a time of industrial unrest. Let us not do what we did with respect to the protests on fuel, which we allowed to go on. When I say "we" I mean the Government and all of us in this House who sat on our hands while they were going on because the Houses were in recess. We should have recalled the Dáil and taken steps in the first days. We should have met people on the ground and engaged with them.

There is only a limited amount of tax revenue coming in to this country. We will not be able to buy our way out of this as the situation escalates, and escalate it will over the coming months unless, by some miracle, Donald Trump and the Iranians decide they never meant to go to war and let the ships move through Hormuz again. I ask that we invite the Minister for Finance to the House to debate the future problems associated with energy crisis.

We also need to publish today what a protest is and what is acceptable in a protest. The right to protest is guaranteed under the Constitution but it is limited and subject to restrictions. A protest that impacts the general population is simply not a protest – it is an illegal act. Locking down O'Connell Street or fuel depots so that nothing can move is an act of illegality. The people who were there thought they were behaving legally because nobody was giving them alternative information. They were taking their information from a hard right group. Let us be honest. These people did not care. We saw on social media stuff coming in from the United Kingdom. Let us publish what a reasonable protest is.

Senator Pauline Tully: I was recently contacted by a parent who has twins. They are both autistic and will be starting school in September in the local primary school where they will be part of its autism class. The ratio in the class is one special education teacher to six children, with two special needs assistants, SNAs, in support. Both parents work and they requested that their children be included in the after-school facility nearby which takes children in from the school in question. The after-school facility is willing to take the children in but it is very concerned because it is not sure the facility has sufficient supports to look after these children properly. The ratio in after-school education is one to 12. There are no additional supports for children with additional needs. When children go to preschool, access and inclusion model, AIM, support is provided. When children go to school there is SNA support or if they are in a special class, there is a special education teacher and a reduced ratio, but there is no support in the after-school facilities.

I contacted a number of providers in this area, all of which said the same thing, namely, they want to include more children with additional needs but they are not in a position to do so. To refuse is discrimination but, at the same time, the providers have to ensure the safety of the students who are using the facility, the students with additional needs and the staff. There is also very little training for staff in these centres.

I want to raise and highlight this matter with the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, because it is a form of discrimination. I ask that we invite the Minister to come to the House to discuss additional supports in after-school facilities for children with additional needs. We know the prevalence of autism in particular is increasing. We will have more and more children who require support after school. Both parents have to work these days because of cost-of-living pressures. I would appreciate it if we could have that debate.

Some weeks ago, I requested that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, come to the Chamber to discuss the roads funding allocation for County Cavan. Has there been any follow-up on that? Has the Minister agreed to come to the House for a debate on the state of our roads?

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome from the banner county, County Clare, guests of Deputy Cathal Crowe from Scarriff National School. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. It is hard to distinguish between the teachers and the pupils but I will tell the pupils there is no homework for the rest of the week when pupils visit Seanad Éireann. They can tell their teachers and parents that.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I call for a debate on Traveller accommodation. Labre Park is the oldest halting site in Ireland. Since the age of 18, I have been working on the redevelopment of Labre Park. Two years ago, we got a playground for the children. It has been wonderful for all the children on the site. It is very unfortunate that the redevelopment of Labre Park is no longer going ahead. The residents of the site are devastated. With all my heart, I say that really wonderful people came from Labre Park, people like the Keenans and other good, famous people. I know there is some negative behaviour and I want to be able to deal with that as well.

The story is all over *The Irish Times* today. We were given a commitment by Dublin City Council 20 years ago. We did the Part VIII process. We negotiated with Clúid and Dublin City Council. Everything was going ahead but in the last few days, residents in Labre Park got the devastating news that the redevelopment will no longer go ahead. It is not just about Labre Park. I want a debate in the House on Traveller accommodation in general. While the committee on Travellers is working, in my opinion it is not working very effectively at the moment. Somebody needs to be held accountable for the injustice that our community is suffering on a daily basis. We see it in St. Margaret's Road in Finglas and other halting sites on the northside as well. They are left to rot. Traveller accommodation money is not being spent properly by many of the local authorities. We have at least two good examples of local authorities drawing down money but that is not happening across the island.

It would be brilliant if the Leader could contact the Minister on this. I am not expecting to have a debate on this in a week or even two weeks, but I would like to have a debate before the summer recess.

Senator Mark Duffy: Today I reiterate my call for supports for every sector affected by the fuel crisis. One group I mentioned yesterday, and whom I have been working on behalf of and advocating for to Departments and departmental officials, is ferry operators who connect citizens of islands right across the coast of my own county of Mayo, but also across the whole country. They are equally impacted by the fuel crisis. Supports and packages that are being devised for all of the industries must include ferry operators and support their efforts. I would like to lend my support once again to those in the inshore fishery sector, who are also facing dire consequences because of the cost of fuel and the reductions in quotas. They are facing severe challenges and need to be supported. I ask that any of these packages are done in a way that is, of course, supportive of hauliers and key sectors like agricultural contractors, which we have already discussed, but is also supportive of all of the other sectors that have not been advocated for as much. They all need to be covered and included because there are livelihoods at stake. I acknowledge the work of Councillor Peter Flynn, who has been advocating for the ferry operators in his own area. He has raised their case with me and I have been working very hard with the Departments on it to make sure we deliver for ferry operators.

Before I finish, I would like to welcome the students from Balla National School, who are on a tour of Leinster House today. They are here as guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon, and are off to Croke Park this afternoon to play a blitz. It was lovely to meet all of the students earlier. This is the people's House and we are all here to improve the lives of young people and others right across the country. I wish Balla National School the very best of luck this afternoon. I met with Chelsea, Luke, Robbie, Jack Óg, Gabriella and Cian, among others. I am told that Balla boys do not stop. They asked me to say that. I congratulate them and wish them well in the competition this afternoon in Croke Park.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak this morning on a very important topic. It has been almost three months since Storm Chandra ripped through Wexford, leaving a trail of devastation. Since then, Wexford County Council road crews have been out surveying the damage and have concluded that 157 roads are now impassable in Wexford, to the point where it is not safe to drive across them. The council has submitted a request to the Department of Transport for €20 million in emergency funding. This is a one-off request that recognises the fact this devastation is having a serious impact on the local economy in Wexford. Hauliers, bus drivers, farmers, agricultural contractors, carers and people trying to get to school are all unable to use the roads as a transport network in rural County Wexford. Given the fact that it has now been three months since that request was submitted, I am calling on the Minister for Transport to come to the House to clearly state whether the Government is going to support Wexford County Council's application for this one-off funding. Back in 2020, an application for €5 million was submitted after storm damage that happened on Christmas Day and that money was allocated, but this time the situation in rural Wexford is far worse. I would like the Minister to come to the Chamber to discuss this issue.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Boyhan is next.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I believe Senator Clonan is next.

Senator Tom Clonan: I want to raise in the House again the issue of the triple lock. We have all received the schedule of the Government's legislative programme, which says that the Bill will provide for the removal of the existing requirement regarding the triple lock. Make no mistake, this is in regard to the dispatch of the Defence Forces for service outside the State as part of an international force. What kind of force? If it does not have a UN mandate, if it is not blue helmets, then we are talking about a coalition of the willing, a stabilisation force, and Chapter VII missions, which are fighting missions.

There was a very interesting article in the *Sunday Independent* last weekend by the former Minister for Defence and Fianna Fáil TD Willie O'Dea, in which he seriously questions the logic and reasoning behind the abolition of the triple lock. His view is shared by me and many of my colleagues in opposition. Indeed, I know that this view is shared by some colleagues in government. We need to pause on this. As recently as last week, we saw a collective of decision-makers, a community of decision-makers, make the wrong decision about the deployment of the Defence Forces in aid to the civil power, which is a use-of-force operation. Thankfully, they were not needed, but in the history of the State we have never deployed troops against the population. I have been on both aid to the civil power and aid to the civil authority operations, going right back to the hunger strike riots, the destruction of the British Embassy and the Love Ulster parade riots in Dublin. Even Margaret Thatcher did not deploy the army against the miners in their protests. I absolutely accept that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, acted in good faith - he is a person for whom I have a great deal of respect - but it was the wrong decision. How can we trust those people to make the correct decision in the absence of the triple lock? We need a debate. I know the Leader shares my concerns, as do other members of the Oireachtas committee on defence and national security. We need to have a debate about having parliamentary oversight of these decisions.

I was delayed coming to the Chamber earlier because I was approached by a very senior politician who expressed serious concern about the spending of €600 million on armoured fighting vehicles that could be destroyed by €60,000 worth of flying drones. We have no oversight. We need to have the remit and to have a debate on this. I thank the Cathaoirleach for his latitude.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Today I wish to speak about the recent comments made by the President of the United States, Donald Trump, directed at Pope Leo. In an increasingly volatile global moment, words spoken by leaders matter. When those words dismiss, denigrate or threaten entire peoples, religions or institutions, they do real damage, not just diplomatically but morally. As some Members may know, it would be an understatement to say that I am no admirer of the Iranian regime. It is a criminal regime and it deserves to be challenged, opposed and ultimately dismantled, but to call for the destruction of the entire Iranian civilisation is something all together different. These are callous and small-minded words. The Iranian people themselves and their beautiful, millenia-old civilisation deserve freedom, dignity and respect. We must always be clear about this distinction.

The same applies to the Catholic Church. Whatever one's personal belief or whatever criticisms may be made, it is an undeniable historical fact that the Catholic Church is a millenia-old pillar of European civilisation. Through its art and architecture, through the preservation and development of learning during Europe's darkest centuries, and through the safeguarding and renewal of classical Greek and Roman philosophy in which our own Irish saints and

scholars played a key role, the Catholic Church helped to shape the civilisation we inhabit today. Without it, European civilisation as we know it would not be recognisable today. To attack the Pope in such a crude and unserious manner is an attack not just on a religious leader, itself unacceptable when not done in a considered manner, but on our shared civilisation inheritance.

Finally, I want to place on record my support for Pope Leo and also for Giorgia Meloni and other leaders who have stood by him. They have acted with dignity. As for President Trump, I can only say I am deeply disappointed.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I support the proposed Order of Business. I want to acknowledge the very significant role of the former Minister of State at the Department of agriculture, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

12 o'clock

As someone who sits on and is elected from the agricultural panel and had a lot of direct dealings with the former Minister of State regarding forestry and the new forestry strategy, I have to say that he gave it his all. To be fair to him, I wish to acknowledge that. We worked well with our committee. He engaged with the agricultural committee well. He set out, for the first time as long as I am in these Houses, in direct engagement with people on the ground through his forestry work all over the country. I spoke to a number of civil servants last night about him and they said that the one thing about him was that he was on the case at 6 a.m. every morning. He took a huge interest. I will leave it at that. I wish him well in his long, distinguished career in politics that will go on further.

The other issue I raise today relates to solar panels. Before I do so, I acknowledge that my family and I have owned and farmed a substantial amount of land at the point of Narraghmore, County Kildare, which links on to Ballindrum and Fontstown. The leader of Fianna Fáil in this Chamber knows the area well and will agree with me in this regard. We have a situation where we have a massive planning application for in excess of 100 ha of solar panels on what is prime agricultural land. This is in an area where there is a substantial amount – more than most countries – of broccoli growing. We have an issue with regard to sustainable agriculture. There are challenges in that regard, especially the number of hectares we can allow to be taken for solar panels. I do not want to particularly comment about this planning application because it is my intention to make a submission to An Coimisiún Pleanála. We need a constructive discussion about the challenges around solar panels, solar energy and how they fit in with sustainable agriculture and land use, which are important.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I mark the passing of a wonderful lady, Moya Brennan. She was often described as the first lady of Celtic music. Moya was not just a singer; she brought the Irish language and culture, as well as Celtic music, to the world stage. She did so through Clannad initially and later as a solo artist. We all know her family from the small pub in Gaoth Dobhair, Donegal, which rose to global recognition. She showed what Irish identity could look like. Personally, Moya and her husband, Tim, were huge supporters of Tiglin, the homeless organisation. She used to sing at all of our events. I genuinely feel her generosity. Her resilience in life will be a loss for the Irish culture, but her voice will live on for generations.

On another note, I support what my colleague, Senator Boyhan, said regarding the former Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, who is moving on. It is disappointing as he was certainly a hard worker. We wish him well. Regarding the matter on which he resigned, I have a haulage business and I know what it is like running trucks, whether national or international, with exceptionally increasing costs. For every cent that is added to a fuel bill, that is a cent off the razor-thin bottom line. Last week, we saw people who were desperate because of the situations they are in. Most of them are ordinary, hard-working people and supporters of the Government. They are supporters of authorities. In my hometown of Naas last week, the fuel pumps were running out. Although there was a delivery that day, the pumps were still running out. They were down to the wire. It is happening because the system is not working. The ordinary citizen feels they are not being supported. They hear that Ireland is the wealthiest country in Europe but they want to make it very clear that it is not impacting them and that we cannot continue like this. They deserve to be heard.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank all Senators for their contributions this morning. I will start with Senator Fiona O'Loughlin, who acknowledged the recent Hungarian election and the new pro-EU Government there. She wished the new Prime Minister and Government in Hungary well. I certainly hope it will now be more pro-European and there will be more liberal democracy as part of this new Government. She also called for a debate with the Minister for education regarding the increase in financial pressures on people following the removal of the once-off payments in relation to exam fees. She also mentioned the increase in transport costs and questioned whether they are fair and equitable. I will request a debate with the Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, and her Department in that regard. She also talked about the documentary by Kathryn Thomas - I have not seen it – and the rise in cosmetic treatments, particularly for those under 18 years of age. She called for a debate with the Minister for Health, which I will certainly request. It is an important issue in the context of body image and everything else, particularly for young people in the age of social media and all the rest of it. I will request that debate.

Senator Joe O'Reilly talked about the ongoing oil crisis and conflict in the Middle East and how it is impacting on the need to invest in public transport. He called for a review of public transport availability and a debate on this whole matter. I will request a debate on public transport. While we have seen increases over the last number of years, it is important that we provide adequate services and increased frequency where there is demand. We must also increase the number of bus shelters, which many local authorities are putting in place. Where they are provided, they are welcomed because they provide that level of comfort to people who are choosing public transport.

Senator Craughwell raised concerns about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and how we will see the oil price shock continue and increase, alongside the possibility of industrial unrest. I will request a debate with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Harris, on the matter.

Senator Tully raised the specific case about supports for twins with autism who are starting school in September. She asked me to raise the issue with the Minister, Deputy Foley. Senator Tully might put down a Commencement matter on that question to get a particular answer. She also called for a debate with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, regarding our roads allocation. We

have a request in with the Minister. I understand he is willing to come to the Chamber but we have to finalise a date.

Senator Flynn called for a debate on Traveller accommodation. She talked about the redevelopment that is now not going ahead in Labre Park. I will request that debate but she may wish to put down a Commencement matter regarding that specific development. I know the issue is in *The Irish Times*, as she mentioned, today. She may get a more direct response about the reasoning or rationale behind that decision by doing so.

Senator Duffy called for supports for those sectors impacted by the fuel crisis. He mentioned ferry operators, which is a valid contribution and one which I have not seen in the dispatches. Certainly, it is something the Government will provide supports for. I acknowledge the role of Councillor Peter Flynn in bringing this issue to his attention. He may wish to put down a Commencement matter with the Minister with the responsibility for the islands or raise it directly with the Government. I will do so as well. He has also called for continued supports for the inshore sector. As I understand it, there is a debate next Tuesday with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, on agricultural supports in the context of the challenges within the sector over recent weeks. He also wished the Balla boys, who are on tour, well in their event in Croke Park.

Senator Cathal Byrne raised Storm Chandra ripping through Wexford and had a request for the Department of Transport. Regarding this specific issue, he may put down a Commencement matter. As I said, I have asked the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to come to the Chamber to talk about the whole issue of roads funding. I will try to get an update on that and, perhaps, secure availability from the Minister.

Senator Clonan raised the triple lock, the talk of international forces, the aid to civil power and civil authority and the need for a debate on parliamentary oversight. I will request a debate on that. We have had the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in the Seanad recently on defence matters. Indeed, we had a Fianna Fáil Private Members' motion on defence. Some of these issues were aired then. She is due in the Chamber in the coming weeks to speak on international affairs. That may be an opportunity for the Senator to raise these matters.

Senator Keogan quite rightly raised the recent comments by President Trump to Pope Leo and the imagery that has been used officially in which Trump was depicted as Jesus. It was not particularly welcome. Certainly, it has undermined him in the views of many Roman Catholics and bolstered the support for Pope Leo in his work.

Senators Boyhan and McCarthy acknowledged the role of the former Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, and I join them in that regard. I am sure that resigning as a Minister of State was a huge upset to him, his family and his supporters. I acknowledge that and wish him well for what will no doubt be a continued long career in politics.

Senator Boyhan raised the issue of solar panels and planning applications. There is an ongoing debate about energy security.

Judging by valid contributions from many people in these Houses, there are so many people who have concerns about onshore wind, offshore wind, LNG, solar panels, battery farms, peaking plants, oil exploration, the nuclear debate and interconnectors. This is a real issue, but energy security is so important. There is a balance to be struck on all of this. I will request a

debate with the Minister in relation to the whole area of solar and its use on agricultural lands. There are other properties, whether they be rooftops or car parks, where these could be focused on, rather than on farmland.

Senator McCarthy acknowledged the late Moya Brennan. May she rest in peace. She was a supporter of Tiglin. He also raised his own business in the haulage sector and the pressures and margins in the haulage sector. The Government has tried to respond over the last number of days, as they did before this, in relation to the diesel rebate. We will continue to keep these under review. As Senator Craughwell said, we do not know where oil prices are going to go over the next number of weeks and months and over the rest of the year. Hopefully things will settle and start to drop. We cannot be absolutely sure on that. That is why the Government has to be able to be agile and robust in trying to reduce the costs and pressures on businesses.

Order of Business agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.11 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.11 p.m. and resumed at 1.01 p.m.

Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025: Second Stage

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

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I am pleased to introduce to the Senate the Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill. As we all know, organised crime inflicts a huge amount of damage on communities and preys on vulnerable people. Behind it all is the fuelling of a ruthless drug trade. Too often, criminals blatantly flaunt their illicit wealth on our streets and that creates a corrosive culture where hard-working, law-abiding citizens feel the system is failing them while criminals operate beyond the reach of the law.

We know, on the basis of the strategy we have had in this country for nearly 30 years, that we go after and seize the assets of criminals. The strategy was initiated after the murder of journalist Veronica Guerin nearly 30 years ago. We should reflect on the great success of Ireland's pioneering framework that established the Proceeds of Crime Act in 1996 and the Criminal Assets Bureau Act of the same year. This is now an internationally recognised model and it is built on two foundational elements. First, there is a system of civil forfeiture that builds a case around the unlawful origin of assets. Also, the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, by bringing together the Garda, Revenue, social protection officers and other specialists, leverages cross-agency intelligence to target profit-driven criminality. To date, this approach has successfully seized over €220 million and returned it to the Exchequer.

This legislation introduces three central reforms to strip criminals of their assets much faster than is currently possible. First, after the High Court rules that an asset is derived from crime, the State must wait seven years before assuming final ownership through a disposal order. This Bill reduces that period to two years, ensuring criminals cannot continue to exploit their frozen ill-gotten gains.

Second, once an interlocutory order is made, the Bill will provide for the automatic appointment of a receiver, subject to the avoidance of a serious risk of injustice. This measure is expressly designed to secure immediate possession of the assets and deprive the respondent of any ongoing benefit and use of the property pending final disposal.

Third, this Bill equips the CAB with new mechanisms to freeze suspected illicit funds at the very earliest stages of an investigation. A new administrative payment-freezing direction can be issued by a senior bureau officer for up to seven days, while a payment-freezing order may be made by the District Court for a period of up to 90 days and may be renewed by the court for as long as it is deemed necessary and proportionate to do so. These tools empower CAB to act instantly on intelligence, thereby preventing the transfer or dissipation of money while a full investigation is conducted.

Crucially, these enhanced powers are carefully balanced with the protection of fundamental rights and are anchored by robust judicial oversight. The District Court will supervise the new powers for asset detention and account freezing. The High Court retains exclusive authority over major decisions such as appointing receivers and ordering final asset forfeiture. At every step in the process, a judge must be fully satisfied that the actions taken are reasonable, necessary and proportionate to prevent any serious risk of an injustice. Ultimately, these reforms will create a highly streamlined and effective system. The State will be far better equipped to swiftly deprive criminals of their wealth, disrupt their enterprises and redirect those funds back to the Exchequer for the benefit of all citizens.

At the heart of this effort is the community safety fund. This vital initiative redirects the proceeds of crime directly back into our communities. By doing so, we are able to fund innovative local projects that share a single unified goal, building stronger, safer communities. Since the fund's launch in 2022 as the community safety innovation fund, we have seen the profound impact it can have. To date, it has successfully supported 127 community safety projects right across Ireland. The sheer volume and breadth of the applications we have received for the fund demonstrates beyond any doubt the immense value of this initiative. Applications for the 2026 community safety fund opened last Monday, 13 April, and the total fund value for 2026 is €4.75 million, which represents an increase of 58% since the fund was initially launched in 2022. I welcome applications from community safety initiatives. I remind Senators that they should inform their constituents or organisations that come within their responsibility of the fund that is available and how people can apply. You can make an application on my Department's website, because that is where the application form is available. Included are details on how to register for a webinar that will be held on 21 April. It aims to support organisations to prepare their applications.

I will now take Members briefly through the Bill and its specific sections. There are 19 sections in it.

Part 1 of the Bill comprises sections 1 and 2, which are standard provisions.

Part 2 of the Bill amends the Proceeds of Crime Act 1996. Section 4 amends section 1A of that Act. The latter section currently allows for the seizure and detention of movable property by CAB for an initial 24 hours, which can be extended for a further 21 days. Section 4 amends the provision to allow a CAB officer to apply to the District Court for further extensions of the detention period. The judge may authorise continued detention in increments not exceeding

28 days, up to a maximum aggregate time of 90 days, provided there are reasonable grounds to suspect the property represents proceeds of crime.

Section 5 introduces new powers to freeze financial accounts. A senior bureau officer can issue a payment-freezing direction to place an administrative freeze on the account for up to seven days, allowing time to conduct a preliminary investigation. Following this, CAB can apply to the District Court for a payment-freezing order for a period of up to 90 days.

Section 8 amends section 4 of the 1996 Act by cutting the waiting time required before the High Court can make a final disposal order to seize criminal assets from seven years down to just two years. This reform ensures that once the court has decided assets are derived from crime, they are seized much more quickly.

Section 9 is a consequential amendment to section 4A of the 1996 Act, which governs consent disposal orders. It removes the current time limitation, providing the flexibility for CAB and a respondent to agree to the forfeiture of an asset at any stage while an interlocutory order is in force, thereby avoiding needless litigation.

Section 11 strengthens the powers of receivership by amending section 7 of the 1996 Act. It creates a mandate for the court to appoint a receiver upon application when an interlocutory order is in force. The receiver's purpose is now explicitly enshrined in law as being to deprive the respondent of the ongoing benefit and use of the property.

In Part 2 there are also several technical and consequential amendments, set out in sections 6, 7, 10, 12, 13 and 14.

Part 3 of the Bill seeks to ensure that the broader legislative framework is aligned and effective. Section 15 amends the Schedule to the National Archives Act 1986 by adding the CAB to the list of bodies. Section 16 amends section 43 of the Criminal Justice Act 1994 to harmonise the definition of cash and bearer-negotiable instruments with Regulation (EU) 2018/1672. Section 17 amends the Criminal Assets Bureau Act 1996 to enhance the operational capacity of the bureau. First, it allows non-Garda experts in the bureau to attend and participate in Garda interviews. It also explicitly extends the anonymity protections for CAB officers to cover them even after they have ceased to be officers. Section 18 amends section 16 of the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act, mirroring the changes made in section 8.

Mirroring the changes made in section 8, this section reduces the waiting period before a disposal order can be made in relation to terrorist funds, from seven years to two years. Section 19 is a technical provision amending section 22 of the Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Act 2018. It aligns anti-corruption legislation with the 1994 Act.

As the Bill passed through the Dáil, I noted the remarkable unanimity across that House. I suspect that will be here as well. Regardless of our political affiliations, we share a resolute determination to tackle organised crime, to dismantle the gangs that bring drugs and devastation into our communities and to ensure that in this State, crime does not pay.

There are a number of matters I intend to return to on Committee Stage and I will flag the most notable of these for the information of the House. The first concerns the transfer of the main domestic functions under Part 4 of the Criminal Justice (Mutual Assistance) Act 2008, relating to the execution, enforcement and realisation of external confiscation orders from the

office of the DPP to CAB. These amendments will not alter the underlying mutual assistance framework, the role of the central authority or the supervisory role of the High Court.

I also propose to introduce further amendments to specifically target and regulate crypto assets. This updated regime will equip law enforcement with tailored powers to freeze and seize these assets. Many details will merit debate and I look forward to working with Senators as the Bill progresses. We will have an opportunity on Committee Stage in the Seanad to look at a number of matters in terms of what the Bill does or does not cover. I commend this Bill to the House and I look forward to hearing what Senators have to say.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I welcome the Minister and his officials back to the House to discuss this very important legislation which the Minister is proposing to introduce. From a Fianna Fáil perspective, I welcome this debate and support this Bill. As we know, it is not always possible to get criminal convictions against criminals who are destroying our communities. However, we can bring them before the civil courts and seize the assets they have secured through criminal activity. These proceeds of crime should be taken from them and invested in the communities they are trying to destroy.

In the EU, estimated annual criminal revenues amount to €110 billion. This is equivalent to 1% of the EU's gross domestic product, GDP. In Ireland, the value of crime markets is €1.7 billion per annum, which is a staggering amount of money. Seizing proceeds - be they money, property or vehicles - from criminal individuals or organisations is central to combating organised crime. Organised crime is driven by money and the harder the State makes it to obtain, launder and keep that money, the weaker these organised groups will be.

I welcome that the Department of justice has conducted a detailed examination of this legislation, vitally informed, to my mind, by the CAB and other stakeholders, with their practical, day-to-day experience of the operation of the regime since its inception and by international developments and best practice. Based on this examination, it identified a series of recommendations for immediate change and for further consideration.

As the Minister outlined during his contribution, this legislation aims to strengthen the proceeds of crime laws to more effectively target organised crime and ensure that criminals cannot retain profits from illegal activity. Where criminal convictions are difficult to secure, civil proceedings will continue to be used to seize assets. This strategy has proven successful, with over €220 million denied to criminals by the Criminal Assets Bureau. I would like to pay tribute to the men and women of An Garda Síochána for their fearless work in this particular area and for the work they do on behalf of us all within our communities.

Criminals often flaunt their wealth, undermining public confidence and creating the perception that they operate beyond the law. The State's objective, is - and should always be - to deprive criminals of these assets, weaken their influence and protect our communities. Ireland's current model, which is based on civil forfeiture and the specialised work of the Criminal Assets Bureau, has been internationally recognised. However, this Bill introduces key reforms to improve that effectiveness even further. These include reducing the time required to permanently seize assets from seven years to two years and appointing receivers to manage seized assets once they are deemed to be the proceeds of crime. The Bill also proposes to introduce new powers to freeze suspected criminal funds early in an investigation. This includes short-term administrative freezing directions and court-approved freezing orders.

These powers are balanced with strong judicial oversight to protect fundamental rights. Overall, this legislation aims to improve the State's ability to disrupt organised crime, seize illicit wealth and return funds to the public in the communities that they are trying to harm. As the Minister outlined, this is reflected in the community safety fund which he announced yesterday. This reinvests recovered money into local projects, with over €4 million allocated this year, which is double the initial funding. I would echo the Minister's words and encourage organisations the length and breadth of the country to apply for this fund. The money is there and can be used in a positive and constructive fashion within our communities.

I again thank the Minister for outlining the detail of the Bill. On behalf of my party I am very happy to support this legislation and I look forward to it passing through the House in a swift manner.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Mark Duffy): Thank you, Senator Gallagher. I now move to Senator Boyhan, who is sharing time with Senator Keogan. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister. It is great to see him in the House. I think he is a permanent feature of the House.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am everywhere.

Senator Victor Boyhan: So am I and I intend staying for a hell of a long time.

I thank the Minister for his ongoing engagement. I know it has been a difficult few days for the Government and for the Minister, who takes his responsibility seriously. I also thank the Minister's officials. I can say unequivocally that the Minister will have my full support for this Bill. I will not spend too long on this. It is the right thing to do. I want to acknowledge a few people before I say a few words about the Bill. I thank the Garda Commissioner and all of his staff. I particularly want to thank CAB for the amazing work it has done. It has been very difficult. We do not see or understand half of what is going on. However, we can take some confidence from the fact that agents of An Garda Síochána are working covertly and overtly on behalf of the security of this State, in liaison with Government and the appropriate contacts that are there. This is an assurance that we have. Throughout the State, An Garda Síochána has served us well. They are brave men and women who are highly articulate and highly trained, particularly in the intake of gardái in the last 20 to 25 years. There are equal opportunities in the force. It is a diverse force. It represents the people who live in our communities ethnically and culturally and all the diversity that goes with that. This enriches what policing should be all about. Core to this Bill is the fact that it is at the very heart of community safety and policing. It brings people to account. People hurt when it affects their pocket. After all, these are proceeds of crime. Let us be very clear what we are talking about and what we are dealing with.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to the community safety partnerships. They have been difficult to bed down. Some local authorities have had problems with them but since the Minister took on this portfolio, a lot of the things that were in abeyance for a long time have been ironed out. Some really able and capable people, many of them local authority members, signed up to the policing partnerships. Yes, they are evolving and I wish them well across the

31 local authorities in their important work. It is not only about elected people, it is also about leading stakeholders and people who are respected in their communities, in partnership. No one person has to be charged with all the responsibility. It must be cushioned and spread across our community, our community leaders and our stakeholders.

I am particularly impressed by the community safety fund, which opened on 13 April. We need to know more about the projects involved in it because we have to continue to sell the message that some of the funds from these activities will go into the community safety fund. I understand there is over €4 million currently in the fund. That is particularly good. Yes, we have a bit of work ongoing to tell people that they can apply for these funds and the criteria required. When people see the benefits of this fund in their own communities, they will get a sense of justice and a sense of support that the system is not all one way. For too long in the past, people have had grave reservations and a feeling that criminals have gone unhindered.

They are not going unhindered. We do not necessarily know the level of policing that is going on, but we can take confidence from what the Minister has been saying since he became Minister for justice. He is on the case. He does not have to be publicly on the case, when he is privately on a day-to-day basis. He is working collaboratively with people and I acknowledge that. The Minister will have my full support on this Bill.

Senator Sharon Keogan: The Minister is very welcome. To be quite honest, I am disappointed that this is not on full and Final Stage today. For far too long, criminals in this country, particularly the drug criminals, have been getting away with far too much. I am delighted to see that the Minister is trying to expedite the sale of properties belonging to criminals and drug barons in this country. Those properties can be left to rot for years, as the Minister knows. Let us take them off them, get them sold and put them back into good use. I am delighted. I am only disappointed that it is not coming quickly enough and is not going through the Houses to Final Stage today.

The proceeds of crime funding initiative was led by an Independent councillor in County Louth. All the Independent councillors throughout this country called for that way back in 2021. It was led by Councillor Paddy McQuillan. Thankfully, the Minister at the time, Helen McEntee, took that on board. The funding the Minister just announced, and which was announced previously over the last couple of years, will make a massive difference. It has grown this year. It started at €2 million and, this year, I think it is at €4 million. It has grown, but how do we build safer communities? We can only do that in collaboration with An Garda Síochána. I am literally just off the phone to an inspector in my area, before I came up here, about property marking, of all things. The citizens of Ireland have a great relationship with our gardaí. They are the cornerstone of keeping us safe in our communities, day in day out.

I was a bit disappointed with what happened last week. I have been a great champion of the Minister's since he took office. I was disappointed. We have a little rebuilding to do now in relation to our Garda Síochána and our citizens. I will fully support the gardaí to do their job and keep our citizens safe. I will do that 24-7. I will fully support the Minister in this Bill, which cannot come quickly enough, as far as I am concerned. I thank the Minister for introducing this Bill to the House today.

Senator Garret Kelleher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta O'Callaghan. Gabhaim buíochas leis as ucht teacht isteach chun an Bille tábhachtach seo a phlé linn. In Ireland, as was said, we are fortunate to have what is internationally regarded to be one of the best systems of civil forfeiture, overseen and implemented by the Criminal Assets Bureau, which was established in 1996 by the then Minister for Justice, Nora Owen. The decisions to introduce the Proceeds of Crime Act and to establish the Criminal Assets Bureau came following the high-profile murders of Detective Garda Jerry McCabe in Adare by the provisional IRA and the courageous, well-respected and widely acclaimed investigative journalist, Veronica Guerin, whose pioneering and tenacious reporting had done so much to expose Dublin's drug cartels and those involved in organised crime. Both of these horrendous murders took place in the same month, June 1996. As well as being unimaginable tragedies for the families of the two victims, who had in their own ways done so much for the Irish State, both murders were also considered to have been serious attacks upon the State and the rule of law in Ireland. It was recognised that a new and more effective approach needed to be taken against those involved in organised crime and terrorist and paramilitary activities by hitting them where it hurt, increasing powers to seize assets, undermining and weakening criminal networks, and preventing the further investment of the proceeds of crime.

The establishment of the Criminal Assets Bureau was, at the time, an example of close co-operation between Ministers in different Departments. I know, having spoken with former Minister for Justice, Nora Owen, that she would give an awful lot of credit to the then Minister for Finance, Ruairí Quinn, with whom she worked closely to ensure that what was being delivered was robust and effective. That it has stood the test of time is a testament to both of them and their close co-operation together in government. The fact is that it came as a result of a multi-agency approach. Huge credit must be given, both for the establishment of the Criminal Assets Bureau and its success over the past three decades, to the work of An Garda Síochána, as has been acknowledged, and to Revenue for its collaboration with what was the Department of Social Welfare and is now the Department of Social Protection. As an example of collaborative work yielding such positive results, it cannot be overstated.

Given the success of the Criminal Assets Bureau, it is hard to imagine that at the time of its establishment, it was not universally welcomed as a necessary and positive move in the right direction to target those involved in organised crime, but was looked upon by some as being anti-human rights and civil liberties. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the rights of all people to do what they want themselves with their own money, but only as long as this money has been earned or received legally. When this legislation was initially introduced, I understand there was a limit on bank deposits of somewhere in the region of £13,000, but that was circumvented by people looking to lodge lesser amounts. That emphasises the importance of the continuing evolution and review of legislation, which is what we are doing today. It is very important that we have the likes of sunset clauses, where necessary, that we review and refresh legislation, reflect upon the sophistication of organised crime groups, and make every effort possible to ensure that the legislation continues to be robust and effective into the future.

Like my colleagues, I welcome the changes that are being proposed, in particular the expedition in the seizing of illegally acquired assets from serious criminals, the closing-off of avenues to delay and obstruct the legal process, and enhancing the investigative powers of the Criminal Assets Bureau. I look forward to looking into the 19 sections in more detail in the

later Stages of the Bill. On behalf of the Fine Gael group, I welcome the changes being proposed.

Senator Martin Conway: I, too, welcome the Minister to the House. He is a very positive contributor as a Minister. If only every other Minister were. I know it has been a difficult week, but that is politics and the joys and challenges of being in government. I know the Minister understands that and stands up to the plate when it comes to that.

I consider this legislation is evolving in the sense that proceeds of crime and the mechanisms that criminal gangs use are constantly evolving and changing. We need to evolve and change our legislative framework to take account of that. Back in 1996, when Veronica Guerin was killed, I remember where I was. I was working in my father's shop in County Clare and a customer told me what had happened. Veronica Guerin had been in the news a lot prior to that because there had been a couple of attempts and threats on her. The sense of revulsion at the time created a major incident in government, which was responded to quickly by Nora Owen, who established the Criminal Assets Bureau. It was pioneering at the time and has proven to be one of the most effective tools we have in this country against organised crime.

If you take away their wealth and what they cause crime for, you deal them a body blow. That is what the legislation has done.

I was in the Chamber in 2016 when we amended the Act introduced in the mid-1990s. At that time, CAB could seize property valued at €13,000 and over. The case made at the time by the Minister and Senators, and the view among the public, was that CAB was dealing with the upper echelons of crime. As we know, there are small crime gangs the length and breadth of the country that wreak havoc in communities. Reducing the threshold from €13,000 to €5,000, as was done in 2016, made a significant difference to the reach and relevance of CAB for ordinary communities around the country. As I have said previously, CAB has been emulated by other jurisdictions because they have seen the success it has had.

What impresses me about this legislation is that it is evolving. It introduces the whole area of crypto and reduces from seven years to two years the wait time for disposing of assets seized as a result of organised crime. That moves and modernising the law. The cautiousness of previous Bills is no longer necessary because CAB is now seen as a standard pillar of our justice system. For this reason, we need to be a bit liberal in pushing the boat out on what can be done. I agree that reducing the time to dispose of an asset from seven years to two years is appropriate because the values of assets can go up or down. We may as well deal with them in real time where possible.

If CAB requires the Oireachtas to continue amending the legislation to take account of developing trends, structures, systems and so on, and if we need to take a broad discretionary approach in regard to facilitating CAB in what it does so well, the Houses should not be found wanting in equipping it. Ireland was the standard-bearer in the nineties and early noughties in regard to proceeds of crime legislation. We should continue to be the flag-bearer in ensuring our legislation is effective, focused and meaningful and that we change it in real time to the greatest extent possible. I am glad there is support throughout the House for this very sensible, prudent and effective legislation.

Senator Maria McCormack: I welcome the Aire. Sinn Féin welcomes the Bill and the measures contained in it. We will support anything that makes it harder for criminals to profit from their actions and easier for the State to take back assets. Reducing the term between an interim and final disposal order, strengthening the ability to freeze funds and limiting the ability to delay proceedings are all positive steps.

For over 15 years, Sinn Féin has argued that proceeds of crime should be directed back into communities. In 2021, my colleagues, Deputies Mark Ward and Ruairí Ó Murchú, introduced legislation to ensure that these funds go directly into our drug task forces, youth clubs and family centres. We are, therefore, glad to see the setting up of the Government's community safety fund. While the community safety fund is a step in the right direction, a fund of €4 million simply does not match the scale of the problem, and we have to look at that.

In communities across the country, groups are doing incredible work but they are on shoestring budgets. The funds recovered from proceeds of crime should be invested directly back into the communities that have been most impacted by crime - in youth services, family supports and addiction and recovery services. We know the reality on the ground. Where there is deprivation, organised crime takes hold. Where people feel left behind, addiction and exploitation follow, and criminals know exactly where to go to take advantage of that. That is why community investment is essential here.

I see great work being done every single day in County Laois by groups such as the ARC Project recovery centre in Portlaoise, which supports people in recovery, helping them rebuild their lives and giving real hope back to individuals and families. This work is absolutely priceless but, too often, it is underfunded. These are the groups for which we need to look at matching funding and bringing funding to them. Community groups and services are asking for something very simple, namely, proper resources and support, and that the Government will listen and be a voice for them. We also need to ensure that the funding goes exactly where it is needed most. This means we have to link it to the areas of deprivation, not just to who can write the best applications. I hope we can find a way of getting funding directly into the communities that need it most because the communities that have suffered most from crime must be the ones that benefit from the proceeds of crime.

We also need to look at prevention in a more serious way. There is still not enough being done to break the cycle. We are not doing enough to challenge the so-called lifestyle that draws young people into criminal activity and we are not doing enough to intervene early. That is why Sinn Féin has called for the exploration of the idea of having a mini CAB to target low-level criminality and the vision mismatch between income and lifestyle. When this Bill was introduced in the Dáil, my colleague, Deputy Mark Ward, brought forward an amendment based on a recommendation from the justice committee, which stated that the committee recommends further examination of the use of funds recovered from proceeds of crime and how such funds could be invested. Through the provision of preventative supports within communities, that recommendation made sense then and it makes more sense now. We really have to look at getting in there, nipping this in the bud at the beginning. We need to stop making this lifestyle so attractive to youngsters in these deprived areas. I urge the Minister to look at whether there is more we can do here. I understand we need to be serious about tackling crime and that the Minister has a massive focus on this issue. This is an area we have to take another look at.

Across the country, there are communities full of decent, hard-working people but they are fed up. They are fed up with gangs, drugs and seeing young people pulled into a life that leads nowhere. These communities are not giving up, however. They are stepping up and they deserve to be heard by this Government when they cry out for more resources and multi-annual funding so they can plan ahead.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Mark Duffy): I welcome to the Visitors Gallery Deputy John Connolly and his visitors to the House. They are very welcome to Seanad Éireann.

Senator Joe Conway: I apologise for missing my slot. I was held up at other important business in the dining room.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Mark Duffy): The Senator is forgiven.

Senator Joe Conway: Notwithstanding that, the phrase "pushing at an open door" comes to mind in relation to this legislation. I am speaking on behalf of the Seanad Independent Group. I think there is a general, across-the-board welcome for the Bill. I am delighted to see the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, here again. He assiduously attends our meetings and all the Senators who I am aware of are deeply appreciative of the fact that he comes so frequently to the Seanad. It is good to see him again.

There are a couple of things I might ask the Minister to keep an eye on as this legislation progresses. Four or five months ago, we had a very interesting exchange in the House with the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, in relation to forestry and the possibility of using the forestry and horticulture breakout - I have just realised what a bad choice of word that is - with the Prison Service, based on the exemplar of Rikers Island, where the residents are given an opportunity to study for horticultural qualifications, engaging with the forestry service in various states in the United States.

I hope we can progress that. There is initial interest from the Prison Service, which we have been in touch with. The Minister of State is intrigued by the idea. I hope the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, will look kindly on it, if we can move it along. We all know the Prison Service is having great difficulty in containing the numbers. It would be beneficial for society and prisoners in general if the less pernicious prisoners in incarceration could be allowed to develop their skills, make a useful contribution to outside life in the future and make a living professionally.

I have been looking at the confiscated assets legislation in Australia, which has a much more ambitious way of redistributing the proceeds of crime. It talks about building up the national DNA base, which is something we could look at here. There is also the whole question of cybercrime and the cyber induction of our younger people. Australia has a policy initiative called ThinkUKnow, which directs its attention to young people through a national campaign to make them aware of how easily they can be drawn into degradation. There is also the area of human trafficking. Of course, those of us who come from a local authority background would love to see the possibility of disbursing some of the moneys to local authorities and NGOs.

I welcome the initiative and the proposed legislation. Other colleagues have referred to reducing the time from seven years to two years, which is significantly sensible. I would applaud that.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank all Senators for their contributions and, more importantly, for their support. It is my job to be here when I am bringing legislation through the Houses, so it is important that I am here. I have great support from my two Ministers of State, Deputies Colm Brophy and Niall Collins. It is a fundamental requirement for all the members of the Government to attend the Houses of the Oireachtas because they are the lawmaking entity under the Constitution.

I will deal with some of the very useful contributions that have been made. I agree with Senator Gallagher when he says that criminal convictions can be very hard to secure. We see the difficulty that gardaí have to go through during investigations, and it can take time for them to happen. I welcome the fact that this legislation recognises that civil forfeiture is sometimes the way to go, as opposed to circumstances where a criminal conviction cannot be secured against the person who is the brains behind the crime.

I thank Senator Boyhan for his contribution. It is great to hear so many Senators being in favour of the legislation. Again, it is illustrative of the support that exists for An Garda Síochána that the money going back from CAB into the community is representative of the fact that the criminal proceeds are made at the outset from the people of that community.

Senator Keogan spoke about crypto assets. As I mentioned in my contribution, crypto assets will be dealt with on Committee Stage, the amending stage in the Seanad. It is important that we cover crypto assets.

I thank Senator Kelleher for what he said about CAB. It is important that CAB is given public support, as it has been. It was very much an innovative solution when it was introduced nearly 30 years ago.

Senator Martin Conway also mentioned crypto assets. As I have indicated, this is very important, and amendments will be made in respect of that.

I welcome Senator McCormack's support. Lifestyle is being challenged. CAB will go after lower amounts of the proceeds of criminal activity, so it is not limited to the large criminals. If Members look at the annual report of CAB, which reports to me, they will see the type of assets it has seized. They are very much everyday assets that are flaunted by criminals in their use of the proceeds of crime.

I am sorry for interrupting Senator Joe Conway's business in the dining room, but I hear what he said about the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan. I will speak to him in respect of that, and get some further information from him.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Mark Duffy): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Next Tuesday.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Mark Duffy): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 21 April 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 1.45 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.34 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.45 p.m. and resumed at 2.34 p.m.

Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2024: Second Stage

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State and his officials to the House. Before I call on the Minister of State, I welcome the former mayor of Galway, Mr. Val Hanley, and his wife Eileen to the House. You are most welcome to the Seanad Chamber today as guests of Senator Ollie Crowe and Deputy John Connolly. Thanks for coming and thanks for your work in Galway as mayor.

The debate will follow the normal pattern, with the Minister to speak for ten minutes, group spokespersons to speak for eight minutes and all other Senators for five minutes.

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

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2024 on Second Stage. This Bill provides a clear statutory framework for transferring Microfinance Ireland, MFI, into State ownership, placing it under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. It does this by amending the legislation that established MFI, the Microenterprise Loan Fund Act 2012, to transfer the authorised share capital from the Social Finance Foundation, SFF, to the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and by updating the relevant governance and accountability provisions.

Before turning to the detail of the Bill, it is helpful to outline the background to Microfinance Ireland and the context in which this legislation arises. Microfinance Ireland was established back in 2012 under the Microenterprise Loan Fund Act 2012. It provides unsecured business loans to viable small businesses that have both fewer than ten employees and an annual turnover of less than €2 million. It fills a gap in the market by lending to businesses that cannot obtain loans from other commercial lenders. Microfinance Ireland makes its loans available to both start-ups and established businesses across all sectors. The loan term is typically three years for working capital purposes and can be extended to five years for capital expenditures. Interest rates range from between 5.5% for clients of local enterprise offices, LEOs, to 6.5% for direct applications.

Many early-stage and small businesses face significant barriers such as limited collateral, insufficient credit history, previous credit difficulties or higher risk profiles. This gap is particularly pronounced for start-ups, a significant proportion of which use MFI finance to establish themselves and subsequently grow into larger, sustainable enterprises. MFI's agility has been particularly important during moments of national challenge. In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, MFI rapidly introduced dedicated liquidity loans before many State supports were in place. In late 2023, following severe flooding and weather events, it once again responded within days when called upon by my Department.

In 2024, in response to rising costs and evolving business needs, we increased the permitted limit for an MFI loan from €25,000 to €50,000. The impact has been significant. We have seen loan approvals rise by 55% compared with the same period last year, which is a clear sign these supports are making a real difference in our communities. MFI also offers structured post-approval mentoring to its borrowers through the nationwide LEO network. This support is provided at no additional cost to approved applicants and helps to strengthen the long-term resilience and sustainability of small businesses.

Since its establishment, MFI has proven to be an effective mechanism for enabling SMEs to access finance. As of September 2025, it had approved up to 6,000 loans totalling €102 million, directly supporting more than 11,800 jobs right across the country. Notably, 78% of these loans have supported businesses outside Dublin, demonstrating its vital role in balanced regional development. Microfinance Ireland has continued to expand its role as a vital source of finance for small businesses and as demand for MFI's lending increased, it became necessary to consider whether the structures put in place back in 2012 remained appropriate. The original Act provided for MFI to operate as a subsidiary of the SFF. The SFF, created in 2007 with support from the banking sector, provided loan funding to community and social enterprises and operated under the aegis of the Department of Finance. It also provided the debt facility that supported MFI's early lending activity, complemented by Exchequer funding.

However, the landscape in which MFI operates has changed significantly. The SFF no longer falls under the Department of Finance and no longer provides loan funding to Microfinance Ireland. Since 2021, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland has taken on the role of providing a debt facility to MFI.

Furthermore, the 2020 amendments to the Microenterprise Loan Fund Act subsequently expanded MFI's financial capacity, increasing its debt fund ceiling from €25 million to €100 million and raising the permitted level of Exchequer support from €25 million to €95 million. The Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is accountable for any Exchequer funding to MFI.

With the funding model for MFI evolving and its continued expansion, the Department undertook a review of the organisation's governance arrangements to identify the most appropriate long-term structure. This review concluded that bringing MFI directly into State ownership would provide clearer accountability, stronger alignment between governance and funding, and greater certainty for the organisation's future. The Government has accepted that recommendation. Following engagement with the Department's review, SFI has agreed that MFI should transition into full State ownership. I acknowledge and thank SFI and MFI for their constructive engagement throughout this process.

The Bill proposes to amend the Microfinance Loan Fund Act 2012 to give legislative effect to MFI's transition to State ownership. The Bill updates the 2012 Act to reflect MFI's transition to full State ownership. A key part of this is the transfer of MFI's authorised share capital from the SFF to the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. Once this transfer is complete, MFI will no longer be regarded as a subsidiary of the foundation. To give effect to this change, the Bill makes a series of technical amendments to the 2012 Act, replacing references to "the subsidiary" with "Microfinance Ireland".

Section 9 of the Bill updates the governance arrangements for MFI. While MFI already operates with many of the features you would expect in a State-supported body, the move to full State ownership means some changes are needed. At the moment, the SFF appoints the board. Under the new arrangement, the responsibility will rest with the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, who will appoint the chairperson and the directors. The Bill will also set out the size of the board, the quorum required for meetings and the usual provisions concerning allowances, resignations and removals, as well as measures to ensure continuity during this transition.

In addition, the Bill provides for the appointment of a CEO. This CEO will be appointed by the board with the consent of the Minister. The legislation defines the terms, responsibilities and oversight arrangements for the role. The Bill also makes clear that the CEO will be accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts and the Oireachtas committee on enterprise, ensuring there is transparency in line with public sector expectations.

A further element of the Bill concerns staff pensions. Section 13 provides for the preparation of a superannuation scheme for MFI's staff which must be approved by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. This is an important step in providing staff with appropriate protections as MFI moves to a State footing. Overall, these measures strengthen MFI's governance and ensure that the organisation has a secure and modern framework as it continues its important work.

I flag my intention to make amendments to the Bill on Committee Stage. Since the publication of the Bill, my Department has received legal advice from the Office of the Attorney General that the Bill's current provisions with respect to share transfer, governance and superannuation would benefit from some further enhancements. The additional provisions have been included in the amendments, which aim to designate the staff of MFI as public servants following its transition to public ownership and to provide transitional provisions for existing staff. The amendments aim to unequivocally establish that both current and future staff of MFI are public servants and are covered by relevant legislation. This may be a technical Bill but what it delivers is far more than technical. Every MFI loan represents real belief in an entrepreneur and a meaningful boost to local enterprise. Time and again, MFI has helped someone to protect a job, create new employment and keep a business trading. Ensuring that the framework supports this work is essential.

I acknowledge the work of the SFF and MFI. Their collaboration, insight and commitment in supporting microenterprises has been essential in shaping this legislation. The Bill secures the long-term future of MFI. It strengthens its governance and modernises the framework within which it operates. Most importantly, it ensures that the small businesses right across this country, which often face the biggest challenges, can continue to access fair, reliable and transparent finance. I commend it to this House.

Senator Eileen Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as bheith anseo linn inniu.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill and to support its passage through the House. As the Minister of State has outlined, it is largely technical but its impact is still significant. We need to strengthen a mechanism that has proven effective in supporting small businesses. Essentially, the Bill provides for the transfer of MFI

into full State ownership under the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. MFI is publicly funded, implements Government policy objectives and plays a vital role in supporting microenterprises across the country. It is therefore entirely appropriate that its ownership, governance and accountability structures reflect this role and that the Bill provide for that alignment. The Bill transfers the authorised capital from the social finance fund to the Minister and amends the 2012 Act to reflect the fact that MFI will no longer operate as a subsidiary of that fund.

This Bill strengthens existing mechanisms by having the Minister appoint the members of the board of directors, including its chair, thereby ensuring a clear division of responsibilities. The Bill contains standard provisions regarding the board's operating procedures, appointments and succession. Importantly, the Bill provides for the appointment of the CEO by the board of directors with the Minister's consent and establishes clear accountability. The Bill, as has been outlined, also addresses staffing and pensions. Subject to ministerial approval, the provision of the superannuation scheme is a key element in ensuring staff are supported as the organisation transitions to State ownership.

I welcome the Minister's intention to propose amendments on Committee Stage to further clarify the status of staff and provide them with certainty regarding their rights and the continuation of service. This clarity is both necessary and appropriate.

Beyond the legislative details, it is incredibly important to remember why this matters. MFI fills a gap in the market that the banking system does not. It makes finance available to those who may not be able to avail of bank loans. It provides access to finance to small businesses that are often at an early and vulnerable stage. Without access to this funding, they may not be able to progress at all. It is important that we remember that these are real businesses. They include cafés, small workshops and family-run enterprises. It is precisely these businesses that sustain the local economy. They create jobs in our communities and contribute to regional development.

I welcome the Minister of State's confirmation that 78% of fund drawdowns occur outside Dublin. Therefore, so much of this funding is going to regional, local and rural areas. The large number of jobs saved and loans issued demonstrates just how effective the support is. The Bill ensures that the framework underpinning the support will be just as robust.

I noted the Minister of State's comments on the increased level under this Bill. I note the upper amount was increased from €25,000 to €50,000 in 2024. If possible, this should be reviewed for a further increase because, as I have said, the businesses do not have access to loan finance. Given current cost inflation, it is appropriate for us to consider increasing the upper limit and, potentially, eligibility. I am aware that the funding is specifically for microenterprises and that there is other funding available as businesses develop, but maybe we should be considering this.

In conclusion, the Bill aims to secure the future of an organisation that plays such a crucial role at the foundation of our economy and in supporting these small businesses that otherwise may never see the light of day. It is about aligning funding with accountability, strengthening the managing system and ensuring confidence in the future. I commend the Bill to the House.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon and his officials to the Chamber this afternoon and I also welcome my friends in the Public Gallery, Val and Eileen Hanley. I hope they have a very enjoyable afternoon.

I particularly want to welcome this Bill which, as the Minister of State has outlined, provides for Microfinance Ireland to be transferred from the remit of the Social Finance Foundation to the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. Microfinance Ireland plays an essential role in the State support infrastructure for viable microenterprises that would otherwise not have access to loan financing from the market.

We have all spoken in this House about how important our SMEs are. They are the backbone of the economy, especially in small towns and villages across the country. Microenterprises are a hugely important part of the broader SME sector. They are the family-run bars and restaurants in towns and villages, the local cafés, or the small plumbing or carpentry businesses we all rely on. These are essential businesses that we should take every opportunity to support. Microfinance Ireland plays a unique and vital role in supporting these businesses. It provides loans to viable microenterprises that cannot access finance from traditional lenders. In many cases, these are businesses with strong ideas and real potential but without the collateral or track record that banks require. Without Microfinance Ireland, many of these businesses simply would not get off the ground.

Since it was established, Microfinance Ireland has made a real difference. Over 11,800 jobs have been sustained through microenterprise loan fund since 2012. Importantly, more than 78% of that support has gone to businesses outside Dublin. This Bill builds on that success. It provides for the transfer of Microfinance Ireland into full State ownership under the responsibility of the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. This is a logical and timely step. When Microfinance Ireland was established, its ownership structure reflected the arrangements in place at that time. However, those arrangements have changed. The Social Finance Foundation is no longer under the remit of the Department of Finance and has indicated its wish to step back from ownership. At the same time, the State, through bodies like the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, has taken on a greater role in supporting access to finance. This Bill responds to that new reality. It ensures that Microfinance Ireland will sit clearly within the State's enterprise support framework.

There are clear benefits to this change. First, it will provide stronger and more transparent governance. The Bill sets out new governance structures, including a board of directors appointed by the Minister, and clear accountability for the chief executive officer to the Committee of Public Accounts and other Oireachtas committees. That means better oversight, better accountability and, ultimately, better value for money for the taxpayer. Second, it will improve how Microfinance Ireland operates. By bringing it fully under the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, we can ensure closer alignment with other enterprise supports, particularly the local enterprise offices, which are so important. These offices already work closely with Microfinance Ireland on the ground throughout Ireland and through Galway County Council, it operates with the help of Galway City Council, helping businesses to develop and grow. This Bill will strengthen that relationship and make it easier for enterprises to access the support they need. Third, it will enhance access to finance for microenterprises. We know from the Department of Finance's SMEs credit demand survey that microenterprises find it the hardest to secure funding. This measure will help address that gap by ensuring that

Microfinance Ireland can continue to provide loans on reasonable terms to businesses that are viable but underserved.

That matter is not just for the individual businesses but for jobs. When microenterprise gets the support it needs, it can start up, survive, recover, invest and grow. In doing so, it sustains employment and contributes to the local economies. The impact is particularly significant in rural communities. As I mentioned earlier, more than 78% of Microfinance Ireland lending is outside Dublin. These businesses are often key employers in smaller towns and rural villages, and these jobs are obviously not as easily replaced as they are in our bigger cities.

I welcome the Bill, which will provide clarity about the status of Microfinance Ireland, strengthen governance and ensure access to loans for viable microenterprises.

Senator Conor Murphy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. We are supportive of the Bill. The Minister of State has outlined the critical role of Microfinance Ireland in the economic infrastructure of the State and the loans it provides to a range of small businesses. As other Senators have said, these are primarily outside of Dublin. As a rural representative, it is always encouraging when we see that level of support for rural communities.

The Minister of State referred to the increased demand for Microfinance Ireland. On the one hand, we could take that as a positive in that more small businesses are starting up and a lot more entrepreneurs are bringing their ideas forward but, on the other, is it the case that access to finance and the cost of doing business is putting more stress on people in sustaining businesses? It would be useful to get some analysis on where that increased demand has come from as the Bill progresses. I noted Senator Lynch's comments on increasing the top level of the loan available. That might be something the Government could come back to us on on later Stages of the Bill, to discuss whether that demand is about businesses starting or about them struggling.

The commitment in the programme for Government to scale up Microfinance Ireland to enable it to support greater numbers of start-ups in the future is important. Getting the right structures for Microfinance Ireland is something that is necessary. It would also be useful, perhaps on a future Stage, to examine the impact of any changes to the operation and governance of Microfinance Ireland and bring that back. It might be something we could return to on Committee Stage, to have a report back as to how the new structures are operating because, obviously, we all agree it is a critical part of our infrastructure.

Small businesses have really been hammered over the past number of years. The Covid pandemic put a lot of small businesses out of business completely and that has been followed by the cost-of-living crisis, the increased cost of doing business and cost of materials, and now we are in a real cost-of-energy crisis as well. That originated with the Ukraine war but more recent developments in Iran have really exacerbated that. We all saw the consequences of that this week, with people out protesting at the level of supports that are not available to them, which they need. There is a real challenge and pressure on businesses and it is important that when we look at this particular exercise, we are also mindful of the broader ecosystem in regard to issues that affect the economy, particularly for those who are smallest in the economic model, who are the ones who suffer the most stress in that regard.

There has long been a recognition that the economic model in this State is heavily reliant on large foreign direct investment, which comprises a small number of businesses in a small number of sectors. There is a real need to rebalance, to have more diversity across the economy and to have more indigenous business supported and developed, not just in developing at the beginning but also into growth and exports and into more substantial international businesses from Ireland. This is a way to assist the beginning of that.

3 o'clock

I would like to see a real focus from the Government, in doing that, on recognising the volatility of having a lot of the economic capital in a very small and narrow sector. If it is run in the way we all wish to see it run, if it supports the businesses that need to be supported to get started up and if it provides diversity in the economy, then it can do a significant job in the long-term economic future. We will be supporting the Bill. There are a couple of issues that we will come back to at a later stage.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the Minister of State, I welcome guests of Senator Pat Casey, the Haugh family from Limerick, Kay, Lisa, Fiona and Gerry. You are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Thanks for coming in today. I hope you enjoy your time in Leinster House.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I also welcome all our guests in the Gallery.

An Cathaoirleach: Normally when a group comes in from a school, there is no homework. I ask the Minister to let them know that there is no homework for the rest of the week.

Deputy Alan Dillon: To keep with tradition, we would love if your teachers could afford you the opportunity of having no homework today.

An Cathaoirleach: No, it is for the rest of the week.

Deputy Alan Dillon: For the rest of the week, which is even better again.

I thank all the Senators who have contributed to this debate and for their constructive and positive tone in regards to the transfer of Microfinance Ireland into State ownership. Many Senators have outlined the vital role the organisation plays in supporting small businesses with the challenges that many of them have when starting out through assessing their financial model and ensuring they have access to capital when it is required in order that they can bring ideas, determination and talent to the next stage of their business journey. That is essentially what we are all trying to achieve in this Bill.

To Senator Lynch's point on a review of the current €50,000 limit, we will certainly keep that under consideration and review and assess the appropriateness of responding to the needs of businesses. It is important that when this organisation is set up its board and CEO will be accountable to the Oireachtas and the Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and there will be exchanges on what we are hearing in our communities, through the different

chambers of commerce and business organisations, about the appropriateness of that limit. We can discuss this further as the Bill progresses.

As I said earlier, the measures in the Bill place Microfinance Ireland on a more secure and sustainable footing for the years ahead. Bringing the organisation into State ownership will ensure a clearer alignment with the wider enterprise support system and strengthen its collaboration with the local enterprise offices. That is important because we know that when many businesses start up they engage with the local enterprise offices, which have a local reach in our towns and villages. The LEOs also give free advice which will now be even more structured. They play a central role in supporting small businesses in our localities.

By establishing the foundations through this Bill, we are enabling Microfinance Ireland to expand its capacity, extend its reach and continue to be responsive to needs and demands right across our economy. The Bill will also ensure that microenterprises that rely on Microfinance Ireland can continue to access essential finance when it is most needed. We have seen significant results in regard to Microfinance Ireland. Over 6,000 loans have been approved and over 11,800 jobs supported, with grants of over €102 million already distributed.

I look forward to Senators' continued engagement as the Bill progresses to Committee Stage. I thank them again for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Ollie Crowe: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 21 April 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.05 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.05 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.05 p.m. and resumed at 5.05 p.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: We are due to commence No. 3 but as the Dáil is having a vote I will ask for a suspension until after the Dáil vote. While we are in session, I welcome the delegation from Ukraine. They are most welcome to the Seanad in Ireland. They are here with the ambassador, who is welcome as well, and the chair of the Ireland-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Group, Senator McCarthy, who is hosting them here today.

I pay particular tribute to the people of Ukraine and President Zelenskyy, who has been a guest in Ireland and has addressed a joint sitting of both Chambers. I also met the President when I was in Kyiv and Bucha. I saw at first hand the horrors that have befallen the people of Ukraine and the bravery they showed when attacked. It is hard to believe how many years ago it is now. We understand what it is to be occupied and to have people try to take over your country, and the acts of violence and genocide that continue to be committed against the people

of Ukraine. We welcome them to our Parliament. Hopefully, we will be able to support them during our Presidency of the European Union. I invite Senator McCarthy to say a few words on the record, as he is the chair of the Ireland-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Group.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: Thank you so much for being here today. I mentioned during our meeting downstairs that in 2022, when the war broke out in Ukraine and so many Ukrainians came to Ireland, I had the privilege of hosting first of all ten, then 20, then 30 and then 40 of them. Through the organisation I am involved with, Tiglin, we have over 150 Ukrainians living with us in our community, but not only in our community. They are part of our social fabric, part of the football teams, the social enterprises and are certainly welcome members. As we had the meeting downstairs, it was evident that the Irish people stand behind the people of Ukraine. They certainly have support from this side of the House. We really appreciate them being here today. I thank the Cathaoirleach for welcoming us.

An Cathaoirleach: I see the Dáil vote is still going on. I will ask the Acting Leader to propose a suspension of the House until the Dáil vote is concluded.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I propose the suspension of the House until the Dáil vote is concluded.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 5.08 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.12 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.08 p.m. and resumed at 5.12 p.m.

Homelessness: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: As the vote in the Dáil has now concluded, we are back to statements on homelessness. The Minister of State is most welcome to Seanad Éireann. The debate will take the normal pattern. The Minister of State will speak for ten minutes followed by group spokespersons for eight minutes. All other Senators have four minutes and the Minister will reply in or around 6.20 p.m.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): It is an honour to be in the Seanad today to talk about such an incredibly important issue, that is, homelessness in Ireland. I will set out the new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030, which is building on the progress made in recent years to increase housing delivery across the board and social housing, in particular. The Minister, Deputy Browne, will conclude today's discussion by outlining the many actions in the new housing plan that are targeted at ending homelessness.

The Government is acutely aware that homelessness is the single most pressing social issue that we face and of the impact that experiences of homelessness have on households and children, in particular. With this in mind, the programme for Government and the new housing plan reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to working towards ending homelessness by 2030.

Increased supply is key to addressing homelessness. Last year saw the highest number of homes completed in more than a decade at more than 36,000. Delivering homes, building communities builds on the achievements and progress already made under Housing for All to further accelerate housing delivery. The key difference between Housing for All and this plan is a greater emphasis on creating the environment for more homes. To deliver more homes at speed, the State will indeed do more but this plan will also empower others, particularly the private sector, to play their part.

A significantly greater supply of housing can be achieved through a balanced approach focused on both directly supporting people to have a home of their own but also creating the best possible conditions for the industry to build and activate more homes. This new plan commits to the building of 300,000 new homes. By the end of 2030, there will be 72,000 additional new build social homes built for those in our society that need them most. Our goal remains a housing system that truly serves the needs of our people. This is why we are committed to also providing 90,000 affordable housing supports. Delivering homes, building communities is ambitious, but the Government is fully committed to making it a reality. This is an integrated housing and homelessness plan that reaffirms the whole-of-government approach to addressing the housing crisis. It will ensure that the funding and strategies deployed to address housing and homelessness are fully aligned at all times.

Direct funding for housing is at record levels. In 2026 alone, over €9 billion in capital funding will be provided through the Exchequer, the Land Development Agency and the Housing Finance Agency. A supply of housing and accommodation, in particular social, as well as affordable and private, remains the essential solution to addressing the challenges of homelessness and precarious living conditions in the longer term. A total of 36,284 new dwellings were completed in 2025. This represents a 20.4% increase on the same period in the previous year. This marks the highest number of completions recorded in any given year since the CSO began recording this data series in 2011. In 2025, a total of 9,089 new build social homes were constructed. This is the highest delivery level on record. It is an increase of 1,256 homes, or a 16% increase, compared to 2024. Over 42,000 new build social homes have been delivered between 2022 and 2025. The latest figures show that 3,423 new homes were commenced in February of this year, an increase of 232% compared to the same period last year. Combined with January's figures, 5,469 new homes have commenced since the start of the year, an increase of 147% on the 2,214 units commenced during the same period in 2025. To put things in a clearer perspective, across 2024 and 2025 combined, a total of 85,723 units were commenced. This represents an increase of 43% compared with the combined total for the previous two-year period.

Delivering homes, building communities takes pragmatic action across a number of different policy areas to boost housing supply, while ensuring that the new homes delivered support people who need them most. These two key objectives provide the foundational pillars in the plan: activating supply and supporting people. The first pillar, activating supply, is about removing structural barriers to homebuilding and ensuring we deliver 300,000 new homes in the lifetime of this plan. This includes measures aimed at unlocking land, reforming planning, delivering infrastructure and creating the conditions needed to increase investment in housing supply. Reaching the target of 300,000 new homes will only be achieved through the individual and collective effort of the key delivery partners. Local authorities, together with approved housing bodies, the Land Development Agency and the construction sector will be critical to

delivering and enabling the delivery of the quantum of homes needed over the lifetime of the plan. Central government will provide the policy, regulatory and funding frameworks to support housing delivery.

Further to this, delivering homes, building communities is enabled by the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State. A total of €275 billion will be invested over the next ten years under the national development plan to significantly upgrade our infrastructure and make the environment for building homes much better. This cannot be overstated. This includes almost €20 billion to supply the delivery of the 72,000 social homes and 90,000 affordable home supports over the next five years. It also includes €12.2 billion for water and wastewater services and €3.5 billion in equity funding for ESB Networks and EirGrid to make sure that we have the capacity in these vital services to make housing connections as and when they are needed. The Uisce Éireann investment is particularly significant.

In January this year, the Government announced a new multi-annual €1 billion housing infrastructure investment fund to support direct investment in housing enabling infrastructure. The new fund will be managed by the housing activation office and will complement investment by infrastructure agencies, such as Uisce Éireann and ESB Networks, as part of a more co-ordinated approach. It will focus on projects that can move quickly and at scale. We want strong, deliverable projects that can hit the ground running and start unblocking housing delivery immediately.

Housing delivery is at the centre of the revised national development plan. We are investing €102 billion over the next five years, an additional €33.9 billion on the previous NDP allocation. Overall investment of over €40 billion will be provided for housing and related water services to 2030. This funding will support vital water infrastructure projects, address historic bottlenecks in the system and accelerate us towards our delivery targets. Over the lifetime of the plan, we will deliver an average of 12,000 new social homes each year. This is an unprecedented commitment. In parallel, we will provide an average of 15,000 affordable housing supports annually through the starter homes programme and related initiatives.

The help to buy and the first home scheme continue to bridge the gap for first-time buyers struggling with deposits and mortgage limits. These schemes are not abstract policy instruments; they are enabling thousands of households to purchase their first home.

Budget 2026 has continued the record level of investment in social housing, with €2.9 billion in capital allocated to support the delivery of social homes by local authorities. This continued investment in the social housing programme will increase the supply of stock available to allocate to households on the social housing waiting list, including households in emergency accommodation.

The Government is not burying its head in the sand when it comes to homelessness. We are acutely aware there are far too many people in homelessness. Over 17,000 is unacceptable, and we as Government are trying to move every possible lever of the State to ensure we deliver homes at speed and at scale so that we can reduce these homelessness figures. We have significantly increased direct investment in addressing homelessness, but as well as that, we are enabling an environment where the public and private sectors can contribute to the solutions when it comes to homelessness. We appreciate people in emergency accommodation, people

on our streets and people who find themselves in homelessness go through incredible difficulty – . We understand and appreciate the turmoil and how this upends their lives.

I assure the House - and the Minister, Deputy Browne, will elaborate on this in his closing statement - that as a Government, we are doing everything possible to ensure we can end homelessness in Ireland once and for all

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Minister of State for his opening statement. He is correct in what he has said there on increased supply in addressing homelessness. The Government is focused on making sure everyone has access to good quality, affordable and secure homes that suit their needs. Over €9 million in capital funding will be made available this year alone.

The housing plan recognises that homelessness is the single most pressured social issue we face, and the Government has introduced several key measures to address homelessness, ensuring the implementation of these measures is a priority in 2026. Prevention of homelessness in the first instance is essential. The Department and the Government have many prevention initiatives under way. It is welcome that the Minister met with all the local authority chief executives last October and laid bare to them that our number one priority is housing delivery and breaking down the roadblocks. First and foremost, however, it is about ensuring people who need to stay in their homes can stay in those homes, are supported in their homes and that the local authority is there to support them and the Department is there to support the local authority.

While that is reassuring, he is also a Minister of action and funding. This includes the provision of social and affordable housing, HAP and homelessness HAP, and a strong tenancy protection legislation. To ensure a fully aligned all-of-government approach under the plan, we are committed to developing a national homelessness prevention framework, within which homelessness can be prevented in a structured and planned way with tailored prevention measures for each potential risk cohort.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are many elements to homelessness. There is the youth homelessness strategy, which has been in place for the past three years and has introduced a range of new measures, including housing supports for youth in shared accommodation schemes. Budget 2026 provided a total of €563 million to address homelessness, and this includes €513 million in current funding to ensure local authorities can provide sufficient emergency accommodation as well as essential related Housing First provisions for homelessness prevention support.

In all of the measures provided, it is very important that the staff on the front line of our local authority have a clear understanding of how situations can evolve and change, particularly in their own housing stock where people will present. I am on the Traveller committee, so I have first hand experience of hearing this from the Traveller community. Travellers present and sometimes, they do not feel their voices are heard from a domestic point of view. I ask that staff on the front line of our local authorities be very open and understanding of the need and that when situations evolve, women at risk need to be prioritised. We do it very well and we did it very well during Covid, but sometimes there are isolated cases where they do not feel their voices are being heard. We need to reflect on that. Where there is vulnerability and where children at risk, we need to think of that.

In the same way, we need to look at youth homelessness. It is an area we are addressing but I believe we have more capacity on it. I welcome the announcement from the Minister for higher and further education, Deputy Lawless, on what is happening around student accommodation. Much of the time when I hear about youth homelessness in Galway, I hear it at the start of the college year when young people cannot find accommodation.

Any levers that can be worked within the Department should be worked to find the opportunities to bring accommodation on stream, particularly for students going back to college. This is a real worry for parents when they let them go for the first time. The Department is working with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, on this and that is very welcome, particularly for kids who have to travel a long distance and do not have the luxury of the bus or car home. Not sleeping rough and pretending everything is okay just to be at college is not enough.

I also worry about those who are in irregular tenancies that have never been regularised, but the laws the Government has brought in in the past six months have given landlords the security for tenure, knowing where they stand, with the same for the tenant. From what the Minister of State has said there, from the notes he has provided and from the investment of €9 million, I know a lot of funding is going into it. He is right that 17,000 people on a homelessness list is nothing we are proud of but Government is working to ensure we can reduce it at all times.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, who are here for the world Parkinson's association conference, which is being held in the Powerscourt Hotel in the next few days: Professor David Burn, president of University of Galway; Dr. Susan Fox, president-elect from Toronto; Dr. Jennifer Gorman, secretary of Barrow Neurological Institute, Chicago; Professor Marcello Merello, secretary-elect of head movements disorders from Buenos Aires, Argentina; Professor Carolyn Sue, president-elect and chair of neurodegeneration from the University of New South Wales, Sydney; Professor Victor Fung, past president from Sydney; and Jenny from Milwaukee, as well as Zack, Kay and Aileen.

They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann and I thank them for all the valuable work they do in relation to Parkinson's. We are delighted to have them here.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for being here.

In 2016, I was asked to present to the Oireachtas housing and homelessness committee, as it was back then. It was long before I knew what a Senator was and long before I became one, but I tried to make a difference in the area of marginalisation and homelessness, and I helped to set up an organisation called Tiglin. We were asked to appear before the housing committee and we spoke to the then Minister, Simon Coveney, who gave an undertaking that homelessness would be eradicated by 2020. Homelessness and emergency accommodation numbers at the time were around 6,000. Now, ten years later, and this is not to criticise anybody but just to say, we are at nearly three times that level in emergency accommodation. We have over 17,000 homeless people now, with more than 5,500 of those being children.

When I entered this House last March, there were 15,286 people in emergency accommodation and I wrote it on my whiteboard. I thought, "Let us see that number coming

down." Now, I get the numbers - I see Ailbhe Conneely from RTÉ putting them up - and I go "Oh no, this is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy of negativity and we are losing a generation." The numbers are nearly losing their meaning, so we have to be careful of that. Behind these numbers are children who are growing up in hotel rooms, doing their homework in bathrooms and who have no kitchen.

It is not just homelessness here. We are losing out with a lot of childhoods being compromised. There is the potential to stunt growth before it even begins. Recently at the Lighthouse, our homeless cafe on Pearse Street where I usually do Thursday evenings, a family came in who were living on Gardiner Street. They are in a family hub. They had a social house, but the father had complex needs, and he fell behind with the rent. The rent arrears were approximately €14,000, which cannot be allowed either. The father, mother and two children were made homeless. The young guy came in with his mother and they were looking for food and I got talking to him. He wanted to be a basketball player. He plays basketball in Tallaght and that is his dream. Unfortunately, he is now living in the hub in Gardiner Street but is commuting to play basketball. Surely to goodness there is a better way and a better solution. I have met and sat with these families. I have seen children trying to grow up like that. We are failing them today and I certainly feel we are shaping their future.

I mentioned I was at Tiglin at lunchtime. The reality we encounter on the front line is that some people are working but cannot afford to pay rent and eat so they are taking advantage of the food circumstances. We also have the residential supported housing, which is vital for people with a dual diagnosis of mental health issues, addiction, etc. The report today by Ailbhe Conneely on RTÉ highlights the number of deaths among homeless people. In 2022, 124 people died. That is slightly down from 133 in 2021 but these are people who have died alone on the streets. That also shows that too many people are falling through the cracks, particularly those with dual diagnosis where it is a housing issue, a health issue and an addiction issue. However, none of those services are joined up and they have to be. Ailbhe Conneely's report shows that we have to reflect on the figures and ask what is going wrong. Everybody should have the opportunity to access recovery, stability, housing and be supported. I have also seen the good side of the Lighthouse where we feed up to 500 people per day.

A couple of weeks ago I was at the Merrion Hotel across the road from these Houses for a wedding. I cannot afford lunch in the Merrion Hotel, never mind a wedding. It was the wedding of a guy I met when he was homeless and living in St. Stephen's Green. He came to us as a service user. He had no education, so we got him into college. He started a degree. He did a master's degree and another master's degree. He managed to do well and got married in the Merrion Hotel a couple of weeks ago. When the opportunity is given, the bed that is offered becomes stability. Stability becomes education and education leads to employment, which then offers dignity. That chap will be here tomorrow. His story is well-known so I am not divulging secrets. He will be in the audiovisual room tomorrow as CEO of a national organisation giving a presentation. It is at 10.30 a.m. tomorrow if anybody is able to get around. I have mentioned it to Senator Tully.

A lot of people who use services like Tiglin hear that Ireland is one of the wealthiest countries in Europe. They hear that we have a strong economy, but when people are in emergency accommodation or the family hub on Gardiner Street, they do not feel it. They feel totally different from everybody else who has been mentioned in this strong economy. It is

essential we bridge that gap and acknowledge and deal with what people are actually experiencing through supportive housing opportunities. That is what I put to the committee in 2016.

The Simon Community's report was also released yesterday. It was all about how single adults, mainly males, are falling through the cracks. It is impossible to get accommodation. One-bedroom apartments are not being built. A lot of people on the Simon Community's report did not come into the system the way we might think. They came through broken marriages and failed job opportunities, etc. It amounts to over 3,000 in a year, according to that report. A lot of those people are in accommodation for over a year, yet it is emergency accommodation. Emergency should be short term, but this is not emergency. It is long term. They are stuck there. HAP is not working for many. Yesterday I got an email from a guy who is entitled to HAP. However, the HAP amount he is being given will not get him anywhere in his area. It is impossible, so he is in a hostel and stuck in limbo. It is a complex situation. From my situation of dealing with people going into rehab, we get people off the streets who have addiction issues. We get them into rehab and try to get them sober. Then, where do we send them? We cannot send them back to where they got sick in the first place. We try to do supported housing. The supported housing we have is temporary and is a year. Now that is clogged up because we have nowhere to send them afterwards. When I see 17,000 homeless people in a country our size with the resources we have. I think this is a problem that should not be too hard to solve. We took in over 120,000 Ukrainians and we did it with the click of a finger because we all got together with joined-up thinking. That same co-ordination is needed today.

What do we need to do? We need more social housing. We also need more one-bed homes. I am involved in Bluebell Community Council. We are doing one-bed housing over there. We also need services that work together like mental health, addiction and homeless supports. If we act properly and get that together, we will look back in years to come and say that the Minister, Deputy Browne, was one of the most successful housing Ministers ever. We do not want to lose a generation and that is what we are doing. I certainly do not want to be here in ten years listening to the increasing homeless numbers. Not only do we need to give these people a roof, but we need to give them a real chance like Jay Bobinac who was in the Merrion Hotel a couple of weeks ago.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister to the House. I salute my colleague Senator McCarthy for his practical contribution in this area. It is admirable. My family has an association with this question that I am proud of. My son, Eoghan, has worked for the past couple of years for the McVerry Trust in Dublin as a social care worker with the homeless. I am particularly proud of that involvement, and it makes me acutely aware of a number of the issues from conversations with him. He is passionate about these questions.

I will make a few formal comments. No one in this House is comfortable with the current homelessness figures. Every individual or family without a secure home represents a failure of systems, of supports and of supply. We must recognise both the progress that has been made and the scale of what still needs to be done. The reality is that housing delivery is moving in the right direction with supply increasing across social, affordable and private housing. That matters because ultimately the only sustainable way to reduce homelessness at scale is to build more homes. However, if we are serious about making a lasting impact, we must go further in

accelerating delivery, removing barriers and ensuring that the entire system, from planning to infrastructure, can sustain that growth.

On social housing, we need to continue scaling up delivery while also building smarter. That means expanding modern construction methods so homes can be delivered faster and more efficiently. It means maximising the potential of State-owned land through the Land Development Agency. It also means strengthening project management capacity within local authorities so delays between planning, procurement and construction are minimised. In that context, I am proud that Cavan and Monaghan have a good record on social housing but one is never comfortable that one has enough. Social housing is not just about units; it is about stability. When a family has a secure home everything becomes more possible. Children do better in school, parents can focus on work and communities become stronger and more settled.

Investing in social housing is investing in opportunity, dignity and the long-term health of our society and I am a great believer that we need to focus big in there.

On affordable housing, we need to scale up what is already working. The first home scheme is helping first-time buyers bridge the affordability gap and it has a good pick-up. While affordable purchase schemes deliver through local authorities and the Land Development Agency, LDA, is creating mixed sustainable communities, the vacant property refurbishment grant is another practical measure that is delivering. The recent croí cónaithe scheme has been a big success and the help-to-buy scheme is important in terms of a tax rebate. Across towns and villages, buildings are being brought back into use, quickly adding supply while revitalising communities. These are tangible effective tools and the priority now is to expand them, simplify access and ensure they are delivered at scale.

In the private housing sector, viability and certainty remain key. We need a planning system that provides clarity and predictability rather than delay and risk. We also need to continue incentivising the activation of vacant and derelict properties, which can be brought back into use far more quickly than new-builds. At the same time, we must ensure that regulatory and cost pressures do not unintentionally stall development. If we want private supply to increase, the system must support builders to build. As the Government cannot finance the entire investment needed to fund the level of housing requirement, we need that investment. Therefore, the private sector, twinned with the other areas, is critical to helping us build our way out of the housing crisis.

This brings me to the wider reforms under way. Increasing housing supply is not just about funding. It is about having a system that can deliver efficiently. Planning reform is central to that effort and significant attempts have been made recently. We need statutory timelines, streamlined judicial reviews and a modernised planning authority all helping to reduce delays and increase certainty. Infrastructure investment is equally critical. Homes cannot be delivered without water, wastewater, transport and utilities and that must match what is going on in the building. Government investment in these areas is already unlocking development and enabling more sustainable, higher density communities. Through regeneration funds, towns and cities are also being revitalised in a planned and co-ordinated way. Housing delivery depends on a system that works from end to end and these reforms are essential to making that happen.

Even with all of this, homelessness is not solely a housing supply issue. For many, it is the end point of a complex chain of disadvantage. Addiction remains a significant driver, with individuals caught in cycles of substance misuse often finding it extremely difficult to sustain tenancies or rebuild stability in their own lives. Our response must be routed in support for these people. That means better integration between addiction services and housing supports as well as expanding access to long-term recovery accommodation that allows people to rebuild their lives in a stable, supported environment. Mental health is another critical factor. A significant proportion of those experiencing long-term homelessness are living with untreated or undertreated mental health conditions. For too long, services have been fragmented, allowing people to fall through the cracks. We need a system that is integrated, community based and responsive, one where mental health and addiction supports are delivered together and where intervention happens early rather than at a crisis point.

We must continue to increase housing supply across the social, affordable and private sectors. That is essential, but it is not sufficient on its own. If we are serious about reducing homelessness, we must match increased supply with deeper supports tackling addiction, improving mental health services and ensuring that no one is left behind by a system that is meant to support them. Homelessness is a challenge we can address with the right investment and the right determination and it behoves us all to try to do that.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): Before I call on the next speaker, I welcome Jane and Peter Maher from the Ballyglunin development to the Seanad this afternoon, along with my good colleague Deputy Albert Dolan. I also see Deputy Martin Kenny arriving with some of his friends and guests as well this evening. Not to leave anybody out, they are all very welcome.

In the Sinn Féin slot, I call Senator McCormack. Is the Senator sharing time?

Senator Maria McCormack: Yes, with Senator Andrews.

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

Senator Maria McCormack: Homelessness has become normalised in Ireland. That is the sad fact we are dealing with. I want to bring the House back to 2014, when it was already widely acknowledged that we were in the midst of a housing crisis. The tragic death of Jonathan Corrie just outside Leinster House shocked people and caused outrage. Mr. Corrie's death was described as a national disgrace. More beds were promised, a night café was established to give homeless people somewhere safe to go and there was talk of how the Government's 2013 promise to end long-term homelessness by 2016 might be achieved. In case someone is looking at this debate on "Reeling in the Years", we are now in 2026 and this has not happened.

As I am in this Chamber here, I received a message from my local bin company telling me my bin charges will go up from May 2026. I got a message yesterday from my local bus operator that brings my child to school telling me the bus fee will go up by another €5. We wonder how we have this.

Many more homeless people since Jonathan Corrie have died on our streets. There has been less outrage, less surprise and, even worse, even less effective action by successive Governments. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government for ten years, first through a confidence-and-supply arrangement in 2016 and then in two formal coalition Governments. During that decade, 55,000 adults have been forced into homelessness. These are the real figures. The 2016 census showed that just under 7,000 people were homeless in Ireland. Ten years on, here we are with record numbers, rising month on month. We are now at 17,300 recorded as homeless. Nobody is shocked any more. We are having statements on it in the Seanad. Sadly, homelessness is normalised. There continues to be chronic underinvestment and underdelivery in social and genuinely affordable homes. Each housing plan the Government comes up with contains low social and affordable housing targets, targets that are, even at that, consistently missed each year. This is the legacy. It is difficult to listen to how the Government is doing everything it can to fix this. The facts are there. It is not happening.

I will talk about prevention measures because I want to try to let people out there feel there could be solutions. People often ask, "What would Sinn Féin do if they were in government?" I want to talk about where you could put investment right now, and that is in homelessness prevention. Prevention measures would reduce long-term reliance on emergency accommodation and break the cycle of homelessness before it begins. Instead, we see frustrating statistics such as that in 2024 local authorities spent 18 times more on emergency accommodation than on homelessness prevention and supports. This reactive approach is both expensive and ineffective in addressing the root cause of homelessness. The Minister needs to start addressing the key drivers of homelessness - the biggest one at present is the private rental market - but instead he brought forward the rent hike legislation last month.

I am not exaggerating when I say that I have seen a significant increase in the number of families and individuals from Laois who are now facing homelessness in six months' time, because in recent weeks they have received an eviction notice. This is not a coincidence. I was told in this House that this would not happen. In Laois there are 1,512 people on the housing list. A total of 34% of those households are relying on private rental accommodation through HAP. That is 511 tenancies in Laois. I could stand here and speak all day about the failures in homelessness, but I am asking this Government to please put its head down and look properly at what it can do because we cannot normalise homelessness anymore.

Senator Chris Andrews: I thank the Minister of State. It is really important to have statements on homelessness and the new housing policy, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. The people I meet and the people who call my office every single day, some of them crying, upset and requiring additional support services, do not see any delivery of homes. We just have to look at the family hubs. In the north inner city you can see the huge number of hotels and the family hubs. They are all behind the statistics the Minister of State came out with. There is no sense that homes are being delivered. When we look at 17,000 people homeless, the evidence suggests the Government has given up trying to solve the housing crisis and the homelessness crisis because its members talk about levers, commitments and plans, but the reality is the people sleeping in doorways around the city and down along the quays do not see any delivery of homes.

The Government talks about affordable homes. A total of 550 homes were due to be delivered on the Irish Glass Bottle site in Ringsend. It claims those 550 homes are all going to

be affordable - that is debatable - but there will be affordable rental. Families, almost certainly from the area - ordinary working families with average pay - will not be able to afford to live in those so-called affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site.

The other part of that housing policy is building communities. The only community it seems to be building is a homeless community. There are 5,000 children in homeless accommodation as a result of the failures of this Government; 5,000 children who have no home to go to and have no prospect of a home under this Government. We have a situation where the Minister for housing has not met the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group. The group has gone through four housing Ministers and this Minister will not meet them. He has refused to meet the residents in Pearse House, even though he pulled the regeneration programme there.

Homelessness is solvable - it absolutely is solvable - but it is not solvable if there is no commitment to invest in public housing and to developing social housing. The Irish Glass Bottle site was a perfect example of a site where the Government could have put public housing. The Government sold off Camden Yard when it was under the Department of education's brief. The buyers went bankrupt and now it seems there is public housing going to go on that site. Why did the Government not just put public housing on it in the first place? The Government does not have a commitment. It does not have a handle on addressing the homeless crisis.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): Is Senator Cosgrove sharing time?

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Yes. Time will be shared between three of us.

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

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: The Minister of State is very welcome. It has been said here before that we all know people who have found themselves homeless who never in their wildest dreams would have imagined they would be in that situation. In February, as was said, there were 17,300 people homeless, including almost 5,500 children. That does not include people sleeping on couches and in spare rooms with friends or family, which often happens in rural areas. It also does not include rough sleepers.

We know that the biggest cause of homelessness is people being evicted from private rental, and we can see as a direct result of the residential tenancies Bill that 43% of homeless figures are made up of people who have been given notices to quit. Just this week, on the train to Dublin, I was approached by a young mother from Leitrim who works in a Government Department. She has been issued with a notice of termination from a landlord whom she rented from for five years. The week before it was a family who have been in long-term rental through the local authority and the landlord decided to sell. The week before that it was a single woman who successfully maintained a tenancy for 14 years. The week before that it was a single man expressing suicidal ideation because of his homelessness. A friend of mine with children has lived in a tenancy for 14 years. Her children have lived with her and grown up there and they have been served with an eviction notice. An elderly lady living in rural Ireland, down the road in Sligo has been served with a notice from her landlord, whom she still describes as being very decent to her. Homelessness has become normalised. I know the Minister of State is very

aware of the following and has been instrumental, and I am very appreciative of that, as are the people in Sligo and Enniscrone. However, for anyone who does not know this, six households of elderly and disabled people got a notice to quit, an eviction notice from our retirement village in Enniscrone. What kind of society have we come to if we are coming to that?

We know that when children are denied a home and physical shelter, it not only affects their development at the time but it can cause developmental regression. As a party, we have been in government, as have Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and there does not seem to be a sense of urgency. Senator McCormack spoke about Jonathan Corrie. I remember when he died. We can all remember that, and it was shocking. When Labour left Government in 2016, homelessness was at 6,000 people. It was being treated as an emergency by then Minister, Deputy Kelly. In just ten years, homelessness levels have soared by almost 150%. A construction company is something we have been calling for for a long time, and to go back on the reset clause. That has caused mayhem.

This will never be normal. This has been caused by poor decision making on the part of the Minister of State's party and that of Fine Gael.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: The Government speaks about the progress it is making on housing, and I appreciate that is something it feels it has to do, but it is meaningless for a lot of us in the face of the growing number of evictions we see and the people entering homelessness. It is a very different reality from the updates we hear from both of the Ministers who have been in the room. The reality we hear is fear of an eviction notice, not being able to afford rent in a cost-of-living crisis, of overcrowding, and of the hidden homeless who are living in their parents' homes. It is not being able to leave a domestic violence situation because there is simply nowhere to go. The official homeless figures are increasing all the time - we all know that - and we know that is actually only part of the problem, because there are so many more people who are experiencing hidden homelessness and who are not counted in those figures.

At the same time, let us talk about dereliction and vacant properties. In Carlow-Kilkenny, there are almost 2,000 vacant properties lying empty when we know so many families are struggling to find somewhere to live. We have homes without families and families without homes. That is ridiculous in the crisis we are in. There are 2,000 homes lying empty and vacant in Carlow-Kilkenny in one of the worst housing crisis emergencies. Why do we not have a vacant property tax with teeth that actually stops people allowing these homes and properties to stand empty?

According to the Residential Tenancies Board, more than 5,200 eviction notices were issued in just the final three months of last year, a 41% increase on the previous year. Over the year, more than 20,000 tenants received notices to quit. We heard a lot in the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan's contribution about social housing and that is obviously important, but it is also about public housing. There are plenty of people who have the salaries. It is not that they need the support from the State to rent somewhere; they have the money to rent. They have the money to buy, but there is simply nowhere to rent or buy. In Carlow, for example, in 2024 there were two affordable homes available or built - two in all of Carlow in 2024.

The Social Democrats have continued to point out the successive failures and issues with our housing policy.

6 o'clock

The housing crisis is not new, it is systemic and it has become normalised. As we have heard from other Senators, we just accept these figures every week. We have an over-reliance on the private sector. There is no ban on no-fault evictions. The new rent controls have actually led to people being evicted, as we said would happen. There were 36 evictions in Wexford two days before the Bill came in, for example. There are more than 8,600 entire homes listed on Airbnb in Ireland with short-term lets now vastly outnumbering the number of long-term rentals in many areas. In communities across Carlow-Kilkenny, people can see exactly what is happening. Homes are vacant or are being used for short-term profit and tenants are being pushed out through rising evictions. There is no mystery here. It is the direct chain of cause and effect, Government policy, more evictions and rising homelessness.

Senator Laura Harmon: It feels as though I am banging my head off a brick wall when I am talking about housing and homelessness. It feels like Groundhog Day every month when new homeless figures are released on a Friday afternoon to avoid maximum media exposure. More than 17,000 people are recorded as homeless. Those represent lives on pause, lives stunted, children living in hotels and doing their homework on hotel floors and not being able to play with their friends. It involves shame for people that does not belong to them, as well as poverty and exclusion. It also involves trauma that we have to deal with collectively as a society. People living in homelessness are more likely to become sick. They suffer chronic stress levels that we in this House or in the Houses of the Oireachtas cannot imagine.

I will talk about some other statistics which may show that many people within the Oireachtas are out of touch with what is actually happening in relation to homelessness. Only 3% of Members of the Oireachtas are renting, that is, eight people, according to a survey by *The Irish Times* last year, compared with one in three households in Ireland. One in five TDs or 25%, identify as landlords, as compared to between 5% and 7% of the general population. One in three TDs own a second property, be that a home, another rental or land. In the real world, this is simply not the case. We need to ensure we are in touch when making legislation affecting people's lives. One in five children in this country are living in poverty. One in eight people over 65 are living in poverty. That rises to 40% for those renting. We need to protect renters to ensure they are not falling into homelessness. There were 20,000 evictions in 2025. Single people are the fastest group falling into homelessness. I do not know what we are going to do but this is not moving in the right direction.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): I call Senator Alice-Mary Higgins, who is sharing time with Senator Flynn. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: We have heard the stark figures everybody has been outlining. The sad thing is homelessness is related to, flows from and has been accepted for far too long as an unfortunate side consequence of Government policy, which has focused constantly on the property market and on housing and development, rather than on the issue of housing as homes and as shelter. The figures are stark. I will focus on the period from July 2014 when there were 3,258 people homeless. In March 2026 there were 17,308. That is a 431% increase. We need to cut through the narrative that we have been doing our best and we are picking up the pace. It has been getting worse over the period while the same parties were in government and

constantly taking a similar approach. The official figures indicate a 431% increase in those in emergency accommodation and a 628% increase in children in emergency accommodation over the past ten years. Those figures do not include those in State emergency homeless accommodation, those in own-door temporary accommodation or those in domestic violence refuges. They do not include asylum seekers or those sleeping rough. They do not include the thousands of hidden homeless who are staying with friends and families in insecure situations. They do not include those with disabilities or older people who are in congregated settings that are unsuitable for them because those with disabilities should be accommodated under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, that we passed, being supported in independent housing. Those people do not feature. There is a line in the new strategy on disability and housing that I welcome. However, that does not feature in these stark figures. These are the missing pieces. Those shocking figures are in fact worse.

Alongside that we have to look at the money-making and the fact that average rent since 2014 has doubled and house prices have increased by 91% in less than ten years. Wages have not doubled. No other aspect of life has doubled for people but rent and house prices have doubled. This is the tension because the Government has consistently focused on supporting the housing market and those whose goals, legitimate goals from a shareholder's perspective, are about making the most out of the property market. The Government has constantly gone to those same people and asked them what would they like. They want what makes them more profits: fewer sticks, less pressure, less regulation, lower standards and public subsidies for private profit-making. Time and again that has been given. The rules have been bent or abandoned, capital gains tax waivers here, suspension of normal planning process there and it has not delivered.

I welcome the recognition of the need for direct delivery now. There is a fundamental issue in that the new strategy still has the language of old build programmes. It mentions that they cannot rely on Part V and turnkeys because they are negated by conditions. The former Minister, Paschal Donohoe was always praised for his supposed fiscal prudence, yet he missed a five-year window during which the EU fiscal rules were suspended, when the State could and should have invested in housing and when the Opposition was crying out for it. In that five-year period, zero percent loans were available. We heard repeatedly that we need private investment and private investment will have to be encouraged. Private investment is encouraged by making sure it is not paying taxes back to the State at the same level and by making sure developers get their money back for connections. This is all public subsidising to bridge what has been called the viability gap. In fact, the State could have been building. It had a surplus and a suspension of the fiscal rules, it had access to zero percent financing and wasted that five-year period. It has again become a discussion about the viability gap and how to get private finance moving. That needs to be acknowledged when we move forward. There is still a huge focus on mobilising private investment and not on public investment. That public investment is now in a more difficult circumstance than it would have been if we had taken the opportunity when it was there.

Another opportunity was there in 2017, when our group brought forward legislation on vacant properties. That is almost a decade ago. We were told it was constitutionally difficult to do anything in that area.

However, we still see a bad plan. Regarding vacant properties, it is still the plan that local authorities are meant to track them down. One of the big gaps is that this money does not go back into local authorities. If that money were allowed to become part of the fund that local authorities could then use to develop for housing, that would have made a difference in terms of the appallingly poor application of derelict housing and vacant property taxes.

I will finish by talking about the quality of emergency accommodation. The Department does not give us the figures for how long, but we know 3,000 single households have been in it for more than one year while 1,400 have been in emergency accommodation for more than two years. Many families are raising children in emergency accommodation that is not appropriate or developmentally safe for children. The Barnados report has been clear on this. In his response, will the Minister of State talk about how he will address this in the delivery of housing and how he will address those forgotten groups, including asylum seekers, migrants, those with disabilities and other groups? Will he talk about how he plans to address the issue of emergency accommodation, its quality and people's rights within it? Will he elaborate on the focus on new-build programmes and the move away from Part V and turnkey pieces? Whenever there is a recession, that is when we see those projects and those public-private partnerships fold and social housing so often takes the hit. How will we ensure that we are doing direct build? Is a State construction company still on the table?

Senator Pauline Tully: Many people have referred to the numbers of homeless, which continually rise. There are over 17,000 at this stage, including nearly 5,500 children. Worryingly, more and more people over 65 are facing homelessness. The fact that older people, who have lived their lives and contributed so much to the State, can find themselves in emergency accommodation is a terrible indictment of this State.

I commend Cavan County Council, which does huge work in trying to prevent people from going into homelessness. The council is successful but, unfortunately, it just cannot accommodate everybody and some people have to be put in emergency accommodation. Cavan does not have any hostel. It has two bed and breakfasts that the council uses as emergency accommodation for families. Beyond that, it has to send people to the hostel in Dundalk run by the Simon Community or down to a bed and breakfast in Roscommon. People do not want to go because they are too far away and are very hard to get to. There is no good transport route to those places and people want to stay in their own county. What happens then is that we see a lot of hidden homelessness, with people sofa-surfing or staying in their parents' box room. I see quite a number who are sleeping rough at times and then maybe staying on their friend's sofa at other times. Increasingly, a large number of young men are affected. Single people tend to be on the housing waiting list the longest. I am trying to help number of young men at the moment, many of whom have addiction problems. Some of them have been in and out of prison. It is a chicken and egg situation. There is no out for them. There are no community-based supports, wraparound supports or the addiction or mental health supports they need to sustain a tenancy. Until we have those supports, they are going to continue to be in and out of prison causing problems in society. Some of them will actually say they sometimes end up getting sent to prison on purpose because they want somewhere warm and dry to sleep and to get a few meals, which is terrible. We need to incorporate Sharing the Vision, the mental health strategy, into our homelessness prevention framework as well, put

those wraparound supports in place for people who require them and ensure they can enjoy a sustainable tenancy.

I have also come across a number of care leavers who are not getting the required support to get them into accommodation either. This is an already very vulnerable group who have been in the care system, maybe with different foster families, and are now out on their own. They not getting sufficient support and some of them are ending up homeless as well and sleeping rough.

Senator Higgins mentioned people in congregated settings and I absolutely agree with her. It also brings to mind the Before I Die campaign. This involves a large number of adults with intellectual disabilities or autism in their 20s, 30s, 40s or 50s who are living with elderly parents. These adults are on the housing list but are not being accommodated, not because the local authority is not willing to accommodate them but because the HSE is not willing to put in the care and support plan. We need to see an awful lot more co-operation between local authorities and HSE to ensure the supports are put in for those people to be able to live independently. If a parent is no longer able to provide the care or passes away, that vulnerable person is put into emergency accommodation or an emergency residential setting, which is often far away from family and friends and their day service. The person is trying to cope with grieving for a lost parent as well as a new living arrangement, which is very unfair.

Many families who are above the social housing threshold and have received eviction letters do not qualify for social housing or any other supports but cannot afford the enormous rents being asked for private rented accommodation and are left in limbo. They are not earning enough to look for a mortgage but they are earning too much to be on the social housing list. A lot of families are caught in that loophole and we need to address that without delay.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): The Minister of State has to be called to reply at 6.20 p.m. but he now has to go for a vote in the Dáil.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 6.17 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.29 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.17 p.m. and resumed at 6.29 p.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

Acting Chairperson (Senator Anne Rabbitte): I call the Acting Leader.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I propose that notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or the order of the House today, the statements on homelessness shall adjourn at 6.30 p.m., if not previously concluded.

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

Investment in Youth Work: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: The combined speeches of the proposer and seconder shall not exceed 16 minutes and all other Senators will have six minutes. I welcome the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, to the House, for this important debate. The debate will commence with the proposer of the motion, Senator Tully.

Senator Pauline Tully: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

recognises:

- youth work is defined in the Youth Work Act, 2001 as ‘a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is (a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and (b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations’;
- Ireland’s national policy objectives for all children and young people aged under 25 years are set out in Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028 (Young Ireland);
- the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 provides for the European Youth Goals, which were designed and agreed by young people across Europe and represent young people’s vision for youth policy in Europe;
- the publication of Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy on Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028 in September 2024 which sets out a strategic direction for the delivery of youth services during the lifetime of Young Ireland;

acknowledges:

- the critical role that youth work plays in the personal, social, and educational development of young people in Ireland;
- that youth work in Ireland offers essential education, connection, belonging and support to young people;
- that young people in Ireland today face unique challenges and require dedicated policy, legislative and resourcing support from the Government;
- the need for meaningful engagement with the youth work sector, including youth workers, volunteers, and young people themselves, in the development and implementation of policies that affect them;
- that the transformative power of youth work is beneficial for young people, their families and wider communities;
- that youth work is a vital profession and youth workers must be adequately remunerated for their work;
- that places and spaces are required for the delivery of youth work;
- that volunteers make an invaluable contribution to the youth work sector in Ireland;

notes that:

- investment in the youth work sector has not kept pace with rising costs and increased demand; and that the youth work sector is largely operating from a deficit and financial uncertainty;
- the lack of multi-annual funding for the sector poses a severe administrative burden, planning difficulties and staff recruitment and retention challenges;
- out of the total National Development Plan budget for the Department of Education and Youth, just 0.265 per cent is designated for youth affairs;

calls on the Government to:

- significantly increase current investment in the youth work sector to address current funding deficits;
- establish a €75 million Young People's Spaces, Facilities and Services Fund, and collaborate with other Departments, Government agencies and local authorities to ensure that young people have places and spaces to engage with youth work;
- commit to moving core youth work funding to multi-annual funding within the next three years;
- publish an implementation plan for Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy on Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028, delivered in partnership with the youth work sector;
- consult with the sector to identify opportunities for expanded services to meet increased demand in a way that is deliverable and sustainable for the sector.

Senator Conor Murphy: I second the motion.

Senator Pauline Tully: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire chuig an bplé ar infheistíocht i seirbhísí don óige. I do not think I have to convince anyone here of the benefits of youth work and what it does for young people. It builds their confidence, develops skills and builds relationships - healthy ones, importantly. It supports positive mental health. We see emotional support and resilience and it encourages community involvement. The fact it is voluntary and not obligatory, like school is, makes all the difference. People choose to attend whatever youth club or project is in their area. It is usually flexible in that it sets out to meet the needs of the young people in the area who are the participants in the club.

For youth work to be successful, there is a need for proper financial investment to maintain both existing levels of service and for capital investment. I acknowledge there have been moderate increases in funding over the past few years in different budgets but it is not sufficient to maintain existing service levels, because it has been negated by inflation, increased employer costs and population growth. The annual city of Dublin actual cost exercise found there was an 8.1% shortfall in necessary funding for youth services and 88% of respondents to the National Youth Council of Ireland survey recently of youth groups affiliated to the council answered they were very concerned about insufficient funding. If you do not have sufficient funding, you will have issues with the provision of the service and there are issues. There are

issues with recruitment and with retention of youth workers. The staff are under pressure. They are under time pressure and are time poor. They are on reduced hours and in reduced spaces but the need is growing at the same time.

Some of the funding streams are quite difficult to manage and there are often significant disparities between allocated budgets and the true costs of delivery. We find that many of the workers, whether they are employed as youth workers within services or are voluntary youth workers, are spending their time worrying about covering the costs, overheads, rent and so on because everything is increasing in cost.

I thank the National Youth Council of Ireland for its engagement on this motion and it has done a lot of work and research with all of the participants. The current investment in existing levels of service is €90 million per year and the National Youth Council of Ireland is proposing an increase of €13 million on that, a 15% increase, to just stabilise the services. The National Youth Council of Ireland feels youth work is under pressure and needs to be stabilised and increased funding will do that. We recognise the need for multi-annual funding to allow for planning and certainty but first, the National Youth Council of Ireland wants a steady stream of investment in order that it can stabilise what is there, consolidate services on the ground, get a good base going and look at expanding from there.

In regard to capital funding there are already dedicated spaces. Many of them are ageing buildings with problems and issues that are in need of upgrade. There is not sufficient funding to actually address that. Youth Work Ireland had a presentation in the Freemasons' Hall today and I was speaking to people there who were from my own area of Cavan and Monaghan. I spoke to one youth worker who works in Clones. They have a wonderful youth service there but it is located in an older building. The building was a primary school at one time and it was rented to the service by the diocese. The roof is leaking and has been for years so a lot of damage has been done to the building and the service cannot afford or access funding to repair it. They need to be able to repair that building but it is not possible at the moment.

I spoke to another young person there and she told me that in her Foróige club there are around 20 members and around 15 on a waiting list but they cannot accommodate them because the space they meet in is so small. They need a bigger space. The need is there but they cannot meet the need. We see this all over, where the spaces are there but need upgrading or we need new or increased spaces. Not every service needs its own space; it can rent a facility, but getting a space that is sufficient in size is often difficult so we need to see an increase in the capital expenditure. In the national development plan, of the €7.5 billion that was allocated to the Department of Education and Youth, only €20 million, which is 0.265%, went to youth. That is very little.

It will be €4 million per year from this year until 2030. There is no sign of that money. Perhaps the Minister will elaborate on when even that €4 million will become available. All money is welcome and will do good, but it is not sufficient to meet the need and there needs to be increased investment. The National Youth Council of Ireland is suggesting an additional €13 million in capital finding to bring it up to €17 million per year for the next four years.

The young persons' facility and services fund was established a number of years ago to attract at-risk young people in disadvantaged areas, especially those where there were significant drug problems. We need to see that strengthened but we also need to extend that

because there are other harms now for young people. We see that online. We see rural and social isolation. We see mental health pressures and the impacts of poverty. A €75 million fund for that service to help people who are at risk and in disadvantaged areas would be very welcome.

Opportunities for Youth is the national strategy for youth work and related services. It was launched in September 2024. That was part of the general election. There is no implementation plan for it yet and we are 19 months into the strategy. I have no issue with the strategy. There are very good objectives in it. However, they cannot be realised unless we strengthen the existing services and have an implementation plan. I cannot understand launching a strategy without an implementation plan. The current plan is for just this year and we are already into the fourth month of this year and there is no sign of an implementation plan. I fear there is going to be a rush to try to reach the objectives that are laid down in that plan and that it is going to become a box-ticking exercise and a race through. I question the governance of the implementation of the plan.

No national youth work advisory committee has been established. That was provided for under the Youth Work Act but is not in existence at the moment. It was to consult with the Minister on youth work. There is talk of setting up two separate groups, but they are not yet established. I want to see that done in partnership with the sector so we ensure that those working groups can work with the Minister to implement this plan. They cannot do that without proper investment. That is vitally needed.

As I said, I met the representatives of Comhairle na nÓg earlier at Youth Work Ireland. It was interesting to talk to them. They were very capable young people. I asked them what their requests were. It was not specifically to do with youth work but they are involved in Comhairle na nÓg, which is outside school, even though it is facilitated through the school programme. Those young people are also involved in Foróige. As I said, they were talking about the lack of capacity. One of the things they asked was why there is no Leap card for young people to access public transport. They said that especially in rural areas, they have a ticket to get on the school bus to go to school. Why could there not be some sort of a ticket that they can buy and use on the school bus, as well as on Local Link and Bus Éireann services?

Those representatives also talked to me about the lack of funding for buses for trips. Coach hire has got extremely expensive, as I have heard from groups of elderly people and young people, to go anywhere on day trips or anything like that. In some areas of Dublin, Foróige clubs have specified buses that can transport people to Emerald Park or wherever they are going for the day. If people from Cavan and Monaghan want to get up there, it is very expensive. It would cost hundreds of euro to rent a coach for the day. Those people do not have the money. They are looking for more investment in buses for youth activities to bring them on trips and different things like that.

They mentioned one more issue to do with schools, which falls within the Minister's remit. That was counselling in schools. They feel too much emphasis is put on the guidance counsellor to provide counselling services. They are often not qualified counsellors. They are qualified guidance counsellors but not qualified counsellors. Young people often say they do not want to talk to the same person about education and their issues or mental health issues or whatever else they want help with. That issue also came up.

I am interested in hearing more about exactly when it is planned to have the implementation plan and how it is going to be implemented. We want to see the objectives reached, but I do not think that is possible, as I said, without the plan and without the proper investment.

Senator Chris Andrews: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. As has been said, it is important that we invest in young people and our communities. One of the issues that comes up when talking to youth workers around the inner city of Dublin is the impact of housing prices and accommodation. As Senator Tully mentioned, recruitment and retention are issues. If a youth worker is living close to the city centre or around the city centre, it is not a problem. Youth workers would like to invest and work in their local communities. It is about ensuring that more people are going through college. There is a community development and youth work course in Maynooth University. We want people working through that course. We want to produce more students from the inner city.

I am not sure if the Minister has visited the Talk about Youth club at St. Andrew's Resource Centre. It is a brilliant youth club. There is also the South Area Youth Service, SAYS, club off Mercer Street. Neither of them has its own space. They have to rent space. They do not have the resources to work with the kids. The spaces they can rent often are not big enough. That has a huge impact on the kids, who require certainty to engage in the youth work. I know that Ms Eileen Nalty in Talk about Youth and Mr. Brendan Dowling in SAYS, as well as Robbie, Louisa, Carmel and Lisa, do incredible work with the young people in an area that is being left behind. It is a very difficult area to work in. We saw the riots that happened down there. We have seen a lot of antisocial behaviour. Many kids are hard to reach and hard to work with, and they do not have the resources. As I said, they do not have the spaces. There should be more funding for outreach to ensure that those kids who are harder to react to or engage with are engaged. That is not happening.

I know that on the north side, there are quite a number of youth clubs. Because of the Mulvey report and the north-east inner city, NEIC, initiative, funding has gone in there, as the Minister will know, to ensure there is funding for youth clubs. The same cannot be said about the south side. They are effectively one community. I know the river divides them, but the north and south inner city are effectively one community. There are lots of family connections and interactions. They have the same issues. Both areas have been left behind by the State. Investment has not gone into the south inner city.

As I said, Talk about Youth does amazing work and is really committed. It has nowhere from which to work. Those involved never know if they will be able to find somewhere to rent and there is no certainty around it. The organisation finds it difficult to recruit and retain staff. Housing is so expensive in the inner city, particularly on this side of the inner city. People are competing with others whose wages come from Google and the other high-tech companies. That is who is renting all the new, modern premises. Youth workers, on youth worker salaries, are not going to be able to compete with those whose wages come from Google and the other high-tech companies. We need to get more people from the inner city through college and then they can work with the young people who are here.

I have a family member who is involved in boxing. That is youth work, although it does not fall under that remit because it is a sport. The work that boxing clubs do is absolutely incredible. The volunteers that are there are absolutely incredible. It would be great to see

some way that those clubs could get more funding. I know it is not directly related to the Minister's responsibility, but Nutgrove Boxing Club, the Dublin Docklands Boxing Club and Baldoyle Boxing Club do incredible work.

Out in Baldoyle, Christy Dunne, Ronan and Graham do absolutely incredible work with young people. They are there during the day for all-Irelands or the Dublin leagues. They bring them to sparring sessions. They do absolutely incredible work and they do it for nothing. Those clubs should be better resourced. I think of the conditions some of those clubs are in. I do appreciate it is not the Minister's responsibility but they do fantastic work with young people. That is an aside but I think it is important to acknowledge the role played by volunteers not only in boxing but in all sports clubs.

When we are talking about youth and youth services, it is crucial to focus on the housing crisis, on payments and on the need to get students from the inner city through college so they can learn the skills that are required for youth work.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Dr. Orla Murray and Helen Rose, who are guests of Senator Curley, to the Gallery. I also welcome the guests of Senator Cosgrove: Róisín O'Sullivan and Chloe Higgins. They are welcome to Seanad Éireann. I now call Senators Curley and Fitzpatrick.

Senator Shane Curley: Trí nóiméid agus trí nóiméid.

An Cathaoirleach: Ceart go leor.

Senator Shane Curley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. I want to begin by acknowledging the Sinn Féin Senators who brought it forward. I could be wrong but it is fairly clear they had closely consulted the ETB sector when they put this together. I was speaking to the head of ETB youth services in Galway during the week and it has been received very well so I commend the work they have done on the motion.

At its core the motion recognises something fundamental – that youth work is not an add-on to education or community life but is central to it. As defined in the Youth Work Act 2001, it is a structured voluntary process that supports the personal and social development of young people, complementing formal education. We in government fully recognise that. Youth work provides something that cannot always be delivered in classrooms or formal settings. It supports young people at critical stages in their lives, particularly those who are marginalised, vulnerable or at risk. It is worth stating clearly that this Government sees youth work not as a cost but as an investment in prevention, in opportunity and ultimately in stronger communities.

While the motion highlights funding pressures, and those concerns are valid, it is also important to set out clearly what is being delivered. In budget 2026, the Government allocated over €90 million in current funding for youth services, an increase of over €4.5 million on the previous year. This funding supports programmes reaching over 450,000 young people across the country. We are also seeing over €54.5 million invested in the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme, which targets young people most at risk and expands services, with new UBU projects supporting an additional 1,000 young people. Over €16.7 million is being provided for national youth organisations through the youth services grant scheme. Over 1,200 local youth clubs are

reaching more than 60,000 young people in their communities. Importantly, for the first time, we now have a multi-annual capital commitment with €4 million per year secured to 2030 for youth infrastructure. This directly addresses one of the longstanding asks from the sector around facilities and spaces. I had the honour for five years of being the chair of the youth and arts committee on GRETB. I went all across Galway and Roscommon and saw the interventions that these measures make. They really change the lives of young people, particularly marginalised young people. We saw a huge intervention with girls from both the Roma and Traveller communities to try to get them out of their houses and into the community which was really welcome.

This is not an issue of disagreement on principle. Across this House there is broad consensus on the importance of youth work. The Government's position differs slightly because we are not starting from zero - we are already increasing funding, expanding services, investing in infrastructure and implementing a long-term national strategy. While we welcome this motion and the focus it brings, our task now is to continue delivery, deepen investment and ensure sustainability. Ultimately it is about ensuring that every young person in Ireland, regardless of their background, has access to the support spaces and opportunities they need to thrive.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister for coming in for this motion. I want to commend the Sinn Féin Senators on bringing the motion forward. Not every person is born equal and not every person is lucky in the lottery of birth. The circumstances someone is born into can be greatly enhanced if they have the opportunity to have access to good schools and a good community. Youth services are an essential part of that. Youth services provide young people with the capacity to develop their confidence and life skills and to learn life skills in a safe space. I want to commend the Minister and her Department on the funding they have secured and on the support they are giving to youth services around the country.

Going back 18 years, myself and others founded a youth service in Cabra, Cabra for Youth. We are one of the independent youth services operating in the capital. Cabra for Youth grew out of the community. With the support of CDYS and now funding from the Minister's Department but also the Department of justice, we operate both a UBU and a Department of justice programme. Therefore it is unique. It allows us to do both targeted and more universal work. I would welcome a visit by the Minister if she ever had time. We would love for her to visit and to share with her our experiences. Over the 18 years, some of the first people we engaged with are now young adults and some of them are parents themselves. It is incredible to see those humans develop and grow and come back and participate. It is really important. I do not think we, as a society, have historically or traditionally understood youth services but I believe the Minister does value and understand them. It is complementary to our education system, our families and broader society.

I have a couple of asks. I want to acknowledge the increase in funding which the Minister did secure in the budget. The €90 million is significant. However, I would say, as a voluntary director on a youth service board, the costs of operating youth services have only increased right across the board. For the sector to be sustainable we really need multi-annual funding. Every year I have heartache thinking about whether we will get our allocation and how much of an allocation we will get. We have gone through some very dark times. We had to put our youth workers on a four-day week at one point when things were economically bad but we managed to sustain the service. It continues and has gone from strength to strength. When we

can pool funding from both the Minister's Department and the Department of justice, it allows us to really maximise the services. When we see young people discussing things like bullying or sexuality, learning barbering or bike skills, or learning to cook for each other, we see them develop in front of our eyes. It is invaluable.

Our staff are incredible but as a sector, professional youth workers are not adequately valued. The fact that there is no multi-annual funding inhibits career development, retention and recruitment, as the Senator mentioned. Recruitment is a constant struggle. We are lucky to have full employment in this country, and we are privileged to have an economy that is strong. We can invest and we should invest so that every young person has access. Not every young person will avail of it but every young person should have access to youth services that are both universal and targeted.

On the age cohort, it is not the same in every community but in some communities there is a need for young people from the age of eight years to be engaged. Some families really need that extra help. For others, the need will not come until much later when they are teens or maybe early 20s. It is about adequately resourcing it.

I commend the Minister and her Department on the work they are doing. I would welcome it if the Minister wished to visit. Most importantly, I ask her to use her office to engage the Government to continue to invest in and expand youth services.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I welcome Mary to the Gallery. Her husband Joe is also here but he happens to be on the wrong side of the glass here. She is sitting with great friends Karen and Michael Eccles. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. They are between two great people in the O'Reillys. I thank Joe for all his years of service to Seanad Éireann. I thank Mary as well because behind Joe is Mary keeping him on track. I thank Mary for being here. I call Senator Scahill.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The Minister is very welcome back to the Chamber. I also welcome Mary O'Reilly who has strong Roscommon links. I know she is the backbone to Senator O'Reilly.

7 o'clock

I welcome the motion from my Sinn Féin colleagues. We all know the importance of youth work. We know how it is preventative and how early intervention is very important in reducing long-term costs in health, justice and social protection. We also have to acknowledge that about 450,000 young people engage with youth services nationally every year. The work is important in terms of mental health support, social inclusion, equality, preventing early school leaving and supporting vulnerable and marginalised individuals.

Since the Minister has taken over this portfolio, she has increased funding in this sector. As Senator Curley mentioned, more than €90 million has been invested, which is a €4.5 million increase on last year. Capital funding has increased by €3.5 million, bringing it to a total of €4 million. We are, therefore, investing in this area. We have identified the problem. We on the education and youth committee are probably not giving the youth element as much time as we should, and maybe that is something that we as representatives on that committee should probably focus on.

I had the privilege last summer of visiting one of the UBU centres in Athlone with the Minister's predecessor. It was concerned with the summer meals programme. While it is still in a pilot phase, it was making an impact on the community in Athlone. I welcome that the pilot programme has been extended and further invested in. A total of 3,200 students have been supported through that scheme. The Minister has increased the funding from €500,000 to €600,000. The programme is working, we are going to get more students through it and it is going to make an impact. We have to be happy any time we can engage with more young people. The budget for UBU centres is just under €55 million and the initiative reaches just under 92,000 young people annually.

We are addressing disadvantaged, marginalised and the most at-risk young people. It is not like we are not listening to these people regularly. Today alone, we had briefings from the Comhairle na nÓg in Roscommon on a scheme for early intervention in mental health issues. It is a scheme where the students came up with the solution themselves. It is a listening and support service undertaken by youth workers dedicating specific hours to specific students weekly. The cost of the pilot programme being proposed was about €170,000, and that was to deal with all the students in Roscommon alone. It is something we will come back to the Minister on at a later stage. I have the group's Listen Link promotional book for her to have a look at some time. Additionally, Senator Cosgrove had a briefing from ATU Sligo student union concerning the lack of student accommodation. This is an issue causing stress and mental health issues for younger people before they even go to third level institutes. There was a good attendance at that meeting too. It is about us as public representatives going in, listening to these issues and seeing how we can address them.

Following that, as we heard already, Youth Work Ireland had a briefing in the Freemasons' Hall. It was great to see the number of representatives who went to that meeting because each of us has our own individual issues in our own areas. Who better to give us that information than the youth services working in those areas? I commend Youth Work Ireland, Foróige and the National Youth Council of Ireland on all the work they are doing on the ground.

One of the schemes I love to see invested in is Youth Night. It is one of these publicity nights, but it is also a way of bringing in people from all types of cultures, showing them the opportunities and what can be done when their kids are given the chance. Senator Curley mentioned the ETBs and how he was involved in the Galway-Roscommon ETB previously. He should be probably less involved in Roscommon in future. I visited some of the events on Youth Night. Students from lots of different demographic backgrounds were putting on performances that they would not have had the opportunity to put on if we were not investing in programmes like Youth Night.

A lot has been done. The fact the Minister is increasing the funding in all these areas is welcome. The sky is the limit in what we can do in this area. As the fact that we are all supporting this motion shows, it is going to take cross-party and cross-House engagement. I think we should all look at ourselves to see what we can do from there. I thank the Minister.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister for being here. I also thank my Sinn Féin colleagues for tabling the motion. As Senator Scahill mentioned, earlier we attended the Youth Work Ireland and Roscommon Comhairle na nÓg briefing on the youth response to mental

health issues. We met the most amazing people who are going to take on the world. It is fantastic that they have the opportunity to do so.

On the other side of things, I recently attended a young offenders' prison. Unfortunately, I met young people who had come undone in life for one reason or another. I do not condone criminality in any way, but I do question whether the facilities those young people had in their environments means we let them down in that regard. I spoke to one individual who was a very well-known criminal in his area. I got talking to him about his life and about what led him to the situation he was in. It turns out he was seven years of age when his father was killed in a car accident. His mother used to drink a lot, and so she used to bring home people in the evening after the pub and then he would maybe get a bit of a battering. What he used to do was to wet the bed at night. The mother would check the bed, and if it was wet, she used to get his face and rub it around inside the toilet bowl. At seven years of age, he used to get into his school uniform, climb out the window when he heard the mother was coming home with whoever and he walked around the local town until school started the next morning. Now, we have a criminal in a detention facility, and this is the seven-year-old kid who never had an opportunity.

That is why, with the organisation I am involved in, Tiglin, we have started youth cafes, which I have mentioned previously. For example, there is one in Greystones. It is a drop-in hub with all the supports for young people. We have put in pizza machines and barista machines and made it a welcoming environment. We have initiatives like crafts, a Garda diversion programme with Crosscare and so on. Whether young people are there to meet a new friend or simply to sit in a space, that cafe in Greystones provides a social alternative to the streets to a person who is perhaps marginalised. By providing a safe harbour like that, we are not just giving the young people something to do; we are giving them a sense of ownership over their community.

We have also teamed up with It Takes a Village in Greystones. The Minister probably knows it. The lady who runs it, Rachel Harper, is on the board of Tiglin. She has created a framework that means we can work in conjunction with the likes of Tiglin's youth cafes. This means there is a practical guideline, on social media, phones, etc., for parents and young people. We have actively encouraged the young people to be a source of their own destination by getting involved in how social media should influence their lives. This has provided a real antidote to digital isolation and is giving people their own future into their hands.

We often wait for a young person to feel isolated or disconnected, and the experience in the detention facility showed me that. Support for facilities like the youth cafes, Tiglin being an example, is proactive, community-based and a common-sense approach. Belvedere Youth Club in Dublin city centre works with over 400 young people weekly. Many of them come from a disadvantaged background of poverty, trauma and social exclusion. Its model focuses on building the same type of trust to include young people and build up a long-term relationship and life skills. The CEO of Belvedere Youth Club, Jenny Courtney, is kicking the ball out of the park when it comes to youth work and what that club is accomplishing.

She is saying that many of the youth workers are dealing with complex issues. There are huge gaps in mental health support and family support for young people but they also do not have the funding or recognition to match what they need to do. Clearly, youth services are

underfunded, workers are filling gaps left by statutory agencies and support for younger people is limited by wider family and community issues.

The current funding models do not reflect the needs on the ground. We need more flexible policy whereby maybe we need to look at youth work for seven- to nine-year-olds rather than focusing on unsuitable childcare facilities. We also need to recognise youth work for what it is. The detention facility I visited would not have half the population in it if we got the youth work correct. Youth work is doing far more than it is funded or recognised for. I have seen that at first hand. Even in the rehabilitation centres I have through Tiglin, a lot of the people you chat or talk to will say their childhood was the basis for their trauma. All they needed was a facility or proper investment in youth care that would have given them an opportunity for a different life. Unless we get that right, young people will continue to fall through the cracks. We need to give young people more places like the Tiglin youth café in Greystones and like the Belvedere youth club in Dublin, more places for them to belong and where we can make a difference in their lives.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 1:

After the word “recognises:” to insert the following paragraph:

"- the publication of a report on The Future of Youth Work by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in July 2023, which acknowledged the essential role of youth work in vindicating the rights of our young people, and the need for the youth work sector to receive the investment and recognition required to sustain this vital work;"

Senator Victor Boyhan: I second the amendment.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. It is great to have her here. I really welcome this debate and I am really thankful to the Sinn Féin Senators for bringing this forward.

I am a professional youth worker. I qualified as a youth worker in 2001. We were the second set of graduates from the course in UCC. The Youth Work Act 2001 was out at that stage. We have come a long way and it is great that the youth services are back within the Department of education again. I have to say before I start that unfortunately, there is still no standard youth work pay scale. There are different titles within youth work. When I started working as a youth worker, I worked in Belfast, Dublin, Donegal, Sligo and all over the country as a youth worker with different organisations such as Foróige, ETB and Home Youth Liaison Service, HYLS. We still do not have a straightforward pay scale. Some of the issues we are talking about tonight come from that.

As a trade unionist, it is very hard to unionise people to come together to look for pay agreements or look for increases in salaries because we do not have one clear, full pay scale and people who work as youth workers can be funded through the Department of justice and the Department of children, besides the Minister's own Department. I know she has made great strides and there has been an increase in the youth work budget, but is it 0.2% of the full education budget goes to youth services? The Minister might clarify that when we come back.

Having said that, we have come a long way. I remember when I qualified as a youth worker, my parents said to me they had no idea what it was because it was such a new profession. It is great we are getting that recognition.

From listening to everyone here speaking, because of the lack of multi-annual funding, it is very hard to retain staff in youth services. It is hard to plan and I think everyone would agree, and it is probably one of the main asks from this, that youth organisations should get multi-annual funding, not only so they are able to recruit staff but also so they are able to retain staff. If there was a proper pay scale, then incremental pay scales could come in. I know at one stage, Foróige paid more than Youth Work Ireland. I worked with the Home Youth Liaison Service so there is a lot of differential between pay scales. One regular pay scale would alleviate an awful lot of that.

On capital projects, at the moment, youth services are coming from a very low base. I know investment has increased but there are so many buildings around the country that need a huge amount of upgrading. That is where some of the additional capital funding is wanted. That should come from across the Departments. Youth work is not just a single identity. The nature of youth work and the expression "mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí" is the premise for youth work. Regarding investment in youth work, early years and right down, I know some of the organisations I worked in, such as the Home Youth Liaison Service, or if it was a targeted youth service, you were able to work with young people as young as eight where it is different for others. There is a bit of difference around what services are provided within the youth work space and within social care, such as the age of certain young people you are able to work with. It is about the investment in existing capital projects but also looking at youth spaces for all.

I also went over to Youth Work Ireland today and it is moving away from certain things. Of course, there is a need for targeted youth work and there will always be, like the UBU projects and like the justice projects. There will always be a need for targeted youth work, where it is referral based and there are specific moneys going into that but there is also a real need for youth spaces for all and youth work for all. Any young person should have access to a youth space and it can be there that young people can be identified if they have additional needs if there are professional youth workers there, who are qualified and trained, to recognise this family needs a bit of extra support and this young person needs extra support. They know the channels to go through, such as Tusla, Meitheal or child protection and they are able to access those organisations because they work on the ground and they know. That is the role of a youth worker.

Many of my friends are youth workers and they still work in the youth work space. They say there are so many complex needs for young people that are developing. Young people are concerned about housing, they are concerned about addiction and they are concerned about social media. The needs of young people have increased but there is also the appreciation, as I would call it, not just monetary appreciation but the need to have proper funding, contracts and pensions to make sure that youth workers are not completely stressed out and they are not completely overloaded with their work. That is often the case when you are working on the front line like that. There are not enough resources there to ensure staff will stay.

More and more, we will rely on youth workers, particularly in the age of social media. There needs to be more youth workers employed specifically to look at critically educating people or getting people critically engaged in thought but also around social media. With youth spaces

for all, the nature of working in a youth centre and the nature of youth work is that you are open, it is inclusive, it is non-judgemental and young people feel safe to ask questions or to make sure they are allowed to be themselves in a space where they are at themselves. That is another area we will have to continue to look at.

It is great that other Senators have said that, within the education committee, youth work gets better emphasis. I am on the children's committee and that is now being removed from it. It is really important that it does get it within those committees.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Flynn, I welcome the Community Action Tenants Union from Ballymun and Finglas. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann. I thank them for being here.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I also welcome the guests from Ballymun this evening to the Visitors Gallery.

We are the only country in Europe that has a Youth Work Act. We value youth work as a society. We know the important role youth services and youth workers play in any young person's life. Youth work is not a luxury. As I got up to deliver this speech, I thought about Bernadette Devlin's quote about how we live in an unjust world; we are not meant to grow up in one. It is really unfortunate that many of the young people in this country are growing up in an unjust world.

If you are from the Traveller community, if you are a young person who is LGBTQI+, if you are a young person who is black or brown, if you are a young person with a disability or you are just a young person who is different, you need those supports. I came up through a youth service in Ballyfermot, the Ballyfermot Youth Service, BYS, and it genuinely changed my life.

I was involved in a youth forum in The Base youth centre in Ballyfermot. I saw there was more to life than the halting site I was born and reared in. It gave me equality of opportunities to go beyond Ireland, to go to other countries, and to have that opportunity to not just be the young person from the halting site but to be the young person who was involved in her community through youth work.

Youth work is a different form of education. I know this as a qualified youth worker. I went back to university as a mature student at Maynooth University to study youth work and community development work. I put my hand up. Anyone who knows me well will say that my first mindset was thinking, "I do not want to be a youth worker. All they do all day is drink tea and play pool." That is not the case. The drinking tea and playing pool is the engagement with young people. Non-formal education is absolutely critical. The youth workers at The Base knew I was not 18; I was only 17. I managed to get onto the board of management - you had to be 18 for that. I remember being a Traveller and feeling so lost within my identity. It was nothing to do with my community but was about how Travellers were treated. I remember being a young person representing all young people of Ballyfermot. What a privilege. I know for a fact that youth workers save lives. They saved my life numerous times. I could have gone down any wrong road but I had somewhere to go. It was that cup of tea and the slice of

toast. It was being told, "You are a great worker. The young people listen to you and you can be a youth leader". They empower our young people to go on to university.

A young woman is doing a placement with me right now. I spoke about her yesterday. She is not ashamed to say that she is in care. Again, she is in a Youthreach and is heavily involved in her youth service in her local area. That is saving her life. There are so many young people whose lives have genuinely been saved by youth workers. I went up to Foróige in Tallaght last month and met with a group. There was a young Traveller woman in the group. She was so intelligent. They had a youth council meeting and never before have I ever seen Traveller children being involved at a local level. They are either involved through Exchange House or other Traveller organisations. A lot of the time we segregate Travellers into just Traveller organisations. It was lovely to see this young woman being involved at her local level, just like I was when I was 17 and involved at local level.

For many a young person who attends the local youth service, it is a different kind of education. It gives them a world of opportunities. We know that youth work suffered deep from the cuts after the financial crash with Government funding reduced by 31%. Many services in working class areas have still not recovered. The National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, and others have called for an increase in youth work funding. It should be prioritised. We have an Act. We are brilliant at European level when it comes to youth work. We do the exchanges. We are very active at European level but we need to put our money where our mouth is. We really need to invest in youth work and we need to see youth workers as professionals in their roles, which they are. They are professionals in a different form of education and it must be funded.

I support 100% the Sinn Féin motion today, along with my Civil Engagement colleagues. As Bernadette Devlin said, "We were born into an unjust system: we are not prepared to grow old in it". There are thousands of children today in this country being saved by youth workers. We need to invest in this critical youth work. It is not a luxury. It is a basic right, just like education. I support the motion, along with the Civil Engagement group.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and her officials for coming here today. I acknowledge and thank Sinn Féin. This is a very timely use of Private Members' business and I thank Sinn Féin for it. It gives us an opportunity. Those who know me know that I tend to cut to the chase. At the end of the day, there is a lot of pious stuff in Private Members' motions but the real thing is "What are we asking?". What are we calling on the Government to do? This motion is calling on the Government to commit. Clearly people have spoken in favour of it, which is fantastic. We are committing here tonight to the establishment of a €75 million young people's spaces, facilities and services fund, and to collaborate with other Departments, Government agencies and the local authorities to ensure that young people have places and spaces to engage with youth work. That is marvellous. It is a commitment that everyone has spoken in favour of. I just hope that somehow the Minister will be able to secure that funding in the next budget or over a period of budgets. That is what the Seanad, across parties, is asking the Minister to do here today and Senators have indicated their full support for it. We are also committed to moving to core youth work funding on a multi-annual basis. I commend that.

I fully support the three amendments and have indicated that I will second them. I thank Senators Lynn Ruane and Alice-Mary Higgins, who unfortunately cannot be here. They are involved in other parliamentary business tonight. They will have my full support. I am very happy to put on the record my seconding of those three amendments.

I will say a few other things. I will not rehash what has already been said, but I acknowledge the very important and significant contributions by Kathryn Walsh and Grace McManus. Many will know Grace McManus who was a former Sinn Féin councillor in Bray, County Wicklow, and a worker and committed member within Sinn Féin. She is very committed, as is Kathryn Walsh. They sent some documentation. It is very important. I also acknowledge Senator Scahill; I will touch on him in a moment if time permits. I draw the Minister's attention to a document from the National Youth Council of Ireland, which is the Pre Budget Submission 2027: Securing Foundations. I will make three points and I will read them onto the record right here. I am sure the Minister has a copy or we can supply a copy. One of the principal questions is why we need to support youth work. It states, "Youth work services play an essential role in improving outcomes for young people by providing safe spaces, support and new opportunities."

Another key point that I took out of this document, which I think is worth bringing into this debate here tonight, is a 2026 survey response from an NYCI member organisation:

Our biggest financial challenges are staffing-related. Retaining staff and managing their workload is difficult, and we urgently need additional funding to hire at least one more team member to handle the increasing demands and ensure current staff are not overworked.

It is an important point that I know the Minister will understand. Another survey response in the report relates to capital investment, which states, "Two satellite projects operate from portacabins and require upgrading and modernisation. Our main building has issues with pyrite and we will have to relocate at some point to enable repairs to be carried out". The Minister might consider this NYCI Pre Budget Submission 2027: Securing Foundations. We have a long way to go but I just wanted to say that.

My colleague, Independent Senator Aubrey McCarthy, talked about youth cafés. They are really important. I would urge anyone who has not been out to Greystones to see the work of Senator McCarthy with youth cafés and support to go and do so.

Senator Scahill facilitated a very important meeting, which was a gathering today in the AV room. It was interesting. A document was circulated with it and the Senator has indicated he can make one available to the Minister. I acknowledge the very positive contribution of work, both from him and the Roscommon Comhairle na nÓg. It was very significant. The research and report was sponsored by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. I acknowledge that is important. I also acknowledge Youth Work Ireland Midlands and Roscommon County Council.

It was a very moving day. I want to thank the Senator for the presentation. When I opened the cover of the presentation, it reminded me about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Young people have the right to say what they think about anything that affects them. What they say must be listened to carefully. When decisions that affect young people are made by official bodies, they must listen to what the young people want and feel.

I will finish on this point, because I am a realist. All services, like youth services and additional services, cost money and we have to prioritise those most in need. The strongest case has to be made. While we advocate for increased services and supports for youth services and capital funding, we must never lose sight of what is most important, namely, vulnerable communities and vulnerable people, vulnerable young people who have fallen out of education or who were brought up in State care and other institutions of this State who then, at the age of 15 and 16, may have found themselves homeless in our cities and our towns. They have to be our most important focus because, as the Jesuits used to say, give me the child until he is seven and I will show you the man. I believe in that. It is so important that we tap in early to all young people but particularly those who are on the margins, who are vulnerable and who have never been supported to realise their full potential. Everyone is important, but we have limited resources. That has to be our most important focus.

I want to thank Sinn Féin and all those who have contributed tonight. They were all very positive. I thank the Minister for her time.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this motion forward and I really appreciate the cross-party support around it. Comhairle youth work is very much the cornerstone of equality for young people. It is about social justice and meaningful participation. When so many children are excluded from accessing spaces, youth work is an entryway to civic engagement, being "real adults" and that level of growth they can undergo.

The sector is supporting thousands of young people every year. Where I am based, in Carlow and Kilkenny, we have Ossory Youth, the Drum Youth Centre and Carlow Regional Youth Services. They are all incredible organisations doing such cool work and such important work in providing supportive spaces for young people but also challenging young people by challenging all of the harmful norms we are seeing a lot of young people being exposed to in the online space. Youth workers play such a key role in providing that mentorship, particularly when young people often feel quite isolated. We have all been teenagers. They can feel quite isolated from their families and their parents. Youth work provides that space where they can engage with an adult in a partnership of equals.

Staff are highly skilled and highly trained but often experience burnout. The level of professionalism a lot of the staff in the youth work space have is not reflected in their contracts. It is not reflected by society. It is considered the voluntary sector or voluntary space when in fact these are people with master's degrees and PhDs, who have gone through many levels of education and provide such a vital service.

Youth work has had a funding cut in real terms leading to an 8.1% shortfall it is experiencing. That cannot be bridged in only incremental increases. We need to see funding to allow the sector to grow, to expand and to deliver for future young people. We have of course already heard about the importance of multi-annual funding. It is so important for every civil society NGO. Annual funding is an absolute nightmare no matter what the space because it does not allow you to plan and be forward thinking. We have already heard in this debate that the National Youth Council of Ireland needs an investment of €27.3 million to sustain and develop the work it is doing.

Senator Flynn used the phrase, which is quite beautiful, that youth work saves lives. She spoke so eloquently about what it was like to be a young woman from the Traveller community

who has faced so much systemic exclusion from society. Hearing from her about the key role of youth work shows it is so crucial. I grew up in Belfast and I was involved in lots of cross-community projects delivered by youth workers. While we are very far from the early nineties and 2000s today, we are seeing so much division in our communities. Social cohesion is being undermined. The horrors of the digital space and the online world is leading to a lot of trouble for young people. However, more than that, the traditional structures of our communities seem frayed in many ways and youth work offers space to bring children and young people back into the space to ensure they are not further isolated from mainstream society.

Young people are under such stress. All of us have young people in our lives. When I look back at being at that stage, I feel that young people today are burdened with so many worries they should not have on them. Youth work and youth spaces offer a really safe environment for them to articulate that and overcome those things in safe spaces.

If we want to challenge the new norms we are seeing for young people and if we want to give them opportunities to thrive, to explore, to be challenged, to make real-world connections outside of their mobile phones and social media and real-world relationships, we have to invest in that space. The austerity years saw youth work take an absolute hammering and it was treated solely as an afterthought, to contribute to if we had a little extra, and as voluntary. It ignored how important it was for so many young people.

I thank Senator Flynn for her contribution. I think she is no longer in the Chamber. It was really important to remind us about all the people who live on the margins of society and are excluded and how youth work is a hand-up to them to bring them forward and to support them and bring them up. She spoke about equality of opportunity and that is what youth work offers so many young people in Ireland.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I thank Senators for the opportunity to be here in the Seanad today to talk about youth work and the Government's ongoing commitment and investment in this important sector.

Youth services are a safe place where young people, with the support of youth workers, are able to reach their full potential and positively shape their own lives and futures. This Government and my Department are committed to supporting youth work services, youth organisations and volunteer-led youth clubs to ensure that there are high-quality, inclusive and accessible opportunities for all young people throughout the country, including in rural areas.

This year, over €94 million in funding has been allocated for youth services current and capital expenditure in my Department. Youth work services deliver high-quality youth work and non-formal developmental opportunities to young people aged ten to 24 across Ireland each year, with approximately 450,000 having participated in 2024. The aim is to support young people to develop their personal and social skills to reach their full potential. Approximately 2,000 youth workers and 40,000 volunteers support young people in their youth services and youth clubs nationally.

I have listened carefully to the Senators here in the Seanad today and there is a lot that we agree on. Supporting our youth work is a critical aspect of what we do as a Government to support young people. Along with initiatives across a wide range of areas including education and training, health, employment, creativity and sport, and tackling poverty and disadvantage,

it forms part of a broader framework that prioritises and advances young people's rights and well-being. This commitment to ensuring that young people's needs and rights are reflected across all policy areas is a key principle of Young Ireland, the national policy framework for children and young people, under which the sectoral policy Opportunities for Youth sits.

Opportunities for Youth, the national strategy for youth work and related services, was published in September 2024. It sets out three overarching strategic objectives and 18 actions for delivery between 2025 and 2026. In partnership with the youth sector, a new set of actions will be developed for the period 2027 to 2028. The strategy was informed by extensive consultations with young people and other stakeholders, which is reflected in its scope and ambition. Since its publication, the Department and the sector have progressed the strategy's 18 actions for delivery, some of which I will speak to shortly. We acknowledge that there have been delays in the publication of an implementation plan to support the strategy. As this House is aware, the youth affairs function transferred to my Department in May 2025. Considerable work has been done to build on the existing implementation work but also to develop a plan for publication to capture this work. The Department has received significant input already from the sector on the draft plan and I intend to finalise and publish it soon. Meanwhile, the important next step is the establishment of engagement structures for Opportunities for Youth, which is advancing well and which I will return to in a moment.

A defining characteristic of the youth work sector is that services are responsive to the interests, needs and concerns of young people, and young people are involved in shaping the services they attend.

Youth workers and volunteers are highly skilled, as has been said here, in connecting with young people where they are at and in developing relationships built on mutual trust that empower young people to be confident in having their say and being, or developing into, young adults and citizens. I have been very inspired by the volunteers, youth workers and young people I have met since taking up this role and I look forward to engaging further with them. One cannot help but be struck by the extraordinary dedication of youth workers and the impressive young people engaging in the services. I also appreciate the sheer diversity of the sector, both in the range of services and offerings available to young people and the range of young people who benefit. I am also very pleased that young people and youth organisations are included at the centre of the education convention. We are progressing a workforce development strategy in recognition of the need to support the workforce and ensure they can continue to provide high-quality, accessible and inclusive youth work opportunities for our young people. I thank our youth workers and employers for the high level of participation in the workforce survey process which took place. The analysis of responses is extremely useful in informing the strategy development. Consultations are scheduled to take place in multiple locations around the country during May and June to engage further with youth workers and employers and to build on the data available through the youth workers and employers survey.

We continue to support the national youth organisations with substantial funding under the youth services grant scheme, in addition to the funding we provide to support local clubs and groups through the local youth club grant scheme. In recognition of the crucial role played by volunteers in running clubs and groups up and down the country, we are supporting national youth organisations to develop additional volunteer capacity through the volunteer activation fund. There is a need for wider recognition of youth workers and volunteers, and to celebrate

what they do. Part of my Department's response to this was the inaugural Oíche na hÓige, or Youth Night, which took place last year. This gave young people a chance to open their doors to the wider community and to showcase what their clubs and services mean to them. My Department works closely with the youth organisations, young people and the 16 education and training boards to ensure the good practice in youth work that Ireland is known for is further developed and supported. The engagement structures being established to support the implementation of the Opportunities for Youth strategy will reinforce this relationship and ensure that young people and sectoral interests will have a clear mechanism for contributing to national decision-making. The national youth sector reference group will comprise young people, youth workers, funded youth organisations and ETB representatives. The interdepartmental and interagency group will bring together those Departments and bodies that provide funding or interact with the youth sector with a view to developing a whole-of-government vision as well as improving coherence and complementarity across schemes.

Within my own Department, the transfer of youth functions into my Department opens particular opportunities for effective collaboration. We see the non-formal and formal education sectors not as stand-alone entities but as complementary areas of work that will allow us to support a child, and later a young person, throughout their life in a way that takes account of their life inside and outside of school. More specifically, youth work provides non-formal, voluntary and relationship-based learning that augments formal education by addressing the social, emotional and developmental needs of young people. I regard youth work and education as natural allies. Both of them aim to support young people's development, learning and active participation in society, albeit through different methods and spaces. Moreover, youth work is an educative process that complements the Department's brief and ambition around social inclusion. My officials have been working to identify areas of synergy, including improving linkages in relation to, for example, DEIS schools, as evidenced in the recently published DEIS and DEIS plus plans for Traveller and Roma young people in line with the Traveller and Roma education strategy and the school completion programme, to name but a few.

In terms of financial investment, in 2026 core current funding of €90.1 million will support existing youth services and youth organisations while also enabling the expansion of both targeted and universal services for young people. This represents an increase of €4.5 million over 2025 funding levels. In addition, €4 million in capital funding will be available in 2026. This funding increase brings the overall core current and capital funding available to €94.1 million. Recently the Department published its NDP capital programme. This includes a dedicated annual allocation of €4 million in youth capital funding for each year from 2026 to 2030. Significantly, this view of the future availability of capital over the medium term provides scope to plan for more strategic capital projects and purchasing in the youth sector over the period of the programme. Ongoing increases to current funding in recent years, from €68.4 million in 2008 to €90.1 million in 2026, represent an overall growth of 31.74% and allow us to invest across an array of programmes, both universal and targeted, and to tailor our targeted supports to address areas of particular need. I am delighted that the ten new UBU services established in late 2025 will be fully operational for the calendar year 2026. I am also delighted with the success of the summer meals pilot programme that was introduced last year.

I said earlier that I agree with much of what has been said here today. I welcome that the contributions of Senators to the debate clearly demonstrate the high esteem in which the youth

work sector is held. However, I will address some parts of the motion directly. As many in this House are aware, following a value for money and periodic review of youth funding programmes in 2014, a decision was taken to consolidate three existing targeted youth funding schemes, including the young people's facilities and services fund, into a single targeted youth funding scheme. This resulted in the creation of the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme, which is the largest youth services scheme funded by the Department of Education and Youth. The UBU scheme came into operation on 1 July 2020 with the first full year of operation of the scheme in 2021. Funding provided under the UBU scheme has increased from €41.8 million in 2021 to €54.5 million in 2026, which is an increase of €12.7 million or 30.4%. This year the UBU scheme will fund 258 targeted youth services across 16 ETBs that co-ordinate delivery of funding to the UBU services in their local ETB areas. Ten new UBU services were established in 2025. Given these developments, there are no plans to re-establish the young people's facilities and services fund. My Department will continue to work with the sector and across government to best ensure that appropriate services, facilities and spaces are available for young people. This work will be enhanced by the interdepartmental and interagency group to be set up shortly.

To focus a little on some of the specifics of Government investment, the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme, which I mentioned earlier, supports young people who are identified as marginalised, vulnerable or at risk of not flourishing. UBU provision was complemented last year by the summer holiday meals pilot programme, in line with the Government's wider commitment to end child poverty. The aim of the pilot was to provide a hot or substantial meal to young people at risk of not having access to a meal over the summer period. Over 3,200 young people availed of that scheme and plans are being made for the continuation of the pilot this year.

Other targeted youth work programmes include the targeted youth employability support initiative, which plays a vital role in equipping young people aged between 15 and 24 who are not in education, employment or training with the confidence, soft skills and practical competencies needed to progress into further education, training or employment. In terms of universal services, through the youth services grant scheme, the Department provides funding to 35 national youth organisations. This scheme funds the effective delivery by national youth organisations of quality youth services that support young people's social and personal development. It also funds organisations such as the National Youth Council of Ireland, which provides support to the overall work of the wider youth sector. In addition, the Department provides funding to the youth sector to support the delivery of volunteer-led, universal youth work. These include the volunteer activation fund, the youth climate justice fund, Foróige's Big Brother Big Sister mentoring programme and funding for NYCII's safeguarding, youth health, youth arts, and equality and intercultural programmes. The Department also provides core funding to Gaisce, the President's Award, and to Léargas to support the implementation of the youth aspect of Erasmus+.

As Senators will know, we are nearing Ireland's tenure of the Presidency of the European Union and the EU Youth Week 2026 is taking place from 24 April to 1 May.

This is a timely moment to outline that youth policy will be a prominent feature of the forthcoming Presidency of the EU. The Department is working in partnership with the National Youth Council of Ireland and youth sector stakeholders in preparation for the Presidency. The

youth affairs unit in the Department will be responsible for progressing key matters on EU youth policy during the Presidency, including chairing the working party on youth throughout the Presidency. Ireland aims to deliver an ambitious work plan on the area of EU youth policy and this will include the progression of a revised EU youth strategy and consultation with youth delegates on key issues affecting young people in Europe. The area of youth policy is considered a national competency by the EU. This means that the EU does not develop legislation in this policy area and it is for each member state to decide on how it develops and implements its youth policy.

Ireland will also host the EU youth conference and the Directors General for Youth meeting. The EU youth conference is the signature event in the EU youth dialogue process. This four-day event is the largest youth participation event in Europe and will be held in Dublin in September. Ireland's Presidency priority on youth policy will be the exploration of the theme of information and constructive dialogue with young people. This theme is youth goal 4 from the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, and was agreed across the Presidency trio of Ireland, Greece and Lithuania. Under this theme Ireland will continue to progress two Council conclusions on supporting young people to critically evaluate information and ensuring young people in Europe have access to safe places. Through the youth conference, Ireland will play a significant role in progressing the development of the next EU youth strategy so this is a very important deliverable for Ireland. The overarching priorities for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU will be published by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade later this year.

As Minister with responsibility for education and youth, I know there is no shortage of challenges facing our young people and facing the sector. There are great opportunities and vibrant and committed youth workers, volunteers and youth organisations. I assure the House I am committed to making sure the area is funded and that we work together. My door is open for ideas. I have listened to the Senators today and I thank them for their very constructive and informative contributions.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): I welcome the Flemish minister for agriculture and the environment. I also welcome the Belgian ambassador. They are all guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan. They are very welcome and I hope the Minister of State is looking after them.

Senator Pauline Tully: I thank all of the Senators who contributed to the debate. It was a very positive debate and we all agree on practically all of the points and the importance of youth work, as does the Minister. I commend all of the organisations involved in youth work, whether providing a club, service or project, and I commend all the staff, paid and unpaid. Voluntary workers do so much good work. I also commend the young people who participate.

The Minister mentioned Oíche na hÓige, which was very successful when it was run a few months ago. It created awareness of youth clubs and encouraged participation. Youth clubs have said they cannot deal with the increased numbers. They are genuinely under pressure. I did not bring forward this motion because they are not and because they are getting sufficient funding. They are under pressure to meet existing levels of service. There is a need for increase.

We talked about staff, and there are excellent youth workers who are working with young people but it is very difficult to recruit and retain because of the cost-of-living pressures on these workers. They are going to go into other sectors that pay better because they cannot meet their rent or the cost-of-living pressures. Many youth workers say they are under pressure because they are filling gaps left by other agencies in society. They are providing mental health supports and counselling services and they are not necessarily qualified in these areas. This brings more pressure. It is an issue for other Departments but it highlights the need for all Departments across the board to be working together in supporting our young people and supporting the workers who are working with them.

Senator McCarthy brought up quite a disturbing story about the young seven-year-old boy he spoke about. It makes us cold thinking about what some children are going through. We wonder why certain services are not picking up on this and interventions are not made. I have long argued that we should invest money in communities where there is deprivation, intergenerational poverty and trauma. Money invested there would be money well spent because we would save it at the other end when we would not have to incarcerate them, which costs an awful lot more money.

I spoke to a youth worker who works with the youth diversion programme, who said that sometimes by the time a child is referred to them and they start to work with that child they realise they also have to work with their parents and other members of the family because there are often years of trauma, including perhaps domestic violence or addiction issues. We need to start investing and youth work is vital in our societies for working with young people. We need to start investing in families and putting in supports. Our resource centres do terrific work but they are underresourced also. We need to resource all of our community supports. When there was a recession, an awful lot of this funding was cut. It is vital funding needs to be maintained, if not increased, when a recession hits and there is unemployment. It is the families who are most deprived that suffer more and the supports that were in the community go also. They really hit rock bottom.

I urge the Minister to please try to invest more in our youth services. The National Youth Council represents many organisations. It has engaged with the implementation plan and the review of the implementation plan. It has the figures done and it has a pre-budget submission ready. It has laid out that the organisations are under pressure and need more funding. It is vital work and we need to support it.

Amendment agreed to.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 2:

After the word "acknowledges" to insert the following paragraph:

"- the need for the youth work sector to be embedded as a key partner in addressing the social, economic and structural inequalities facing young people in Ireland;"

Senator Victor Boyhan: I second the amendment.

Amendment agreed to.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I move amendment No. 3:

After the words "calls on the Government to" to insert the following paragraph:

"- restore youth and community work funding to pre-austerity levels, adjusted in line with inflation and population growth, and factoring in the increased cost of service delivery;"

Senator Victor Boyhan: I second the amendment.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Chris Andrews): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Shane Curley: At 9.30 a.m. tomorrow morning.

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

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 8 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 16 Aibreán 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 8 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 26 Aibreán 2026.