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DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*

(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 19 Meitheamh 2025

Thursday, 19 June 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

***Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.***

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Trade Relations

1. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will provide a list of companies operating in Ireland which are trading with or linked to companies located in occupied Palestinian territories; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33465/25]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: My first question asks the Minister to provide a list of companies operating in Ireland which are trading with linked companies located in the occupied Palestinian territories. In 2020 the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published a listing of all businesses involved in the illegal Israeli settlements. It was a highly significant development, naming those in the corporate world complicit with the war crime that is Israel's settlement enterprise. That database was set up in 2023.

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for the question. The Government's position and, indeed, that of the EU is clear: settlements are illegal under international law and undermine the realisation of a two-state solution. While decisions regarding the operations of individual companies rest with those companies, a corporate decision to engage in economic and financial activities in settlements poses potentially significant reputational, legal and financial risk.

The Government does not maintain a list of companies operating in Ireland that may be trading with or linked to companies located in Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. Ireland does not encourage or support in any way economic and financial activities in such settlements. Ireland has not issued any export licences for dual use or other goods in such settlements. Ireland does, however, strongly support the promotion of legitimate trade relations with the Palestinian Authority.

At EU level, the Interim Association Agreement on Trade and Cooperation sets out the legal

basis for relations between the EU and the Palestinian Authority. Ireland strongly supports the deepening of the EU-Palestine bilateral relationship, including in the area of trade, and it is welcome that the first ever meeting of the EU-Palestine high-level political dialogue took place in the margins of the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 April 2025. At this meeting, the European Commission announced a multi-annual comprehensive support programme worth up to €1.6 billion to foster Palestinian recovery and resilience, including a pillar to provide support for the private sector there.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: As I said, when that UN database was updated in 2023 several companies with offices in Ireland remained on it following the update. It is widely known that these include Airbnb, Booking.com and Tripadvisor. The International Court of Justice ruled in July 2024 that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories is unlawful, that Israel should put an end to the occupation, desist from creating new settlements and evacuate those already established. It further concluded that where Palestinians have lost land and property, Israel should pay reparations. What is the Government's approach to these companies based in Ireland? That is the premise of my question.

Over the last week we have seen the shameful act of piracy against the *Madleen* aid flotilla and the detention of our colleague, Deputy Paul Murphy. I am sure the Minister is aware of the co-ordinated legal actions which were launched last week in Ireland, Britain and America, targeting the companies I mentioned that are operating in illegal Israeli settlements.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am sure the Deputy is aware that in the case she referenced at the International Court of Justice, Ireland was one of the countries that intervened in that determination to ensure Israeli settlements were deemed to be illegal from the point of view of international law. Our Attorney General went to the Hague to take part in that case. That was one of a number of actions taken by Ireland to hold Israel accountable for its current actions and to support the Palestinian people in the face of the genocide that is happening. As part of that, we have supported UNRWA to the highest level because it is the key mechanism to get aid into the country. We have, along with the international community, supported UN resolution after UN resolution in an effort to change the dial. When I served as Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, Ireland was one of the very first countries, along with Spain, to put pressure on the EU to try to turn the dial and move on article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement to ensure that Israel is held to account for its human rights violations.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I take on board what the Minister is saying but last week a number of organisations, including the Global Legal Action Network, GLAN, and the Ireland Palestine Alliance launched a High Court action challenging the refusal of An Garda Síochána to investigate Airbnb Ireland and its senior executives for alleged activity in Israeli settlements. Surely companies must abide by international law as a prerequisite to operating in this country. What I am seeking from the Minister is an explanation as to why this is being permitted here. It is not good enough that this behaviour is being tolerated. As in the case of apartheid South Africa, economic sanctions undertaken by the international community should be brought to bear on Israel. The Israeli State has flouted international law and this must be challenged in every single possible way. Back in the 1980s it was women working in Dunnes Stores who took a stand. Again, the Government is way behind the people on this issue. A few weeks ago, the Government refused to support a Sinn Féin Private Members' motion which would have ended the shameful Irish Central Bank's facilitation of the sale of Israeli bonds.

Deputy Peter Burke: Ireland has been a lighthouse internationally in supporting the Pales-

tinian people. We have, as I pointed out, intervened in the case to ensure that Israeli occupation has been deemed illegal through a resolution of the court. We intervened in the South Africa case and supported that very firmly, as requested by the Dáil and my own parliamentary party. We have supported UNRWA and are bringing forward the occupied territories Bill, which is another significant step in terms of Government support. We have moved the dial by first recognising the State of Palestine, a key ask of the Palestinian Authority and by pushing EU member states to hold Israel to account under the EU-Israel Association Agreement. In every single area, Ireland has been at the forefront in supporting the people of Gaza and we will continue to do so as a Government because it is something that is very close to our hearts. I am the father of two young children and am acutely aware of what is happening in Gaza. We will do everything possible, every single day, to help and support the victims of Israeli perpetration.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): With the agreement of Deputy Lawlor, we will move on to Question No. 3 now.

Departmental Strategies

3. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will provide an update on his action plan on competitiveness and productivity. [33466/25]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank Deputy Lawlor for facilitating me as I must leave shortly to chair a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Defence and National Security. I ask the Minister to provide an update on the action plan on competitiveness and productivity. I am aware that the closing date for submissions to the public consultation on the action plan is tomorrow. I ask the Minister to provide information on how many submissions have been received to date and what sort of outreach the Department has done in that area.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for this very important question in an area that we are really moving the dial on. Ireland currently holds a strong competitive position globally, ranked seventh overall, and first in the eurozone, in the annual IMD world competitiveness rankings for 2025. However, we cannot be complacent and work remains to be done in many areas. We are aware that there are significant challenges and it is important that we do not take our strengths for granted. In a rapidly changing and uncertain international environment, it is fundamental that we take action to address long-standing legacy issues as well as emerging threats to our competitive performance. Persistent high costs in areas such as energy continue to challenge the competitiveness of businesses, particularly SMEs. Moreover, external shocks like Brexit and geopolitical uncertainties have embedded themselves into the cost structure, making it harder for businesses to remain competitive, whether indigenous or FDI.

In response to international economic developments, and in line with a commitment in the programme for Government, work is under way on the development of an action plan on competitiveness and productivity. The Government agreed to accelerate the timeframe for this work and the action plan will be presented for consideration at a competitiveness summit to be held in July. The action plan will reflect a whole-of-government approach to domestic drivers of, or barriers to, competitiveness, focusing on areas firmly within our own control. Its development has been informed by extensive consultation across Government Departments and with external stakeholders. My Department has already undertaken a series of bilateral engagements with key Government partners, including in the areas of infrastructure, housing,

research and innovation. This discussion will continue over the weeks ahead. My Department has also launched a public consultation which is currently open. The action plan will also be guided by the forthcoming Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2025 report from the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, NCPC. That evidenced-based input will be vital to ensuring that our policy responses are targeted, proportionate and future-facing.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister for that update and welcome the work that has been done. What engagement has the Department had with the unions on the action plan? My fear is that workers' rights will be sacrificed on the altar of productivity. We need to be very careful in this space to bring workers and businesses together and ensure that there is not further division and polarisation between them. I am afraid that the threat of international trade tariffs will be used as fig leaf to guillotine employment rights, usher in bad trade deals like CETA and renege on our climate commitments.

9 o'clock

We all want a strong economy but there must be balance. The business organisations I have engaged with are pointing to the lack of housing, pressures on services and the diabolical cost of living as presenting the biggest threat to business expansion. Have all these issues been taken into account in the action plan? It is really important that we have a sustainable plan that will address the cost of living and the cost of doing business as we go forward.

Deputy Peter Burke: No Government has done as much for workers' rights as the previous Government, of which I was a member, did in terms of banning zero-hour contracts, bringing in tips legislation, introducing more agile practices in the workplace, the fruits of which we have seen and bringing in a statutory sick pay scheme. We turned the dial on a number of areas that had been neglected for years.

It is my job and responsibility to ensure businesses remain viable. I have met with union leaders over the past number of weeks in connection with the work that is ongoing in my Department. They expressed concern in some areas but they also acknowledged the huge number of reforms that have been carried out. We have the biggest reform of employment law ongoing through the employment law review group, which is examining laws that affect so many citizens right across the country. I am keen to ensure businesses remain viable. The cost of business advisory forum had its inaugural meeting last week. We have established a small business unit in the Department. We are changing the dial by doing things in a more simple, light and fast way. That will be my approach in the Department to ensure we really incentivise our indigenous economy.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am glad to hear the Minister say that. As he knows, Fine Gael having been in government for 14 years, indigenous businesses have so far been left behind. The figures for foreign direct investment speak for themselves. The Minister talks about competitiveness and he is not wrong in the figures he is putting forward. However, he dismisses the figures relating to the competitiveness of the regions. As the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, will know, the west and north-west region is in the bottom 7% in terms of competitiveness, according to the EU index. The facts speak for themselves.

Yesterday, I participated in a discussion at the enterprise committee regarding the EU omnibus package. The Draghi report indicated serious competitiveness deficits across the European Union that absolutely need to be addressed. I have huge concerns about both the contents of

the proposed legislation and the manner in which it is being introduced. We certainly need simplification but what we do not need is deregulation.

Deputy Peter Burke: Let me bust the myth to which the Deputy referred. Our indigenous economy is at record levels. Currently, Enterprise Ireland is supporting 234,000 jobs in our country. Our exports, at €36 billion, are at record levels. Enterprise Ireland companies spend €39 billion in our wider economy. The Deputy referred to the FDI sector. There are some very significant FDI companies in the country that interact with indigenous companies. For example, one company in the semiconductor space has interactions with and has built in 831 SMEs into its supply chain. The same is happening with companies from Banagher Precast Concrete to Kiernan Structural Steel in Longford. That is very important for our indigenous economy. I am trying to close that eco cycle to ensure our SMEs benefit from the presence of the FDI sector. That is happening in front of us.

To be clear on the facts, Ireland is the most competitive economy in the eurozone. I want to make sure that does not change. The actions I take will ensure our businesses have the best environment in which to grow, that we support viability and that we continue to grow our economy, as we did with the 90,000 extra jobs that were created over the past year. That is 90,000 families with an extra income.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What the Minister is saying is not compatible with what we are hearing from business organisations and what we know, which is that businesses are really struggling right now. They are struggling with energy costs, red tape and so many different things. That must be addressed. It is not right to say everything is okay for businesses, including indigenous businesses.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I apologise for interrupting the Deputy but she is on her fourth contribution on this question. She has already been up three times.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Sorry, a Chathaoirligh, I was not counting. The Minister has heard my message.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I thought I was counting wrong. Deputy Conway-Walsh has asked that we proceed directly to her next question, which is No. 5, as she has to leave. Is Deputy Gibney agreeable to that?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Yes.

Business Regulation

5. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide an update on the work of the cost of business advisory forum. [33467/25]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank Deputy Gibney for accommodating me. I did not have an opportunity before Question Time began to ask her to do so.

I am seeking an update on the newly established and hugely important cost of business advisory forum, which met recently for the first time. Costs in general are spiralling, with the cost of energy being one of the major difficulties reported by the SME sector. I am pleased that ESB

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and EirGrid are members of the forum. Will the Minister confirm whether they have indicated any reductions in the cost of energy?

Deputy Peter Burke: I convened the inaugural meeting of the cost of business advisory forum on 11 June 2025. In my opening remarks, I shared my vision and expectation that the forum would “create a space where businesses can speak directly to decision-makers about the real-world impact of rules and charges, and identify areas where practical changes can be made”. The establishment of the forum delivers on a key commitment in the programme for Government. The forum is a subgroup of my Department’s enterprise forum. I was pleased to appoint Mr. Kevin Foley as its chair and Mr. Ronan Byrne as vice chair.

The forum presents a unique opportunity for tripartite engagement, with Departments and regulators hearing directly from business owners and representatives. I was very encouraged to see a strong turnout at the first meeting and diverse representation from enterprise bodies across retail, tourism, agriculture, small businesses and the multinational sector. At the meeting, the chair outlined the forum’s operational approach and its terms of reference were formally adopted. To set the scene, presentations were delivered by my officials on Ireland’s economic landscape and by IBEC on the theme of regulatory ambition.

The forum’s purpose is to examine the factors contributing to the rising cost of doing business in Ireland, including regulatory and infrastructural challenges that may require a sharper focus and a revised approach. It will identify practical steps to help to reduce those costs. To assist with its review, the forum will hold a series of follow-up thematic meetings on topics such as regulatory cost and simplification, planning and Infrastructure, technology and innovation, visas and work permits, and utility costs. This is not an exhaustive list. It will develop with input from stakeholders as the engagement process continues over the coming six months.

A high level of engagement is not only welcomed but is strongly encouraged through the forum and also via the public consultation methodology, which is now live on my Department’s webpage. Members of the public, as well as all participants in the enterprise forum and retail forum, are invited to contribute to the consultation. Submissions are open until 20 June.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am specifically interested in the outcomes from the sector meetings. Can the Minister confirm whether there have been any indications of a reduction in energy prices? The cost of energy is huge for businesses, with many owners telling me their energy costs are greater than their wage bill. We must do something about that. I am also keen to know whether there has been any discussion about the cost savings utility providers have made being passed on to consumers.

Working people are being absolutely crucified by the cost of groceries and the cost of living in general. There is a strong perception that the cost of basic groceries has risen by a greater margin than the rise in the consumer price index. Recent media reports suggest that over the past four years, the price of a basket of groceries has risen by approximately 36%, while the consumer price index rose by 21% over the same period. Figures released earlier this month by a grocery data firm show the price of a weekly shop is rising by more than double the general rate of inflation.

Deputy Peter Burke: The key area on which the forum will focus is the cost of regulation and trying to make things more efficient and easier for our small family businesses. I always point out that many of these businesses do not have a HR director or finance director; all their

work is done around the kitchen table, trying to vindicate all the efforts they put towards employing two thirds of workers right across the country. That is why it is key that all the regulators, who make so many decisions, are involved. We need to look at the interoperability of those decisions with the decisions of other regulators and what costs that puts on businesses.

Critically, we have to achieve outputs. We must see how we can make changes, with the forum being a key accelerator in that regard to ensure we are doing things in a simpler manner. The Government is very much focused on that. As I said, we are at record levels of employment but there are challenges. I am more aware than most of the challenges in terms of the costs facing our family businesses. I have demonstrated what we are doing about this. July will be a very important month for our competitive action plan. We will also establish our small business unit, and we have our cost of business advisory forum.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Many business owners barely have a wage at the end of the week by the time they have paid all of the costs of doing business. This did not begin today or yesterday. Many businesses tell us they are under threat of closure. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, is represented on the forum. I welcome that. The remit of the commission has expanded in recent years, particularly in light of EU legislation aimed at strengthening consumer protections and ensuring fairness in digital and online markets. Is the Minister aware of the high rate of vacancies at the CCPC? As of 9 June 2025, the CCPC had 33 vacancies across various roles. Does he have a plan to recruit these essential staff to ensure consumers are adequately protected and that there is no danger of price gouging in the major supermarkets? People's food bills have risen significantly. It is vital that the public are reassured that no underhand tactics are at play here. The CCPC must be fully staffed.

Deputy Peter Burke: The CCPC is a very important independent agency. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, is working very closely with the organisation on inflation in grocery prices.

With regard to vacancies, there has been a challenge with recruitment. The budget is there. There has been a significant increase in budgetary capabilities for the CCPC but it is a very competitive landscape and the recruitment process is very difficult. We are doing all we can to fill those vacancies. This is one of the areas that was raised with me by the head of the CCPC when I met him a number of weeks ago. We will ensure that it has the resources needed to grow. Over the past decade, the CCPC has grown exponentially. As a result of European laws and responsibilities, Ireland now has an outsized role in the regulatory environment. It is very important that the organisation is resourced. The cost of business advisory forum will bring all of those key agencies, from the Revenue Commissioners to the CCPC and An Bord Pleanála, into the same room. It is critical that we see how we, as a country, can make things simpler for our businesses.

Employment Support Services

2. **Deputy George Lawlor** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will outline the targeted actions being taken by his Department to improve the employment rate of people with disabilities, considering that Ireland consistently lags behind the EU average in this area, our constrained labour supply, our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the absence of a Government strategy from 2026 to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33296/25]

Deputy George Lawlor: Will the Minister of State outline the targeted actions his Department is taking to improve the employment rate of people with disabilities in Ireland given that Ireland consistently lags behind the EU average in this area? Will he also comment on Ireland's constrained labour supply, our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the absence of a Government strategy from 2026 to address this issue?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for his question. It is a priority for the Government to narrow the employment gap to which the Deputy refers. Working to enable people with disabilities to pursue freely chosen employment is an important personal priority for me.

The forthcoming national disability strategy will include employment as an important consideration as one of its five key pillars. The national disability strategy is intended as a whole-of-government framework for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Ireland. It is intended to publish this strategy in the coming months. It will contain a number of actions from my Department, including engagement with employers and employer bodies to raise awareness and to foster positive attitudes towards the employment of people with disabilities, which the Minister, Deputy Burke, has mentioned in the House previously.

After the strategy has been published, the Department will establish a new Minister-led forum that will provide a platform for a more structured consultation and engagement with employers on the employment of people with a disability. It is intended to be a subgroup of the Department's enterprise forum and will serve as a means of advancing that employment by discussing employer concerns and potential obstacles. The forum will also showcase best practice examples from both private and commercial semi-State companies. It is my hope that these dialogue processes will enable a better understanding of the range of supports available to employers and of employers' legal obligations to provide reasonable accommodations to workers and job candidates with disabilities. The specific commitments from my Department will be set out in the strategy once it is finalised and approved by Government.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister of State. While I welcome his comments, we really need serious action in this area. As he will know, we are a laggard in terms of our performance. The figures speak for themselves. The right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others is enshrined in international, EU and national policies including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It has also been enshrined in the past two programmes for Government. Significant obstacles still remain to the development of pathways to employment for people with disabilities. Disabled people are only half as likely to be in employment as others of a similar working age. At 32.6%, the employment rate among people with disabilities in Ireland is the lowest in the EU, comparing poorly with the EU average of 51.3%. At the same time, our disability employment gap is the highest. Among people who are unable to work due to a long-standing health problem or disability, two in five are in poverty. We really need serious action.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Narrowing that employment gap for people with disabilities is a Government priority. The Minister, Deputy Burke, the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and I are very much focused on this. The forthcoming national disability strategy, which will be published in the coming months, is really important in respect of employment. That strategy is a whole-of-government framework and relates to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The finalisation and co-ordination of the strategy is be-

ing led by my colleague the Minister, Deputy Foley. I commend her work in ensuring that the voices of those with disabilities have been central to that development. My Department will lead on the employment pillar of the strategy. The first meeting of the group is envisaged as happening later this year, following the publication of the strategy. We want to address employers' concerns, showcase best practice and promote awareness to support those with disabilities and to ensure legal obligations to them are upheld.

Deputy George Lawlor: There are wonderful organisations right across the country working with people with disabilities but the State has really let them down. As I was saying, two in five people with disabilities are at risk of poverty, one in five lives in consistent poverty and one in two lives in deprivation. The additional costs of living for people with disabilities are well documented in the 2021 Indecon cost of disability report. This report stated that the additional cost associated with managing a disability fell between €11,579 and €16,285. That is an additional €233 to €313 per week for people with a disability. This Indecon report was published in 2021, but we have moved no further along. We are still the laggard of Europe. We still fall consistently below where we should be. I welcome the Minister of State's comments, but we really need to see the required action.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Our enterprise agencies are already active in this space. Our local enterprise offices offer tailored supports for entrepreneurs with disabilities. Enterprise Ireland has an open door mentoring programme, which provides mentoring and capability supports, while IDA Ireland connects companies with talent from under-represented groups, including those with disabilities. I hear what the Deputy is saying. We hope to continue our engagement with the office of the Minister, Deputy Foley, to get the national disability strategy published and to launch the Minister-led disability employment forum. That subgroup of the enterprise forum is key. It will provide a platform for collaboration, innovation and problem-solving with employers and promote best practice in ensuring that people with disabilities can enter the workforce.

Product Labelling

4. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his position regarding the introduction of alcohol labelling under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018, in light of his recent comments citing halting the introduction of labelling as a potential measure for business in response to tariffs (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33468/25]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: What is the position of the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment on the introduction of alcohol labelling under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018? I ask this question in light of recent comments citing the potential halting of the introduction of this labelling as a potential measure for businesses in response to tariffs.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The introduction of alcohol labelling under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Health, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

As regards the question more broadly and measures to support businesses in response to tariffs, the Government recognises that this is a dynamic and evolving situation, which is being monitored closely by the Government. A key element of the Government's response is the forthcoming action plan on market diversification that is being developed jointly by my Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The action plan provides an opportunity

now for new ambition in our approach to market diversification. The action plan will provide a whole-of-government approach to enhance Ireland's economic and trading relationships with new and emerging markets. It will also consider actions which can be taken in established markets where there is value to be maintained and, potentially, more value available.

My Department has been preparing for tariffs and economic shocks. We are working with Enterprise Ireland, our dedicated agency that provides support to exporters. Enterprise Ireland has established a bespoke team that is engaging with exporters and supporting businesses around tariffs and mitigation measures as well as offering advice and support on diversification measures. Enterprise Ireland stands ready to support exporters through its current range of supports and is focused on assisting businesses in developing a response to trade tariffs. Through its team in Ireland and across its seven offices in the US, Enterprise Ireland is working with Irish companies and business owners and providing them with the latest in strategic market intelligence, information and resources through webinars and guidance on accessing advisory and financial supports.

Enterprise Ireland has also published a trade disruption checklist. This is a practical tool for SMEs to assess their exposure to tariffs and prepare mitigation strategies.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Minister of State began by saying that the topic of the question is a matter for the Minister for Health, yet on 6 April the Minister for Finance mentioned this, on 1 May the Tánaiste mentioned it and on 8 April the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Burke, mentioned it. They all referred to this as a potential measure in the context of tariff mitigation. I will therefore ask the question again. What is the Department's position on removing alcohol labelling as a potential measure next year? This legislation has been in the pipeline since 2018. It positions us as a leader in health measures, just as the smoking ban did many years ago. As the Minister has said, the reality is that there are European measures that we need to measure ourselves by. If we kept in step with Europe on the smoking ban, we would still not have a smoking ban. This is our opportunity to mitigate a major health issue here in Ireland. It has the backing of the entire medical community. I need to be clear that this Department will not halt or pause the potential introduction of this.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Let us be absolutely clear that the introduction of alcohol labelling is a Department of Health function. If the Deputy wants to ask this question during oral questions to the Department of Health, she is welcome to do so. Ours is the Department of enterprise, however, and I am responsible for small businesses. As a result, I have a duty to defend the interests of Irish indigenous SMEs, which are facing unprecedented global trade pressures not of their own making. The Deputy is right that the US market accounts for nearly 40% of Irish global exports of alcoholic beverages, with exports of Irish whiskey alone worth nearly €450 million. Indeed, in the context of the Deputy's question about alcohol labelling, the Minister, Deputy Burke, has written to the Minister for Health about the introduction of the new labelling requirements. This is not about undermining public health; it is about a sequence around policy and a way not only to protect jobs and to preserve competitiveness but also to ensure that businesses have economic resilience within their sector. The proposed legislation is very much at a time when many of these companies are struggling with uncertainty.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I have not had a drink of alcohol in thirteen and a half years. Alcohol and its negative impacts have played a huge part in my life. I say this and share it because there is hardly a family in Ireland which has not had the same experience. Once again, therefore, what is the Department's position? I know very well that I can seek an answer from the

Minister for Health about her position, but the Minister of State has just told me that his Department has corresponded with the Minister for Health on this. What is he trying to say? This is not a new thing. It has been the subject of full consultation. It was introduced by the Taoiseach back in 2018, and it is wrong and unfair to dangle it as a response to tariffs when it will not even help those Irish companies involved because it does not have an impact on exports. Distributors are already putting labels on products in anticipation of what might happen, so all this would do is cause confusion if the Government were to roll it back. What is the Department's position, as opposed to that of the Department of Health, on the matter?

Deputy Alan Dillon: We are very much committed to a whole-of-government approach not only to public health but also to economic sustainability. The national alcohol labelling regulation, while rooted in public health objectives, must be implemented in a way that does not jeopardise Ireland's export-led recovery. Indeed, the alcohol beverage manufacturing sector employs more than 5,500 people and is a strategic contributor to our national economy. In one sense, we do not want to abandon the public health goal but we are asking for more pragmatic sequencing and economic realism in terms of its implementation. We will not apologise for standing up for Irish jobs and Irish businesses within this sector and ensuring that we maintain Ireland's global competitiveness. We need to ensure that this well-intentioned regulation does not become an ill-timed disruption to many of these exporters at a time of real uncertainty.

Work Permits

6. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the steps being taken to address the huge delays associated with work permit applications, particularly for the licensed haulage sector in Ireland; if he has met with the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA, to discuss the issues it is experiencing due to these ongoing delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33471/25]

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What steps is the Minister for trade and employment taking to deal with the huge delays relating to and the bureaucratic system that companies in Ireland face in trying to get work permits for foreign applicants? I refer especially to the IRHA and many other industries - agriculture, to name one - and parts of industries. Has the Minister met with the IRHA to discuss these issues? The ongoing delays are crippling the economy.

Deputy Alan Dillon: My Department is committed to delivering an efficient and responsive employment permit system which supports businesses and ensures that we are well positioned to maximise the benefits of economic migration. The system is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and-or labour shortages required to develop and support enterprise for the benefit of our economy.

The Department has responded to labour shortages reported by the haulage sector by making the role of heavy goods vehicle, HGV, driver eligible for a general employment permit without restriction. In April 2025, the quota for HGV-bus mechanic was extended by 200 permits in direct response to identified labour shortages. The role of coach and bus driver is subject to a quota of 1,500 general employment permits, with over 1,000 remaining available.

Following a surge in demand for employment permits across 2021 and 2022, the Department implemented an action plan which increased resources and introduced more efficient methods of processing permit applications. The measures have resulted in significant reductions in wait

times and a vastly improved user experience.

As of 16 June 2025, my Department is processing general employment permit applications received and critical skills permit applications received, with approximately 2,000 applications awaiting processing.

Applications for HGV drivers were temporarily placed on hold in the first half of this year due to an external delay in the licence verification process. Until recently, there was an operational agreement that this Department would verify the driving licences of HGV drivers before issuing an employment permit. However, following legal advice on this issue, the employment permits unit will no longer be verifying driving licences in that manner. Consequently, the unit has recommenced processing permit applications for this role and all applications which have been on hold have now been processed.

The regulation of who is licensed-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It was not too long ago that the Minister of State was on this side of the House. I wish him well in his new position. He is aware that the situation faced by our licensed hauliers is disgraceful. Hard-working Irish businesses are trying to operate legally only to be choked by a lot of regulatory issues and a dysfunctional recruitment process. It is unbelievable. If a haulier in Tipperary in my constituency or anywhere else wants to hire a qualified driver from outside the EU, for example, South Africa, they must wade through a nine-stage bureaucratic minefield and deal with five different departments. The process involves licence exchange agreements, a mandatory 28-day labour market, visa applications, work permits, PPS numbers, residence cards and CPC modules. The list goes on. This process can take up to two years, with costs racking up every step of the way. At the end of it, the driver may not even be allowed into the country.

Deputy Alan Dillon: We recognise the pressures faced by many in the licensed haulage sector. I assure the Deputy that the Government is responding to those concerns. We have made significant progress with the new online employment permit system. It is delivering an effective and responsive system to provide the maximum benefits of our economic migration system. Over the past three years, we have increased staff resources, streamlined internal processing and introduced the new online digital system. It is very user-friendly. General employment permits are being turned around in 19 business days, while critical skills permits are being turned around in just 12. That is significant progress. Since the new system was launched, more than 3,700 applications have been received and more than 3,100 permits have been issued. The system is operating at pre-launch levels. There is high user success.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I do not believe those figures. They do not reflect my experience. People come here illegally and get all the treatment, including free housing and everything else. The message the Minister is giving out is to penalise those who play by the rules. Multinationals can get away with stuff as well. This affects small businesses. It is not just the hauliers; it is also agriculture and hoteliers trying to get people in. They pay the money and go through the system. It is so bureaucratic, and the Minister is telling me it takes 19 days. That is simply not happening. It is not the case in Tipperary, certainly. People are not telling me lies. The process needs to be streamlined. Where a business needs employees from abroad in order to carry out its business, where those people are qualified and meet all the criteria, there must be

a streamlined process in order that businesses can get them in . They make a huge investment and the driver, operator or whomever may not come at all or might leave after a short time. It is a risky business for employers. They need these people. The Minister must cut out the red tape.

Deputy Alan Dillon: These are accurate figures presented by the Department.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I do not believe them.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I am not aware of the cases the Deputy raised.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are numerous.

Deputy Alan Dillon: If he wants to send me a note in relation to them, I will be happy to take the matter up. As stated, there is a more modern and integrated system now. We are working with the Department of Justice to try to streamline matters more. There is also a single application process for visas. We have made significant progress in relation to labour shortages in many sectors. The Minister and I have made additions - most recently in April - in the context of permits for HGV drivers and vehicle repairers. We will look at the review relating to the employment permit occupations list that is scheduled for the summer. It is an important step forward. Overall, we have invested heavily in the permit system. It has shown huge benefit in trying to fill the skills shortages in certain sectors of our market.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Work Permits

7. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his plans to expand the lists of occupations for roles that are eligible for employment permits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32942/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: This question is important in the context of our economy. Across our economy in health, ICT and engineering, there are skills shortages that need to be filled. Will the Minister of State provide an update on his plan to expand the list of occupations?

Deputy Alan Dillon: The programme for Government outlines our commitment to addressing skills shortages and supporting economic growth through a strategic migration approach. Ireland's general policy is to promote the sourcing of labour from within Ireland and the EEA. To fulfil this policy, Ireland operates and manages an employment permits system designed to fill critical skills and labour shortages in the short to medium term where those skills are not available within Ireland or the EEA. This targeted approach ensures that Irish enterprise has access to the talent it needs to remain productive, competitive and innovative, particularly in the context of near full employment.

The employment permits system is managed on the basis of two occupations lists. The critical skills occupations list prioritises specific in-demand professional roles crucial to the functioning of Irish society such as healthcare and IT. Minimum annual remuneration for roles on the critical skills occupations list start at €38,000 for those with a relevant degree and €64,000 for those with relevant experience. The ineligible occupations list identifies roles for which a

labour supply should be available in the Irish or EEA labour market and so are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit. All roles not on either list are eligible for general employment permits which have a minimum annual remuneration of €34,000 for most roles.

The occupations lists are subject to periodic review. This means that in times of economic expansion, eligible occupation categories may be expanded to provide for labour and skills shortages. During a period of economic contraction, eligible occupation categories can be narrowed and other restrictions applied.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Are there plans to expand the lists? The programme for Government does not just mention visas; it also refers to merging the visa and employment permit systems into one user-friendly, single-application procedure supported by a new ICT system. I understand that a new permit system has been rolled out, and Deputy Mattie McGrath also raised this issue. Concerns have been raised with me by constituents, all of which we were able to resolve. How is the new system performing? Is the new IT system performing well? Is it slower than the previous system? There is much confusion. To support SMEs, the Department could provide more training. There was an online webinar and briefing but more training could be of benefit for SMEs that regularly use the system, whether in healthcare or ICT.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The employment permit system is demand-led and designed to respond to the real labour market needs. The occupations list is reviewed periodically. The next formal review is scheduled for the summer. It will be open to all sectors. We invite many representative bodies, Departments and NGOs to make submissions. It is evidence-based. It is reviewed and overseen by an interdepartmental group on economic migration, the skills and labour market research unit and Department of Social Protection. We recently made 43 changes to the occupations list. That reflects the new critical skills required. We are making changes including key sectors such as science, engineering and health. I will come back to the Deputy about his question on the ongoing performance of the current system which was implemented as part of an action plan. It has been working well in recent months.

Deputy Albert Dolan: It is welcome to hear that a review will take place and that such reviews happen periodically. Is there a date for when submissions will open? Are they made on a rolling basis? If I go back to my constituents in Galway East and across the network, it would be great to be able to give people an update. I would appreciate an update on the permit system. As with any new system, there have been teething issues but nothing that cannot be worked through. The system will serve the better purpose of shortening waiting times for work permits. In sectors of high demand, is there any limit to the number of work permits that can be issued for areas where we have significant skills shortages?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his focus on this important area. The consultation will open shortly. We will make that announcement in due course. It will open for an eight-week period. There will be an opportunity for employers, representative bodies and Departments to make submissions. This is very much a transparent, data-driven process. It is open to all sectors. Most recently, we opened the eligible occupation list for town planners in order to deliver the infrastructure and the housing we need, and for social and home care helpers because it is really important we continue to invest in the care of older people. We also have a shortage of HGV, coach and bus drivers. The single application procedure for employment permits and the immigration permissions will be central in terms of how we have one system fit for the State.

Industrial Development

8. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the number of jobs in Galway currently supported by Enterprise Ireland and by the IDA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33001/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: In Galway, we have a fantastic economy that has grown over the past few years and has only gone from strength to strength. There is a significant amount of people employed across our IDA and Enterprise Ireland clients. I ask the Minister to provide details of the number of jobs in Galway in either IDA- or Enterprise Ireland-related companies.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank the Deputy for his very important question. I am happy to tell him that the Government and I, as Minister of State with responsibility for trade promotion, digitalisation and AI, are committed to developing Ireland's enterprise base across all regions over the next five years. This ranges from backing small businesses and start-ups to scaling up indigenous firms and enhancing our attractiveness as a location for foreign direct investment. Our vision is to foster a dynamic, resilient and inclusive economy that supports sustainable growth and job creation in every corner of the country.

The Deputy's interest, of course, is County Galway and according to the Department's annual employment survey of Enterprise Ireland clients for 2024, there are 329 Enterprise Ireland-supported companies operating in that county. These companies collectively employ 9,687 people, which is a nearly 7% increase in employment compared with 2023. This growth reflects the strength of local entrepreneurship and the effectiveness of targeted supports for indigenous enterprise, which continue to empower businesses to innovate, expand and compete on a global stage.

There were a number of Enterprise Ireland jobs announcements in Galway in 2025. In January 2025, Aerogen announced an expansion that will create 725 jobs over ten years. In May, M&M Qualtech announced 18 new positions at its Galway facility while in June, ICS Medical Devices announced 72 jobs by 2028. In addition, the Galway local enterprise office has been instrumental in supporting small businesses. In 2024, it assisted 258 local businesses, supporting 1,356 jobs and creating 218 new jobs through the provision of over €600,000 in direct grant assistance.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. That tells the story. I was expecting to hear numbers like that. A 7% increase in Enterprise Ireland employment numbers across Galway in 2023 to 2024 alone is phenomenal growth and the type of growth we want to see, not just for Galway, but for all of the west.

There are two important aspects I wish to highlight. The first is the planning process for new companies looking to establish in our area to accelerate that growth. We had a fantastic example in my nearest town of Athenry. The Dexcom facility currently under construction is set to employ 1,000 people. It is at the M6 motorway interchange and has rail connectivity. This formed part of the western regional enterprise plan previously. The problem currently lies with infrastructure in Galway city. I need support from the Department of enterprise to encourage the other Departments, be that the Department of Transport or of infrastructure, to ensure access to Galway city is a priority. So many of my constituents commute into the city to access work in Parkmore and it is not fair on them to have their time stolen.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for the very legitimate concerns he has raised. On the first piece around planning, he will agree that the Planning and Development Act passed by the previous Government has gone a huge way towards trying to address that. Whether we are in opposition or government, we all know this country has been choked and almost had its development stifled due to planning. We are doing everything possible to address those challenges and make it more attractive for businesses to go through that process. The spurious and vexatious objections that have stifled the ability of companies not just to start up but also to possibly scale up have been detrimental to the growth of our economy. In the previous Government and this Government, we are certainly trying to address it, and we have addressed it in an action-based way through the Planning and Development Act.

As to how we support the businesses that want to scale up, the Deputy will agree that all of our State agencies, be it the IDA, Enterprise Ireland, CeADAR - which is focused on AI development - or a LEO, are doing everything possible to support those businesses in doing that.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I appreciate the commitment by the Government to tackle the planning issues, but we did not have that problem in Athenry, fortunately. It was an eight-week planning process and permission was granted with the necessary conditions to ensure nobody was impacted negatively. It was a positive news story and something we as a Government should promote more to the wider world to show that companies can do business in Ireland, can do it quickly and can grow their business in a safe and reliable environment.

The other point I wanted to make applies in particular to small-to-medium-sized enterprises across the west. Procurement can be quite difficult. I continually raise this, but we need to change the way we are doing procurement to ensure our small-to-medium-sized enterprises can access opportunities close to home. It should not be a case of the large players continually being the ones to get the largest slice of the cake. It should be the case that our small-to-medium-sized enterprises in our localities have access to opportunities as well.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Point taken. It is a very reasonable observation to make. Procurement is a language of its own. We all know that from filling in procurement applications for grants for communities, for example. There is a language and that can sometimes be off-putting, make it difficult and create further challenges for business. However, we are in the business of creating business. We are in the business, as a Government, of supporting business and the Deputy is right, in that we want the world to know this is a good country to do business in and that the Government and the local authorities are ready and open to assist in any way we can.

I take on board the Deputy's point about procurement and will speak to the Minister to see what we can do to address that.

Small and Medium Enterprises

9. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will outline his strategy to address the rising cost of doing business, particularly for small and medium enterprises; if he will detail any planned interventions aimed at improving cost competitiveness in areas such as energy, insurance, labour and regulatory compliance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33207/25]

10. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the

further steps the Department is taking to support small and medium enterprises to reduce the cost of energy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32906/25]

16. Deputy Tony McCormack asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the additional supports being provided to SMEs to address rising costs and staffing challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33029/25]

Deputy Peter Burke: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9, 10 and 16 together.

I thank the Deputies for these important questions on the SME sector. Ireland's SME sector has faced a number of economic shocks in recent years and these have resulted in very significant cost increases. While most of these have been international in nature, with energy price inflation the most significant, there have been costs associated with domestic measures, including policies aimed at improving working conditions. Although there have been improvements in wholesale price inflation, business costs and especially energy prices remain elevated. Our small size and peripheral location contribute to higher electricity prices in Ireland. We also have a widely spread, low-density population, which means that network and connection costs are higher.

The Government has been active in providing support for businesses facing increased costs over the past several years. In April 2024, I announced a substantial package of measures that continue to aid firms. These measures included increased payments under the innovation grant scheme and the energy efficiency grant scheme and the implementation of an enhanced SME test on Government decisions.

The National Enterprise Hub was launched in 2024 and has been designed as an entry point to aid businesses to find relevant supports and help for their business. Most recently, budget 2025 provided for the introduction of the power up grant and introduced changes which reduced costs by means of the increased employer PRSI threshold. The programme for Government set out a commitment to establish a cost of business advisory forum. The first meeting of the forum took place on 11 June where numerous organisations representing Ireland's enterprise sector were joined by officials from a variety of State agencies and Government Departments. It is anticipated the forum will meet regularly over the coming six months, with each meeting devoted to a distinct area of concern to businesses, including business costs, infrastructure and regulation.

In response to international economic developments and in line with other commitments in the programme for Government, we have also accelerated the timeframe for the development of the action plan for competitiveness and productivity. The action plan is currently being prepared and discussions on competitiveness will be had at the summit in July. The plan will focus on domestic policy measures, which can make the Irish economy more competitive and resilient to economic shocks. It is expected that the plan will address areas that are currently impacting on the ability of SMEs to compete internationally, including costs, SME scaling and increasing the rate of research, development and innovation among firms, which will be critical.

We have taken a number of actions over the past months since my appointment as enterprise Minister, and we will continue in that vein. We are coming to our fourth piece of omnibus legislation in an EU context. At the heart of that is doing things, as I mentioned, simpler, faster and lighter. We need to bring that to the heart of the enterprise sector. The Deputy will be aware we have taken a number of decisions on sick pay, the trajectory to a living wage and

trying to ensure businesses remain viable so employment can be retained at the significant point it is. He will be aware also that we have increased employment by approximately 90,000 over the past year. That is 90,000 families with an additional income going into them. We all know that high-value jobs are the best route to meet one's ambition in life and to give everyone a fair chance. We are focused on delivering that.

At our competitiveness summit we will have a significant focus on infrastructure. Working with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, we are trying to put together a competitive fund within the Department. We know the priorities of the current national development plan review are housing, water and wastewater, energy and our competitiveness. Those are the four key areas. That is why, as a Government, we need to prioritise those with a laser focus because if everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. We need to be clear on that and send that signal strongly to the enterprise sector. We are also focusing, in the context of budget 2026, on our value proposition as a country. It will be key for the SME sector. Taxation changes like VAT will be important for the hospitality sector. It is important in the programme for Government talks that we work towards and deliver on those to ensure we are giving a strong stimulus to those sectors that are most vulnerable. We know across the economy that approximately three quarters of all minimum wage workers exist in retail and hospitality. That is a significant challenge to those businesses because of the regulatory impact it has had. No other Government has done as much for employment rights and supporting the well-being and rights of employees, but we also have to be cautious to ensure businesses remain viable on that trajectory. That is why it is key in decisions taken to ensure that and to ensure businesses continue to grow and prosper. Last week, subject to the establishment of our small business unit, we had our first meeting of the cost of business advisory forum, which had a huge turnout from many of the regulators and a lot of the State agencies. We need to be clear that we are charting a pathway forward. The interoperability of some of these rules and regulations set by independent regulators from different areas and how they impact on the costs and viability of business can be significant. We need to take a number of actions in that regard. That is why the outworkings of that forum will be critical in delivering the Government's vision of supporting our SME sector and keeping that growth.

As I always point out, and as I did in reply to Question No. 2, many of these businesses that employ two thirds of people across our country are operating from the kitchen table. They do not have a finance director or HR director. They are doing all of that work themselves. They are working from five to nine and we in government need to everything to vindicate their efforts and ensure they remain viable, which is key to our economic success.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister and compliment his Department for all its hard work. We are in an economy with full employment. That does not happen by chance. I refer to all the work that has been done in the past and needs to be done in the future. We are in uncertain times. We are looking at tariffs. We are working with our European partners to negotiate tariffs with the United States. Now, more than ever, we need to be supporting our smaller businesses. I welcome the supports mentioned, but many small businesses in County Offaly and across the country are still not sure how to access them or whether they even qualify for them. I have spoken with business owners who are unaware that certain schemes exist in the first place, and that is a real gap. Will the Minister look at simplifying the application process and at rolling out a strong national and local awareness campaign through the local enterprise office, chambers of commerce and media? We need to meet these businesses where they are, and not just on the websites. Will the Minister also provide figures on how many businesses nationwide and in Offaly have made use of the wage subsidy scheme and upskilling programmes

like Skillnet or others under the national training fund?

I want to ask about commercial rates. Small businesses in towns are still under major pressure from inflation, energy bills and wage demands. Will the rates relief continue into next year? They need certainty now.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for mentioning those important areas. I turn first to simplification. I have met Enterprise Ireland and our LEO sector, and we are keen to drive the message home that we need conditions that are simple for family businesses to get those supports, critically in the transition to digitalisation and sustainability. If we do not support our businesses, it will not be possible to meet that transition. We have established a National Enterprise Hub that has more than 250 supports from 29 Government Departments and agencies all under one portal. They have a return time of less than 24 hours, with phone operators at the other end of the line to reply to customers. That is critical to assist them with some bespoke examples that pertain to their business models. That has been successful. We have seen a significant increase in callers and people interacting on the website over past months. You can see the advertising campaign under way to make people aware of those supports which we want to get out to businesses.

We also have our SME tests, which I am trying to get into the Cabinet handbook, which direct that an impact assessment must be carried out on all memorandums, primary legislation changes and statutory instrument changes - at the heart of each decision - to demonstrate how it impacts on our SME sector and in thinking small first. It will be important to reach that milestone.

On the National Training Fund legislation, the heads of Bill went before Cabinet this week. That will be keenly focused on our tertiary education sector, but also on our SMEs and how we can get money into upskilling, life-long learning and continuing to train people across our economy. It is critical to our success that we have the skill base to ensure we can grow and absorb the huge opportunity that is out there. That will be very important.

With regard to other supports, we are currently preparing our pre-budget submission for budget 2026. We, along with the Ministers of State, Deputies Smyth and Dillon, have met a number of the sectors. Yesterday we had our enterprise forum where we heard all the views on what our enterprise sector would like to see in budget 2026. They are wide-ranging. As a country, last year was the first time we went over the €100 billion barrier, with a budget of €105.5 billion. That shows the significant improvements we have made, but the Deputy rightly alluded to the significant clouds on the horizon. We have to be careful we are hitting the right parts.

Key from my point of view will be significant changes in the research and development tax credit and, hopefully, we can get small, indigenous companies as part of that. As well as supporting the enterprise sector, we are trying to reduce regulation, which is important, and continuing to get as much scaling up and as many new companies. We have established a target of having 1,000 new companies, through Enterprise Ireland, over the next five years and getting up to 275,000 employees, supported by Enterprise Ireland. We are also trying to ensure significant investment in regional Ireland. It will be core and central to our ministerial team to ensure the regions grow strongly. I know that is something I share with the Deputy.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I now turn to the issue of high-street retail, which is in serious decline. In towns like Tullamore, Birr, Edenderry and similar towns all over Ireland, we see

more and more shops closing. Footfall is down, rent and staffing costs are up and the result is that once thriving town centres are slowly emptying out. This is visible, urgent and deeply worrying. The reality is that this cannot be solved by one scheme or Department alone.

10 o'clock

We need a national joined-up plan that looks at how to bring life back to our high streets. That includes cross-departmental action, enterprise, housing, local government and finance. We need real incentives for retail on the high street, not just to keep existing shops afloat, but to make it attractive for new retail businesses to open. That could mean help with start-up costs, targeted grants for fitting out vacant units, supports for marketing, rent, or even pop-up retail pilots in empty spaces.

What plans does the Department have to support and revive high street retail? Will the Minister work with his Cabinet colleagues to make this a priority in government?

Deputy Peter Burke: Absolutely. Retail is the biggest employer in the economy. It is so important to our vision for enterprise.

There are significant supports already in place. One key example I always give is the energy efficiency grant. At the moment, one of the key ways we have to reduce business costs is not to take money off businesses in the first place. Front and centre of that is the energy efficiency grant. I have seen case studies, such as the example of a shop owner in Donegal who has a convenience store with a deli, who, by upgrading his LED lighting and refrigeration, can save €1,500 a month on his utility bills. We want to see business owners involved in schemes like that, in particular in the areas of sustainability and digitalisation. We want to make the conditions easy for them to access it and to get a quicker turnaround in the schemes. We met Enterprise Ireland at its centre of excellence, which liaises with LEOs, this week with that target in mind. We are trying to support businesses as much as we can.

Deputy McCormack quite rightly points out that there are other Departments that are key to the development of our main streets. Vacancy is a big challenge, in particular in regard to accommodation. Getting people to live over the shop, as it were, has been a big challenge because the regulatory burden is very significant in terms of making developments viable in that space. Our new housing plan will be launched in July. I hope we will see actions that involve working with the Minister, Deputy Browne, in that regard to ensure that happens. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is very focused on that in terms of planning exemptions. There is a lot of work we can do.

We are also working closely with the local authorities. We see very different stimulus plans from various local authorities in terms of how they can bring a bit of agility and how they deploy their rates stimuli, rates budget and waivers, etc. We are up for any way we can support an increased number of retailers in our country. The Deputy will see some of the measures that we have taken on retailers' costs in recent months, which we hope will support them and, equally, help retain employment and jobs, which is our focus every single day in the Department.

Enterprise Support Services

11. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment when a new western regional enterprise plan will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33000/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: This question is essentially to ask when a new western regional enterprise plan will be published. Will the Minister of State provide some detail on that? The previous western regional enterprise plan from 2021 to 2024 has been a success. It identified a Galway to Athenry economic corridor in which we now see enterprises developing in the form of Dexcom, but we have also seen other developments right across the west. I refer to CREW and BIA Innovator in Athenry. A huge amount is going on. I would greatly appreciate it if the Minister of State could provide an update on when the new western regional enterprise plan will be launched.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. Balanced regional development remains a key Government priority. One central aim of the White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030 is to support balanced regional economic development. My Department and its agencies contribute to this agenda in several ways, including through the nine regional enterprise plans or REPs. These are bottom-up plans developed and led by regional stakeholders, which focus on collaborative initiatives to strengthen the enterprise ecosystem in each region.

As mentioned in response to a parliamentary question during Question Time on the 20 February 2025, with agreement from the regional enterprise plans national oversight group at its meeting of 25 April 2024, the current REPs have been extended for one year to the end of 2025. This extension provides an additional year for the continued implementation of the current plans and time to consider the best approach to the development of successor plans throughout 2025.

There is a clear commitment in the new programme for Government to publish and resource new regional enterprise plans. Before we develop these new plans, I am assessing our approach to date so I can set a clear framework for the future and engage all of the relevant stakeholders in each region.

An independent review of the regional enterprise plan initiative is currently under way. The review began in January 2025 and the final report is due to be delivered by the end of this month. A steering group was established to oversee the review.

The REP national oversight group, or NOG, met last week, with the Minister, Deputy Burke, the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and me co-chairing the meeting. The NOG brought together the chairs from the regional committees and other key stakeholders to discuss implementation of the REPs and related policies. We will ensure that we also develop a new policy statement in the second half of this year. In turn, that will lead to the development of the next set of regional enterprise plans.

Deputy Albert Dolan: The western regional enterprise plan must have significant consideration of AI and a dedication to it. Ireland has benefited massively in the past 30 to 40 years from having incredible educational opportunities, ultimately leading many people into high-paying, knowledge worker roles. The problem is that, with the speed at which AI is changing, it is a threat to many of the knowledge worker roles. We should not see it as a threat but as an oppor-

tunity. We must embrace it and run with it. This western regional enterprise plan should set out clearly that Galway or the west needs an AI hub, whereby all of our tech companies, medtech and pharma in the west can tap into AI and make sure that not only are they using AI to benefit their companies, but they are using it to benefit the west and the country as a whole, because it is going to get hyper-competitive in the coming years. If we do not get ahead of it now, we run the risk of being left behind. Globally, AI is being adopted at a faster rate than any technology previously in the history of the world. It is our chance as a country to get out in front.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I agree with the points and the principles the Deputy has presented. The regional enterprise plan for the west is very much a collaborative initiative and must be focused on digitalisation and decarbonisation and on ensuring that the region itself is put to the fore. We have a good story to tell about sectoral growth in ICT, agritech and medtech. It is great to hear about the large multimillion euro investment in Deputy Dolan's town of Athenry, where Dexcom created 1,000 jobs. We want to support that even further in regard to artificial intelligence. We will shortly publish the cluster programme, which will be important. There will also be a new life science strategy. AI will be central to both our indigenous and FDI investments. Following the publication of the Indecon report on the framework for the new regional enterprise plans-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy David Maxwell): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Alan Dillon: -----a core element of that will be how we use digital technology to support the plans in the future.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I appreciate the Minister of State's commitment to digitalisation, but I want to hammer the point home. An AI hub for the west is something we need in order to be as competitive as the rest of the country, and world, into the future.

The final point I want to raise relates to agritech and the agrifood sector. There is a role to be played between agritourism, the food sector and what we have already built in Athenry – the BIA Innovator. If the Minister of State has not seen it or visited it, it is an incredible multimillion euro facility with state-of-the-art biotechnology, kitchens and supports in place. It is not just a kitchen; it is a wraparound service for entrepreneurs in the food sector who are trying to make new and innovative products, ultimately leading to them growing and expanding. I would like to hear the Minister of State's consideration of the agritourism and agrifood sector as well, especially in the west, because it is a great opportunity for us.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The fact that the tourism function has moved into the enterprise Department means there is a role to expand within the agrifood and tech sector. In my county, agritech is an important sector. We have McHale Farm Machinery and Malone Farm Machinery.

The west must be a focal point and have centres of excellence. It is great to hear about such positive developments such as CREW and the other sectors within Galway. It has a really strong ecosystem and that is down to the hard work with the local authorities, public representatives and key State agencies on development and investment. Indeed, I want that to continue within the new west regional enterprise plan. I am sure we will be in touch and I know the Deputy is a huge advocate for business, enterprise and ensuring we create the jobs to ensure people have that quality of life to live and raise a family within their locality.

Dáil Éireann
Business Supports

12. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if usage data relating to the National Enterprise Hub is able to demonstrate the more popular or accessible business supports; if such information will help shape future supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32944/25]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for his question on the National Enterprise Hub which was established on 10 July 2024 and since then, the NEH has handled more than 6,000 inquiries from businesses. Monthly numbers have increased consistently and 773 were received in May alone. The primary goal of the NEH is to improve access to Government supports for businesses. We also want to simplify access and reach businesses that have never availed of the many different supports on offer. While my Department leads on the NEH overall, it is run by Enterprise Ireland, EI, and it is very much a whole of Government approach. The NEH has expanded considerably in the last year and now offers information and support on more than 250 Government supports from 30 different Government bodies. The NEH continues to undergo developments to refine and improve its services and to enhance the manner in which data is captured and used to ensure it is providing useful insights that can be used to inform policy.

In terms of the most popular supports, the top three most searched categories in May this year were, as the Deputy might expect; grants and funding; loans, training and programmes; and advice and mentoring. The top inquiries received by the NEH team in May were: fund your start-up; become more digital; and get support to expand. They relate to scaling up, digitalisation and AI and seed funding for start-ups. The top individual supports were the local enterprise office, LEO, supports start your own business; the grow digital voucher; LEO and EI feasibility studies; Micro Finance Ireland loans; the LEO energy efficiency grant and the revenue start-up relief for entrepreneurs. SOLAS micro-qualifications, the SBCI growth and sustainability loan scheme, social protection job plus and Skillnet Ireland networking also featured as popular supports.

I am learning every day of all the different schemes and supports that are there so something like this that pulls all of that together and gives it to the business community is essential.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister of State for the update. I fully agree with her. When the Minister of State shares that information, she is essentially giving an insight into what is happening in the market. However, if a business owner sits in front of a computer and is looking for information, they do not necessarily know what they are navigating for. We need to be sharing that detail on the website's home page and using it as an interactive piece. I appreciate this is very early days - it was only established last July - but it has been hugely welcome. The level of engagement is important to share but also the outcome on queries and where the obstacles were is also important. Business people learn from each other in networks, hotels and whatever else on a daily basis and there should be an element of that brought in here as well.

On the grants, this is a constant, evolving and moving piece. We need to not just share that information but give that element of opportunity for businesses to share their sense of the market. As the Minister of State said, that can feed up in many different ways into what our policy can be.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy. As I said at the outset, the National Enterprise Hub not only gives the information but it is collecting the data too which gives the Government

a laser sharp focus on the type of policy, grant aid and supports we need to offer to get to the critical crux of what businesses need to support, grow and scale.

The figures I gave out on the inquiries it has had so far are incredible. There have been 6,000 since it began and in May alone, there were over 700 inquiries. The hub brings together information and resources on more than 250 Government supports and 30 different Government bodies and State agencies. That is always the challenge for business people, especially the small and medium sector that may not have a HR section or does not have a section dedicated to going after where funds are or where they can be availed of. That is always the feedback we would all get. Having that one stop shop, which is the hope and intention of what the enterprise hub is, gives them that one place they can go. It is across 30 Government bodies. That kind of coherence and collective information is critically important.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister of State. She might not believe this but sometimes, I get feedback that the grant systems are too good to be true. When you get an applicant that has gone through the likes of an energy efficiency grant, how seamless it is and how easy it is to apply and get the payment, that feedback needs to get out there more. We will see an increase in that regard. No one can doubt what progress has been made from a Government perspective in this space over time, whether it be sick pay or living wage, but overall prioritising the viability of business. That is the message we need to get out.

There is a narrative that we may not have been as pro-enterprise as we are but this is very much an instrument and tool we need to use to our advantage. It is working but it needs to be maximised and invested in more to ensure there is a level of engagement with it rather than just pushing information out on particular grants. It should be showing what is the top line in terms of what the engagement has been so people are learning from it.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: In my short few months in the Department, the Minister, Deputy Burke, has been relentless on the theme of lighter, faster and simpler with what the Deputy is talking about and providing opportunities for businesses to apply for those grants and make it easier and quicker and not as onerous or burdensome. As we all know and we hear it at meetings ourselves, business people ask is it worth the effort. There is a huge effort being made on the Minister's part to get all of the right people around the table and have the forums for those messages to come across, not just to us, the policy makers, but to the officials too who are helping us pull together these grant applications.

The Minister, Deputy Burke, has been relentless on the message of simpler, faster and lighter on not just the burdens of regulation but also on the theme of providing supports to businesses to assist them to scale up and grow.

EU Directives

13. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his Department's position on the provisions currently contained in the Corporate Sustainability and Due Diligence Directive which may be subject to alteration or removal as part of the EU Omnibus package relating to the risk-based approach to due diligence, harmonised civil liability regime, the requirement to put into effect climate transition plans, and provisions on stakeholder engagement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27728/25]

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Gibney for her very important question. Ireland supports the simplification and burden reduction agenda at EU level. Specifically, in relation to the Omnibus on sustainability, the proposals are intended to address disproportionate burdens on businesses, in particular on SMEs, whilst retaining key aspects in relation to corporate responsibility. In relation to the necessity to conduct a risk-based approach, the Commission's proposal retains the requirement for in-scope companies to conduct risk-based human rights and environmental due diligence of their own operations, those of their subsidiaries and their direct business partners. If plausible information suggests the existence or possibility of adverse impacts arising from their operations or those of their indirect business partners, the company will be required to conduct an in-depth assessment.

If that assessment confirms the existence of an adverse impact, further due diligence will need to be carried out. The proposed amendment in relation to civil liability is to remove the EU-wide civil liability regime in favour of a national civil liability regime. My position, which has been indicated at EU level, is that to avoid a civil liability regime which would vary across EU Member States, Ireland sees the benefits of retaining the EU-wide civil liability regime as provided for and published in the directive.

In relation to the climate action proposal, it seeks to simplify the provisions on transition plans by aligning with the provisions of the corporate sustainability reporting directive. In-scope companies will be required to include implementation actions, planned and taken, in their climate transition plans. The design of climate plans must include targets related to climate change and companies will have to report on achieving those targets on an annual basis. The Deputy may wish to note that under the climate action plan, the enterprise sector is committing to a 35% reduction in emissions by 2030. Irish enterprises are taking climate action seriously. For example, a recently commissioned survey of more than 300 SMEs showed that 83% of businesses consider sustainability important in their daily operations. As for stakeholder engagement, in-scope companies will be required to engage with their workers and representatives, including trade unions, and individuals and communities.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am glad to hear there are some elements still supported by the Government, but by removing the risk-based assessment for suppliers we are not identifying where the problems are. We cannot guarantee, then, that our clothes, food and phones are not made using slave labour or in factories like those at Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, whose collapse killed more than 1,100 garment workers in 2013.

A full assessment of low risk for one supplier is potentially being asked for, and this disproportionately affects SMEs. This is not better regulation. Harmonised civil liability gives certainty to business. That is better regulation. Instead, we businesses face having to navigate countless different legal systems. It has been really difficult to get a straight answer on what the Department wants to keep at EU level and what it is seeking to be simplified. I would appreciate the Minister's clarity on some of his. I urge him to provide more clarity on exactly what the positions are on this crucial legislation.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am happy to provide the clarity. First, I agree with her on the harmonised approach to civil liability. That would be important. We want to be careful about member states having very different responses, which could present a very significant challenge. We have made our view on this known in the co-legislative process that is under way. There is a lot of territory to be covered in this.

On the risk-based approach, it is key that in-scope companies have an obligation - I want to be very clear on this - in relation to human rights and the environment. It is so important that we hold companies to account with respect to their corporate responsibility. Ireland's position will be very clear in supporting aims in this regard, but what I am not supporting is the gold-plating of some of the directives, which primary legislation has often done, to ensure proportionate regulation for smaller companies and companies in the supply chain process but whose work is done at the kitchen table. The responsibility of those that are in scope is very significant. I concur with much of what the Deputy said in her contribution.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The corporate sustainability and due diligence directive came about after years of collective work, consultation and engagement. My concern and that of the Social Democrats is that the omnibus proposals are really being rammed through without any consideration at the same level. Is the Minister in favour of all the measures cited in my question, particularly the risk-based assessment? Does he support their being removed? If so, why? Since this matter is about to be discussed at European Council level, we need more clarity from the Government on what it wants to happen. I have submitted many parliamentary questions on this because we need the clarity. Without it, we have a huge democratic deficit whereby we do not really know what our Government is going to do to shape this vital EU legislation.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy and appreciate her concern about this issue. We are happy to engage and work with her as the directive is amended through the omnibus measures. I am in favour of the thinking on in-scope companies. It is critical that a risk-based analysis be conducted, particularly regarding human rights, the environment and areas critical to the companies' supply chains, and to ensure principles of good corporate responsibility are upheld in those companies. We are very much focusing on that.

The Department has met Trócaire, Oxfam, Christian Aid Ireland and all the key stakeholders in this area. Our public consultation, as a country, has been very strong on this. What I am trying to achieve here is a balance to address any possible unintended consequences the due diligence directive may have for some small SMEs that can get carried into the supply chain. I want to be careful about that. However, as a country, we really need to stand up for corporate responsibility and ensure companies operate to the highest standard with regard to all their supply chains. The Deputy quite rightly pointed out serious consequences for workers in other jurisdictions who are very much exploited. Therefore, we need to be very careful about this. I will be happy to work with the Deputy on it as we go forward in the European context.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Social Welfare Eligibility

85. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is aware of the groups excluded from the jobseeker's pay-related benefit, in particular the seasonal, casual, short-time or part-time workers such as school caretakers and secretaries who could benefit considerably from receiving the jobseeker's pay-related benefit in lieu of the jobseeker's benefit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33101/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Maidin mhaith do gach duine. As is often the case, my question

is very simple and straightforward. It gives the Minister the chance to explain why a category of workers, particularly those in seasonal, casual, short-term or part-time employment, such as school caretakers and secretaries but not exclusively, are excluded from the Government's new pay-related jobseeker's benefit.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Maidin mhaith ar ais duit, a Theachta.

The new jobseeker's pay-related benefit was introduced at the end of March. This new social insurance-based income support has replaced the jobseeker's benefit scheme for those who have become fully unemployed since the commencement of the scheme on 31 March. On 7 June 2025, some 11,900 jobseeker's pay-related benefit claims had been awarded under the new scheme.

The origin of this payment is the experience during the Covid period, when many workers lost their incomes suddenly and without warning. The PUP, which was pay-related, helped to cushion the income shock.

The jobseeker's pay-related benefit extends the same principle to people who lose their income unexpectedly. It links the rate of payment to a person's previous earnings to provide a financial cushion when a person loses their employment entirely. It allows them to adjust to a period of uncertainty associated with unemployment. The scheme aims to support a person during this initial period while they seek alternative employment and adjust their outgoings.

The legislation underpinning the scheme specifically provides that specific categories of atypical workers are excluded from the jobseeker's pay-related benefit. These exclusions apply to those referred to by the Deputy, who often work on a part-time, casual, short-time or seasonal basis. The conditions for the jobseeker's pay-related benefit scheme are not designed to provide in-work support on a recurring and intermittent basis.

Seasonal workers and those whose employment patterns align with the academic year have a predictable or ongoing pattern of work and can plan accordingly. However, within the Department we seek to be proactive. We have already communicated with more than 8,000 people who we know have the work patterns in question to ensure no delay in going on to benefits as soon as the school year ends. At this point, I do not plan to include them in the jobseeker's pay-related benefit scheme.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will hold the Minister to that. I will be back here in September to check against delivery, as the Government often states regarding its statements.

The Minister has not advanced any satisfactory justification for why the group has been excluded. He states they can predict they are going to be unemployed, but even if you know you are going to be broke or are surprised by being broke in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, you are still broke.

At the committee meeting last week, the Minister spoke at length about his commitment to make some efforts with regard to child poverty, which I do not doubt for a moment, but what about the children of school secretaries, school caretakers, seasonal workers and those on very low incomes? Just because they know they are going to be struggling does not mean they will be struggling any less. Will the Minister reconsider his decision and examine the group I have mentioned, in particular, perhaps in the context of the cost-of-living crisis or commitments on

child poverty? The Minister should do whatever it takes and consider again the groups who are excluded.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am always open to considering the Deputy's suggestions. We will be reviewing the jobseeker's pay-related benefit after a year of operation. This is the first time in more than 40 years we have had such a benefit. In connection with other questions that have arisen, it will provide the foundation for other potential pay-related benefits.

If there are relevant cases, the Deputy should bring them to my attention. We are proactively engaging with those we know have a particular pattern of employment at this time of the year, particularly in the academic sector. More than 8,000 people have been contacted in the past several weeks. If there are any cases, I would like to hear about them before September so we do not have any delays in people getting their income payments.

As of now, I have no plans to review the scheme but I will certainly be happy to have a discussion with the Deputy in the context of the overall review, which will take place after a year.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I ask the Minister to charge the people doing the review with the responsibility of looking at seasonal workers. To be frank, that is possibly the least that the Minister could do but I ask that he do that. There should be some engagement about the people who are excluded with the trade union, Fórsa, because it represents the bulk of the secretaries and caretakers. It is not just them but all seasonal workers. There is a more favourable rate of jobseeker's benefit available and a group of low-income workers is excluded from it. Does the Minister see where I am going with this? These are not people who are on big money. When people are on jobseeker's, they are broke. It does not matter if they have known for a couple of weeks that they are going to be on jobseeker's. If there is a more favourable rate available, I am sure the Minister can imagine how those excluded from that rate feel for the weeks of the year when they do not get any payment. These are the only people in the school who will not be paid over the summer. I am not saying they are treated as second-class citizens. I am saying they have possibly every right to feel like they are, then they look at the jobseeker's benefit and see the same treatment applied. I ask that the Minister look at this group in particular.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. I am always open to any engagement with unions on this. This system was designed for workers who are going to be re-employed relatively quickly. Hopefully in the coming weeks, we will get the first signal of that, because the first cohort of people will be coming to the end of the top payment of 13 weeks. That payment declines as they are no longer employed so to do a full comparison between jobseeker's pay-related benefit and other things will take some time in terms of people's experience and the length of time people are on it. It is designed to assist people as they seek other jobs. The group the Deputy mentioned will be going back to other jobs in September. What I want to do in the immediate term is make sure that their transition is as seamless as possible. I am more than happy to engage with the Deputy, the House and any unions about how we can make that transition much easier. We will also engage with the Deputy in the context of the overall review, which will be in the middle of next year after about a year of jobseeker's pay-related benefit.

Social Welfare Code

86. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Social Protection to outline his plans for a pay-related carer's benefit payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33117/25]

Deputy Mark Wall: I would appreciate if the Minister could update the House on his and his Department's plans for pay-related carer's benefit payment, given the importance of that particular payment and the need for a pay-related part of it for so many people.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Carer's benefit is, as the Deputy knows, a payment available to insured people who may need to leave work or reduce their hours to care for a person or people in need of full-time care and attention. It is financed from the Social Insurance Fund. Since January, the scheme has been extended to the self-employed. Recipients of carer's benefit were among the 138,000 carers who received a carer's support grant of €2,000 on 5 June. The Government fully acknowledges the incredible role that family carers play and we are fully committed to supporting carers. This is recognised in the programme for Government, which includes a number of commitments regarding carers, including the commitment to examine the introduction of pay-related carer's benefit for individuals who have to give up work suddenly in order to provide full-time care to a loved one.

The new jobseeker's pay-related benefit started in March. Developed from the experience during Covid, the scheme ensures that workers who are made unemployed receive enhanced benefits linked to their previous earnings. It is a relatively new payment but, as I said in response to the previous question, we intend to learn from our experience operating it. That experience and learning will help to inform future decisions regarding pay-related schemes, including, potentially, carer's benefit. In addition, we will be moving towards the implementation of the programme for Government commitment to abolish the carer's allowance means test. In this context, further consideration will be given to the potential knock-on effects for the carer's benefit scheme generally. We are fully committed to supporting family carers and I will always keep the range of supports provided by my Department under review. I expect to launch a consultation later this year on the further extension of pay-related schemes, including parent's benefit, and will also seek the views of Deputies and stakeholders about pay-related carer's benefit.

Deputy Mark Wall: It goes without saying that carers in this country save the State €20 billion. We know we have more than 500,000 carers in the State. One in nine of those people are reported to be trying to juggle a job and their caring responsibilities at the same time. I appreciate what the Minister said. Obviously the pay-related jobseeker's benefit is something new, as he said. What we are looking for and what is promised in the programme for Government is to protect the most vulnerable, who are those who have, in most cases, to give up work suddenly to look after a loved one. That is what we and so many people in the caring community are asking for, that the cliff edge is less severe than it could be by having a pay-related carer's benefit. I appreciate the Minister's reply, but I hope the carers and the huge role they play for the State will form a huge part of that review and consultation that the Minister is launching later in the year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. I think in a couple of weeks the Deputy will see a full indication of this Government's ongoing commitment to carers. As he knows, the carer's benefit is subject to an earnings limit of €450 per week after tax. As part of budget 2025, the income limit will increase to €625 with effect from July, which will allow far more carers to avail of carer's benefit. We also extended the flexibility regarding children who are in hospital or newborns who are kept in hospital. The carer's benefit payment has increased by €41 a week over the past four years. We will continue to support carers by increasing the number eligible for it and by ensuring that the weekly payment is as high as possible. I also want to ensure that those who have to make decisions to leave work, and in particular, considering the essence of the scheme, those who have a sudden change in income, are supported as well.

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Deputy Mark Wall: I think we can both agree that the sudden change or cliff edge, as I call it, causes so many problems for so many people who have to leave work, and unfortunately their income drops accordingly. That is the issue that we are trying to raise with the Minister today. In fairness, he has come back to say that he recognises there is an issue and that he will review this as part of the consultation later in the year. Obviously that consultation relates to carers. I know we have already debated the carer's needs and the Minister has mentioned the means test as well. We will not go back over that today. Regarding pay-related carer's benefit, I will offer some support to the Minister in the form of the number of queries we have got in our office. It is important that we all play our part in that review and consultation. Various carers' associations will also want to be part of that consultation because that cliff edge and sudden drop in income, because you have to stay at home and because you cannot earn that income anymore, needs to be addressed urgently. I look forward to debating that and indeed helping the Minister with that consultation later in the year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have met the carers' forum in the Department. I will continue to use that forum with carers' groups for consultation. I am sure the joint committee will have good input on that, as well as Deputies in this House. We have made changes this year. As I said, carer's benefit was extended to the self-employed as part of budget 2025. At the end of April, we had 139 applications from self-employed people for carer's benefit. We paid the carer's support grant, which is the highest in its history, of €2,000 on 5 June. We will expand eligibility from 2 July. We are very much investing in carers. We have more to do and will continue to do that. I look forward to working with Deputies on that.

School Costs

87. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is aware of the considerable financial burden the cost of school tablets imposes on parents; if he will consider expanding the back-to-school payment or introducing a device allowance for children attending schools that require tablets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33102/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The issue of having to purchase devices is coming into my office a lot. It is probably coming into everyone's office at this stage. While obviously there is a benefit to parents of not having to buy schoolbooks, that benefit is entirely undermined if they then have to spend the equivalent amount or more. I welcome the Minister's recent announcement of the extension of the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance to foster families, but they will be means tested for it, which will exclude a lot. I know I am tacking that onto the end of my question but I am sure the Minister will not mind and that the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will indulge me.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. I do not mind at all. The back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance scheme provides a once-off annual payment to eligible families to assist with the cost of clothing and footwear when children start or start back at school each autumn. Last year, the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance payments totalled €57.04 million. This was paid to more than 149,500 families in respect of 264,400 qualified children. The majority of families are awarded the allowance automatically. A notification of the awards is issued to these families. In 2025, 114,000 families have been automatically approved for the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance, in respect of 197,000 qualified children. Payments will begin to be made in the week commencing 14 July. I encourage anybody who

has not heard or got a notification to go to *MyWelfare.ie* and to register their interest or concern.

Matters relating to devices in schools is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee. She is keenly aware of the challenges faced by parents and educators relating to the costs of digital technology, including tablets. Her Department is continuing to work to help support schools and families with these costs. The Minister recently announced a €35 million investment in schools for ICT infrastructure. This funding is issued directly to schools, as schools are best placed to identify the requirements of their own student cohort to meet those requirements in accordance with their digital learning planning. This can include the purchase of ICT devices, such as tablets or laptops and the implementation of loan schemes for same if needed. At this time, I have no plans to change the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance to include a specific device payment.

I welcome the Deputy's expression of welcome for the expansion of the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance to foster families. It is means tested. However, the means test will exclude the weekly payment of €400 that is paid as the foster allowance. We are currently reviewing every means test. Means tests are important to ensure that supports go to those most in need of them income-wise. I wish to re-emphasise that the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance means test will exclude the €400 or €420 per week payment to foster families.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I understand the need to get the money to where it needs to be. With the greatest of respect, the Minister does not need to do a review to understand that kids who are in foster care are among the most likely to be experiencing deprivation. They are effectively in the care of the State. I urge the Minister to look at that again because the means test is unfair. We are not talking in the context of a large budget. We are not talking about a large amount of money. I understand that big budgets are made up of many small asks.

In the last couple of days, I read in the newspaper that some of the Minister's colleagues are saying that the cost-of-living crisis is over. Good luck with that project as they go out to their clinics because it is not. Families are being put to the pin of their collar. I know of organisations and companies that are offering buy now and pay later terms. That is families having to get themselves into debt just so their kids can go to school. This goes completely against the principle of the back-to-school allowance. It has now been superseded by the need to purchase devices. I urge the Minister to have a discussion with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, but the money will come from the Minister, Deputy Calleary's Department. It will be the extent to which that the Minister can champion this that it will be done.

Deputy Dara Calleary: On the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance for foster families, it was an anomaly that foster children could not qualify for this scheme. This was even to the extent that there could be foster children and other children within a family. Some of the children would have qualified and the foster children would not. I have corrected that anomaly. There are means tests, however, across all our schemes. I do not want to correct an anomaly by creating another. I understand the extraordinary role played by foster parents. I look forward to working to continue to enhance conditions.

In the context of that big budgets are made up of small asks, I will use that a lot if the Deputy does not mind. I will engage with the Minister, Deputy McEntee. She is conscious of this. We have had discussions. As the Deputy said, the cost-of-living crisis is also affecting clothing and footwear. That is a massive expense on families at this time of year, particularly as children go back to school and if schools are demanding particular kinds of uniforms. I wish to make sure

the money, which is relatively small, is directed at that cohort at this time.

We have made huge investment in school books. My Department has made huge investment in school meals. We are focused on trying to improve the experience of children in education, but my Department cannot continue being the Department that everybody comes to looking for assistance.

Child Poverty

88. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Minister for Social Protection if his attention has been drawn to a report on child poverty (details supplied); his plans to address the rising number of children living in consistent poverty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33108/25]

Deputy Liam Quaide: I would like to ask the Minister for his response to the recently published child poverty monitor report and his plans to address the rising number of children living in consistent poverty. The findings of that report make for very grim reading and should focus the minds of the Government on a major change in policymaking.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Government welcomes the publication of the fourth child poverty monitor. I acknowledge and thank the Children's Rights Alliance and its constituent members for the work they have put into this. The child poverty monitor draws on the survey on income and living conditions, SILC, 2024, which was published by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, in March 2025. It is based on a survey conducted throughout 2024 asking people about their income and consumption in 2023 and 2024. It illustrates that the consistent poverty rate for children increased from 4.8% in SILC 2023 to 8.5% in SILC 2024. While the related figure for child deprivation did fall marginally in SILC 2024, it is disappointing. I am concerned that we continue to see an increase in consistent poverty for children. We are currently working through the report. However, it is important to note that the survey data does not fully factor in the impact of budgets 2024 and 2025, both of which included the largest ever social welfare packages, including many measures that can be expected when they are fully reflected in the data to reduce child poverty.

The child poverty monitor highlights the progress that has been made in recent years, including increases in targeted family income supports, as well as important new measures, such as hot school meals, the holiday hunger pilot, free school books and the commencement of Equal Start. The solutions to child poverty identified in the report align closely with the priorities identified by the Government in our first cross-government programme plan - Child Poverty and Child Well-being 2023-2025. This includes a focus on targeted income supports, early learning and care, the cost of education, family homelessness, integrated services and participation. Due to this report and many others, including reports of the views of children themselves, we know that the policies are working. We are ready to take targeted, decisive and informed action in the context of the forthcoming budget in this space, not just in the Department of Social Protection, but across government. We are focused on reducing child poverty in measures that will be part of budget 2026.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The stark and ever-worsening reality of child poverty is laid bare in the child poverty monitor and wider research. The Children's Rights Alliance has issued a stark warning that unless ambitious action is taken by the Government it will take Ireland four to five generations to break the cycle of poverty. The report found that the number of children living

in consistent poverty rose by a staggering 45,107 in 2024 to almost 103,000 children. This reflects immense damage being inflicted on young lives with the potential to cause harm into adulthood. We know that adversity chain reacts across the lifespan. This is not evitable. It is not a natural disaster. It has come about through political decision-making. It is a scandalous indictment of successive Governments that as State coppers are overflowing, but at the same time we see child poverty soaring.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I wish to reiterate that we are disappointed by the latest child poverty figures. However, it is important to recognise that in 2023, when the SILC income data was collected, the Government had not yet brought in free school meals for all primary schools, which we have now done, or free school books across second level, which we have now done. Those supports will make a difference to children in poverty. It will be reflected in future figures. Similarly, the significant increases in social welfare contained in budget 2024 and the associated cost-of-living measures, which were worth more than €2.3 billion, were not included in the SILC income statistics and neither was the €2.6 billion budget 2025 social welfare package. However, we do not take that for granted.

I can assure the Deputy that our determination to reduce child poverty is reflected in the programme for Government commitments and in the work of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office. Since 2023, this is based in the Department of the Taoiseach. It will take time to see the impact of the work of that unit on the data. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, independently shows that the system of social transfer has been effective in reducing child poverty. Current child-related cash and in-kind benefits have lifted an estimated 157,000 children out of income poverty and 94,000 out of consistent poverty.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I acknowledge the supports the Minister mentioned, but we have not seen sufficiently ambitious targeted measures and strategic investment in recent budgets designed to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. It is critical, therefore, that there is a focus in budget 2026 on breaking that cycle.

The cumulative impact of continued rising costs of living has created a landslide effect for low-income families such that the very basics, such as nutritious food and keeping their homes warm, become increasingly difficult to achieve. We need to see a major scaling up of the Equal Start programme and an extension of DEIS Plus to address disadvantage at the early stage. We must also benchmark our social protection system to the cost of a minimum essential standard of living to ensure that everyone has enough to sustain a decent quality of life. All future budgets must be poverty-proofed and set against the targets of the anti-poverty strategy. At a very basic level, we need a radical change in housing policy. One in four children lives in conditions of overcrowding and more than 4,700 children living in emergency accommodation. This will require ideological change from the Minister and the Government. Not embracing that change will cause untold damage.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It will require continuous targeted investment. We will be making choices in the context of budget 2026 regarding targeted supports for children and families. I look forward to the Deputy's support for those. In the context of the programme for Government, we will continue to retain the child poverty and well-being office in the Department of the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach made it very clear to me when I was appointed that child poverty is to be a major focus. We will continue to increase core welfare payments. We will be looking at increasing the child support payment as one of the targeted measures and looking at various pay-related benefits for parents that we discussed earlier. The programme for Government has

a commitment to expand the fuel allowance to the working family payment, which will address the energy issues to which the Deputy referred. We have a focus on this within the programme for Government, which will be delivered upon. We are finalising our new child poverty target and the measures that will go with that in order to ensure that we achieve it. It will be ambitious, absolutely, but it has to be ambitious. We have to ensure that no child is left behind. I am certainly determined to ensure that will happen in the context of my Department.

Social Welfare Benefits

89. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection whether his Department will conduct a review of the delays relating to the awarding of disability and carer's allowance, particularly in light of delays of up to five months that have occurred in County Laois; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33295/25]

Deputy Brian Stanley: My question relates to the delays around reviews of decisions relating to disability and carer's allowance. Currently, people are waiting a long time. This matter needs to be addressed. I hope the Department is going to take action on it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: My Department is committed to providing quality service to all, ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made in a timely manner. We absolutely understand the pressures people face, and we ensure that claims are processed quickly and efficiently.

There are almost 170,000 people in receipt of disability allowance, DA, and more than 100,000 people in receipt of carer's allowance. The number of people in receipt of DA has increased by almost 50%. The number of people in receipt of carers allowance has increased by 67% over the past ten years. The processing times for individual claims may vary in accordance with the relative complexity of each application, particularly in terms of the main qualifying criteria, each individual's circumstances and the information that is provided in support of the claim.

When determining suitability for disability allowance, evidence needs to be examined in respect of the medical condition involved, the extent to which it restricts a person from taking up employment, their means and habitual residency. Similarly, when examining suitability for carer's allowance, caring needs are also examined. To assist the Department to make timely and fair decisions, we need to ensure we have completed forms and that supporting documentation is attached. Claims with incomplete information take longer to process.

In recent years, my Department has introduced a wide range of initiatives aimed at streamlining the processing of claims using modern technology. Operational processes, procedures and the organisation of work are continually reviewed to ensure that processing capability is maximised. I am pleased to inform Deputy Stanley that we are currently meeting and exceeding our processing target for the disability allowance scheme, which aims to award 75% of applications within ten weeks. For carer's allowance, we aim to award 80% of applications within ten weeks. The average processing time for both schemes is six weeks. I will certainly engage with the Deputy with regard to any specific case that falls outside of those periods. We are continuously trying to reduce those processing times.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The reason I raise this is because people find themselves out of

work through no fault of their own because of a disability or have to give up work to care for a loved one and may have to put in a claim for carer's allowance. These are genuine cases. I understand that it is complex. I understand that there are a number of different aspects in terms of judging whether people are eligible or not. The Oireachtas helpline is of assistance, but it is not a silver bullet. The experience we have had is that some applications take four and five months to process, which can cause serious problems. Even in straightforward cases, there may be a missing document that is then supplied. If there is an appeal, it can take up to 12 months. That is our experience.

The Minister asked if I have an individual case. I want to go back and check where those cases are at. If there is a particular case, I will bring it to his attention. The Minister read out a reply prepared by the Department. I am not saying that the officials are giving him false information, but the experience we have been having does not match what he read out.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his feedback. We discussed this matter in the context of preparing a reply to his question. We are putting a huge number of resources into dealing with appeals. We have 20 extra staff who have been assigned to the appeals unit. They have been trained up and are working. The number of domiciliary care appeals decreased from approximately 1,200 in the middle of May to just over 600 by the middle of this month. The majority of those 600 cases relate to appeals made in April, May and this month.

I will be focusing the extra resources in the appeals unit on carers in order to ensure that any backlogs are addressed. I do not have a figure at the moment. However, no claim should take up to a year to assess. If there are delays of that nature, the Department and I want to hear about them. We have set a time of six weeks with regard to carers and disability in the context of the turnaround of applications. It is important that we get the fullest possible information from people in support of their claims. The more information we have, the quicker we will make decisions.

Deputy Brian Stanley: If they could be done within a six-week period, that would certainly be very good. I welcome the fact that there is a target in that regard. In the absence of targets, nothing is achieved. Things move when there are targets. The Minister is correct about people supplying more information. Often, those who make claims are not sure what is being sought as a result of the language the Department uses. It has been simplified in recent years, and that is welcome. It is important that we try to achieve the target.

As already stated, people find themselves out of work through no fault of their own because of a disability or they have to give up their jobs. The Minister and I often come across cases in our constituency of people having to give up work to care for loved ones. It is really important that we try to support people financially. We must remember that while they are waiting, they have nowhere else to go. They can go to the community welfare officer, maybe, but there are very strong rules in that regard. It can be difficult and can take time. It is really important that we try to iron out any difficulties with this. The delivery part of the appeals process needs to be looked at.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In recent weeks, I took the time to try to visit all the Department's regional offices in which many of these claims are dealt with, including our head office in Dublin. I met all the staff, and they are doing absolutely fantastic work. We have nearly 7,000 members of staff across the Department of Social Protection, many of whom are managing these claims and turning them around as quickly as possible. Where there are information gaps,

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we try to address them as quickly as possible. We are investing significantly in technology to try to assist that as well. As the Deputy said, we have tried to change the language and make it more inclusive, but if there are places where that is not happening, we will address that. The Department and our staff are very committed to doing that.

As stated, we have appointed 20 extra appeals officers. They come with experience of managing and processing claims. I visited the social welfare appeals office last week to meet these officers and see their work at first hand. They are all very focused and are working hard to reduce any backlogs.

11 o'clock

The domiciliary care allowance is a good example of where a focused effort has reduced the backlog by almost half in just over a month.

Social Welfare Code

90. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an update on plans to abolish the means test for the carer's allowance, given the strong support for this in the programme for Government; to confirm if it will be included in budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32829/25]

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I know the ground on carer's allowance has been covered a lot, but the programme for Government contains a commitment to the abolition of the means test for carer's allowance during the Government's term. Will the Minister provide an update on where this now stands, on the work has been done on the costings or preparations and on whether we can expect progress or a first step in budget 2026?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The carer's allowance is the main scheme by means of which my Department provides income supports to carers in every community. As the Deputy will be aware, more than 100,000 people are in receipt of carer's allowance. Expenditure on the scheme in the current year is estimated to be more than €1.24 billion. Carer's allowance provides an income support to people whose earning capacity is substantially reduced because they cannot work full time due to their caring responsibilities. It is means tested to target the support to those most in need.

In the programme for Government, we set out an ambition to significantly increase the income disregards for carer's allowance with a view to phasing out the means test entirely during the lifetime of this Government. A number of significant changes have been made to the carer's allowance means test in recent years. From 3 July, there will be further increases that will see the weekly income disregards rise from €450 to €625 for a single person and from €900 to €1,250 for carers with a spouse or partner. This amounts to cumulative increases to the disregards of €292.50 and €585 weekly since June 2022. From July, carers in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €69,000 will still retain their full carer's payment. Even with an income of €97,000, they will retain a partial payment. These increases have made the scheme accessible to many more people and may increase payment rates for those currently on a reduced rate.

It is important that we make progress in a way that is sustainable and that balances the al-

location of available budgetary resources. That is why we have committed to a measured and phased approach over a number of budgets. We are beginning our work on budget 2026 in the Department, and this will be a priority I intend to achieve over the lifetime of the Government.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: As the Minister stated, more than 100,000 people are in receipt of carer's allowance. There are 500,000 carers, however, which means that 400,000 people are not getting benefits under the scheme. Will the Minister increase the disregard in the forthcoming budget? The means test hits families who are doing their best, often one-parent families or where a parent is working part time and might have some savings. It is outdated and creates huge hardship, especially for women. This is because the majority of carers are women. The current system penalises those who are trying to save for their future or manage their finances responsibly. It penalises prudence. This is not only a financial issue; it is also a matter of fairness and equality.

The Minister mentioned cost concerns previously with estimates ranging from €600 million to €3 billion depending on eligibility. Has the Department done proper costings in the context of abolishing the means test? Will the Minister clarify the figures from which the Department is working? Have any equality or poverty impact assessments been conducted as part of this work to ensure that the most vulnerable are not disproportionately affected?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I reiterate our full support for carers. I fully recognise the gender impact caring has. Deputy Ardagh is right to highlight that.

It is important to look at the progress made on disregards in recent years. I want that to continue and for more people to qualify for the payment. The carer's support grant, which was paid at the beginning of June, is not subject to a means test. It is paid out. We are working through all the issues that were highlighted by the Deputy to get an effective costing for the phasing out of the means test and the other issues she highlighted. We will continue to do that.

In the context of budget 2026, I intend to seek the support of my colleagues to once again substantially increase the income disregards. That will be done in the context of the budgetary negotiations.

As stated, there are other supports for family carers. The carer's support grant was the highest ever. It was paid out on 5 June with an investment of €334 million.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Carers are saving the State billions of euro. The highest figure we have seen for the amount involved is €3 billion. In any event, the savings being made are enormous. People provide care for children with complex needs, older people and family members with serious illnesses. They do so out of love and with very little support from the State.

While the increases to income disregards are welcome, they are not a substitute for fully abolishing the means tests. Carers, as the Minister stated, are the backbone of our society, providing essential care the State would otherwise struggle massively to offer. The financial and emotional toll on individuals is immense and abolishing the means test would go some way to helping those families. Will the Minister provide a detailed plan for how the carer's allowance means test will be abolished? If he would give me a timeline for how it will be implemented over the course of Government's term of office, it would be appreciated.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy that we are working on the plan and on what will be involved, not only financially but also in other ways, in the context of abolishing the

means test, and we will continue to do so.

I also highlight that a great deal of work has been done to support long-term carers. The long-term carer's contribution scheme ensures that people who have been full-time carers for at least 20 years will get contributions to cover the gaps in their records in order to allow them to qualify for the contributory State pension. That is beginning to take effect with carers who would otherwise have lost their contributions and not got any recognition for their work.

We are fully committed to phasing out the means test, but I am conscious that there are other supports and issues we need to improve on. Other Departments also have work to do in supporting carers. This is not just the responsibility of the Department of Social Protection. Other Departments are involved in supporting full-time carers, family carers and those who work in the care industry. Across government, we will be keeping a focus on this.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Social Welfare Benefits

91. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will provide an update on the progress made by his Department in exploring the introduction of a targeted second-tier child benefit payment for low-income families in light of recent reports highlighting a significant rise in child poverty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33150/25]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Will the Minister provide an update on the Department's consideration of a second-tier child benefit scheme? Research by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and Social Justice Ireland shows a that growing group of families are experiencing real deprivation despite being just above the income thresholds for most supports. A targeted measure like this could be transformative. Is it being actively considered by the Department?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar is eol an Teachta, child benefit is a monthly payment to families with children up to the age of 16. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their nineteenth birthday where they are in full-time education or have a disability. It is paid in respect of almost 1.3 million children. Expenditure on the scheme in the current year is estimated at more than €2.2 billion. In addition to child benefit, families on low incomes may be able to avail of: other social welfare payments, such as the child support payment with primary social welfare payments, which is €62 per week for those aged 12 and over, and €50 per week for under-12s; the working family payment for low-paid employees with children; and the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. These schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked to household income and thereby support low-income families with children.

Addressing child poverty is a key priority for the Government. That is why the programme for Government includes a range of measures to support children and their families. One such commitment is to explore a targeted child benefit payment and examine the interaction this would have with existing targeted supports to reduce child poverty. Existing supports include the working family payment and the child support payment. We are progressing this work and

have regard to a wide body of evidence, including the work undertaken previously by the ESRI and what was contained in the presentation it made to the Oireachtas committee yesterday. We are also looking at work done by the National Economic and Social Council and the Commission on Taxation and Welfare. We will be considering all this work in the context, not only of budget 2026, but of our revised child poverty target.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Aontaím leis.

Child benefit already plays a vital role, but recent estimates are that between 150,000 to 230,000 children are experiencing poverty and we now have clear evidence that a large number of families are still being left behind by this threshold. There is a major impact on these families. They are still working hard, but they are struggling with the cost of living. Will the Department examine a second tier payment for low- and middle-income families? Once one factors in rent and the extra costs that come with raising a child with any additional needs, it becomes clear that income alone is not the full picture. We are seeing a real squeeze on households that do not qualify for means-tested supports but are far from financially secure. A second tier of child benefit would go directly to where the pressure was most intense and help to close the gap in a fair and targeted way.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Táimid ag obair ar an two-tier payment. We are looking at that but there is quite a lot of work involved and it is a complex issue to examine. In the meantime, budget 2025 had targeted increases in the one-parent family payment and the jobseeker's transitional payment, which increased by €12 per week. The weekly rate of the child support payment, which is very important in this space, increased by €8 to €62 per week for those aged 12 years and over and by €4 to €50 for under-12s. There is also a €60 increase in the weekly income threshold for the working family payment, particularly targeting low income workers. The child support payment and the working family payment are particularly targeted and focused. I am very conscious that we have a lot of work to do on child poverty. We discussed it in the context of an earlier question and the measures we are taking in that space.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the fact that the Department is looking at that. Budget 2026 should be focused on that but a second tier payment should not replace what we already have. We need to build on it. It would target families facing higher costs while protecting the certainty and simplicity of universal child benefit. There is an opportunity to act on this evidence. The system works well for many but the people whose doors I am knocking on are struggling. This is a chance to make child income supports fairer and more effective for those who need them most. At the same time, we need to focus on those people across the board, not just in terms of the Department of Social Protection. There are going to be huge issues coming into the winter. We do not know what will happen in the Middle East. There may be increases in fuel and other costs. The Department should look at this to help the people who are struggling the most.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is our intention. The work of the Department is to help those who are struggling. To give the Deputy a sense of the complexity of this, one of the considerations in the ESRI proposal was to amalgamate the working family payment with the child support payment but that would result in people losing out on what they are getting at the moment. If we are to do this, people cannot lose out. We have to look at expanding the working family payment and the child support payment as part of targeted measures. Anything we do in this space needs to be targeted and focused on those on low incomes, particularly workers. We have to ensure that people do not get a lower payment under a new system than they are

currently getting. That could be an unintended consequence of some of the work we have seen today. Whatever we do will be targeted and focused on those most at risk of poverty and those in consistent poverty. I welcome the Deputy's acknowledgement that there are other Departments involved in this effort as well. We need to work on it collectively.

Job Losses

92. Deputy Darren O'Rourke asked the Minister for Social Protection if he or his officials have had engagement with a company (details supplied) and the examiner located there since announcement of the company entering into examinership; the extent to which the Department can support this process to ensure workers there are supported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32742/25]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his question. I am very well informed of the situation at Wellman by the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth. There is significant uncertainty for the employees, their families and the wider community and our thoughts are with those workers. Our priority within the Department of Social Protection is to ensure that affected employees receive access to all necessary supports.

Notification of collective redundancy from the company concerned was received by my Department on 6 June. An official from my Department's employer relations team made contact with the company on the next working day so as to provide the affected staff with information on income, redundancy entitlements and employment supports. A meeting with workers took place this week. In addition, a team from my Department stands ready to meet the workforce, either virtually or in person, to ensure speedy access to income supports, support them into alternative employment, and access appropriate education, training and development options.

We have discussed extensively this morning the jobseeker's pay-related benefit, which is now available and provides a maximum weekly payment of €450, which will help people through this period of uncertainty. My Department has a range of employment programmes and schemes available to support customers to return to employment or start their own business. When people move onto a jobseeker's payment, the Intreo employment services team works with them to provide one-to-one support focused on what they need to assist them to remain in the workforce. Those affected should note that the easiest and quickest way to apply for a jobseeker's payment is online at *MyWelfare.ie*. We remain open to working with workers and union representatives in Wellman International, particularly at this very difficult time.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It was a shock for the whole community because we are talking about 217 jobs. Some workers in the area I grew up in and in the wider area have been in that factory for decades. It was known as a really good employer in the area and the impact on both direct and indirect employment is significant. It is an important employer in the area.

In the first instance, this period of examinership is about securing a sustainable future and protecting as many jobs as possible. In the event that there are job losses, we must ensure that those workers are supported. I welcome the fact the Department has had engagement. Further engagement would be welcomed by the workers and their representatives. Is that something the Minister will consider?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Yes. There is a long tradition with this company. There were pre-

vious short-term layoffs in 2023 and there was engagement at that time with the Department of Social Protection. There was departmental engagement on 9, 10 and 12 June of this year. We have been notified that there will be a number of redundancies but we will engage with each person. Intreo staff will provide a personalised service to each affected person. Our teams are more than willing to work to provide information on the immediate income support options that are available as well as the training and reskilling options that people may be interested in. We want to ensure that what is a very traumatic experience is made less traumatic if possible. I am more than happy to work with any representatives in the area to make sure that is happening. Our primary concern is for the workers and their families. We want to minimise difficulties as much as possible at this very difficult time.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In the first instance, this is about protecting as many jobs as possible. I have raised with the Minister for enterprise the importance of making every effort to identify an investor and save as many good jobs as possible. This is also about ensuring that those who lose their jobs are supported in every way possible in terms of understanding their rights and entitlements and the supports that are there for them, including support to retrain and find alternative employment. The Minister mentioned that pay-related social welfare was now in place for those employees. Unfortunately, we had a similar situation with Tara Mines some time ago, and it was not in place then. Is it the case now that it is in place and is available for those workers?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Yes, jobseeker's pay-related benefit has been in place since March of this year and will apply. We have already received quite a number of applications - over 10,000 - so that is very much in place. Furthermore, the experience of *MyWelfare.ie* and people being able to apply online gives us a quicker turnaround and ensures that people do not have any major gaps in their income. There are also wider supports available through Intreo for those who may be made redundant, including training supports and assistance to seek future employment. Many of the workers have been with the company for a long time. For people who have not had to seek a job for some time, there is backup and support available in terms of preparation and training. That is very important and valued work the Department is doing. It has done so on a confidential and personalised basis, with full respect for people's situations at this very difficult time. We will continue to work to ensure that support is made fully available.

Child Poverty

93. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is aware of the child poverty monitor report from a group (detail supplied); if he has any plans to address its findings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33106/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The child poverty monitor published recently by the Children's Rights Alliance makes for very depressing and alarming reading. Far from being equal to its commitment to tackling child poverty, the Government is overseeing a rise in rates of child poverty. The Minister and I both know that the only way to address this issue in any meaningful way is through in-cash payments that are targeted directly at those who need them. I ask him to outline his plans in this regard.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am aware of the report the Deputy referenced and I share her concern regarding the data from the 2024 survey on income and living conditions, SILC, presented in the report. However, as I said earlier this morning, the data does not fully capture many of

the Government actions in recent years to address child poverty. SILC asks people each month to provide income and poverty status data for the previous 12 months. This creates a timing issue in that the SILC 2024 data does not include the impact of many of the measures announced in the budget of October 2024 and does not fully include the impact of measures announced in October 2023 or, indeed, October 2022. The budget measures announced in 2023 and 2024 involved the largest ever social welfare packages, which will take some time to be reflected in the SILC data. I expect that when the data begins to reflect the budget measures from 2023, 2024 and 2025, which include significant increases in the child support payment, double child benefit bonuses, free school meals, free schoolbooks and the newborn baby grant, we will see an improvement.

To be clear, even in that context, we have work to do. In fact, a huge amount of work is already under way. We are looking beyond the data to fully understand the real challenges we face. We had a very good discussion at the social inclusion forum recently and will do so again at the pre-budget forum in July. We want to ensure payments are targeted, as the Deputy said, and reaching the people who really need them. I have already gone through a number of measures this morning, particularly with Deputy Heneghan. I spoke about the focus on the working family payment and child support payment and the impact the increases in those payments will have. We will continue to support those kinds of targeted payments to those on the lowest incomes, as well as measures in other areas that are brought forward by the Department. Our actions will be guided by a new child poverty reduction target and by the work of the Taoiseach in this area.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: My worry is that we have had targets previously and they were missed by a mile. A concerted effort is needed. When we talk about deprivation and child poverty, we are talking about households in which members are unable to afford two pairs of properly fitting shoes that are in good condition and suitable for daily activities, or a warm waterproof coat. It is unimaginable that poverty on this scale is happening in the State when it really does not need to be occurring. The statistics show who needs to be targeted, including, in particular, lone-parent households, especially where there are teenagers, who bring additional costs. What we are hearing in the media from the Minister's Government colleagues is really disturbing. The notion that there might be people sitting either at parliamentary party meetings or around the Cabinet table, God help us, who believe the cost-of-living crisis is over is deeply disturbing. The cost-of-living crisis is very much not over and it must be urgently addressed by the Government.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I share Deputy O'Reilly's concerns. Looking at the child poverty monitor, we see the failure of the 2020 roadmap for social inclusion, which included a target of reducing consistent poverty among adults and children from 5% to 2%. Five years later, we are still at 5%. The roadmap has been an abject failure.

One of my concerns when it comes to child poverty and poverty within families is their lack of resilience to deal with emergencies and other issues that arise for them. I have in mind the inability, because of the assessment of need crisis, to access the special education supports that are needed. There is also the issue of people who, were there no housing crisis, would be paying differential rents on council houses. They are now paying differential rents for housing assistance payment, HAP, properties plus cash top-ups to the landlords. The resilience to deal with such situations is gone from families and households. I want to see an all-of-Government approach, involving the Departments of housing, health and children, as well as the Minister's Department, to get to grips with this issue.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim go mór cé chomh dáiríre is atá an fhadhb seo. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil a lán oibre déanta ag an Rialtas. We fully understand the challenges but a lot of work has been done in this space. The ESRI has shown, backing up Deputy O'Reilly's view, that direct social transfers by way of child-related cash and in-kind payments have lifted an estimated 157,000 children out of income poverty and 94,000 out of consistent poverty. I have given the background to the SILC data not to avoid any responsibility but to point out the issues. The consistent poverty rate for children reduced from 7% in SILC 2022 to 4.8% in SILC 2023 before increasing to 8.5% in SILC 2024. However, until eight to ten years ago, that rate was always above 10%, fluctuating up to nearly 13%. Pointing out fluctuations is not saying we do not have a challenge. We are very focused on that challenge, which is why we made the biggest ever social protection package available in budget 2025, the impact of which is not reflected in the SILC data.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister must acknowledge that the direction of travel is not good, as we see from the SILC data. I respect what he is saying and it may be that the data starts going in a different direction, but I do not believe it will. A lot of the investment he mentioned involved one-off, non-recurring payments to deal with an acute cost-of-living crisis. That crisis has not gone away and is still acute. The Government is saying there will be no one-off measures in the next budget. How will it tackle the rates of child poverty? We do not need to do a poll to know those rates are unacceptable. How will the Minister deal with this issue in the absence of one-off measures? He is relying on such measures to make the argument that when they wash through, there will be a change in the figures. In the absence of those measures, long-term measures will have to be put in place to tackle the acute cost-of-living crisis that is impacting on children very severely. The figures bear that out.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We recognise that the cost of living is still incredibly challenging. Not all the measures we have taken have been one-off measures. The hot school meals and free schoolbook schemes are continuous improvements that will directly assist in reducing child poverty. The expansion of the hot school meals scheme, in particular, was not recognised in the SILC data.

Deputy O'Reilly and I are at one on the importance of targeted payments. The child support payment and the threshold for the working family payment increased significantly in budget 2025. Those measures are very much targeted at families and children who are currently under the most pressure.

Deputy McGuinness spoke about resilience. The first measure to point to in response is the domiciliary care allowance. I have really focused on reducing the delays in the processing of applications and appeals for that payment. From May to June, we have reduced by half the number of appeals on hold, which will assist families who qualify for the allowance. I will continue to keep a laser focus on that payment in particular. That will address the first cohort of people to whom the Deputy referred.

Social Welfare Benefits

94. **Deputy Paula Butterly** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to extend the free travel pass to children in receipt of domiciliary care allowance; the number of children who would benefit; the estimated cost of this extension; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32745/25]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Butterly for her question. The free travel scheme provides free travel on our main public and private transport services for those who are eligible. There are over 1 million customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on the free travel scheme in 2025 is €107.6 million.

The programme for Government has committed to examining an extension of free travel to include children who benefit from the domiciliary care allowance. DCA is a non-means-tested payment of €360 a month per child. In addition, all recipients of DCA qualify for the carer's support grant in June of each year, which is worth €2,000. If the free travel scheme were to be extended to include children benefiting from DCA, it is estimated that some 65,000 children would benefit from the measure in 2026. Based on an additional 65,000 children benefiting, it is estimated that extending free travel to include those children would cost in the region of €7 million in a full year.

It is not possible to deliver all of our programme for Government commitments at once and the extension of this scheme, along with other potential budget measures, is being considered in the context of the budgetary resources available. I am positively disposed to this measure and I note the Deputy's support for it but it will have to be looked at in the context of other priorities. At this time when we are quite far out from the budget, we are not in a position to make any commitment as to whether the measure will be included in budget 2026. I understand the importance of the scheme, particularly for children who are in receipt of DCA, as regards access to appointments and leisure activities. It is a priority we will be maintaining a close eye on.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister. I will go back over the criteria for free travel. One can get a free travel pass if one is in receipt of disability allowance, blind pension, carer's allowance or invalidity pension. Leaving out the domiciliary care allowance is an anomaly in itself. It is quite unfair. The domiciliary care allowance is provided to parents and guardians of children under 16 who have a severe disability and who require substantially more care and attention, which involves more costs, than a child of the same age without a disability. It is based on the children's level of physical and mental impairment and the ongoing care they need. Free travel would often be of great benefit because there are a great many costs associated with taking care of a child with severe disabilities. I refer to treatments, appointments and loss of income. This would be of great benefit to people in more urban settings.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I fully recognise the importance of DCA. That is why we in the Department have put such a focus on it. We have particularly focused on trying to reduce the waiting periods for appeals and applications. I fully understand how important it would be to extend free travel to include those in receipt of DCA for many reasons, including medical and social appointments.

Regarding free travel, we are currently focused on implementing the decision made in budget 2025 to expand the free travel companion pass to everybody over the age of 70. As of next September, everybody over that age will be able to avail of a free travel companion pass. Last July, we expanded the free travel scheme to support people who were medically certified as being unable to drive for a period of 12 months or more. This includes people with epilepsy, for example. We are expanding the scheme on a planned and budgeted basis. The expansion that will be implemented from September is currently being rolled out within the Department. People are receiving correspondence about that companion pass. This will be one of the biggest expansions of the scheme in its history.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I welcome all of these changes but I will go back to the issue. These children are under 16 years of age and have severe disabilities. Their parents and carers are put to the pin of their collar both financially and emotionally. Allowing them a free travel pass would not only ease the financial burden, but ease the transition. As I was saying previously, this is particularly the case in urban areas. It is no good to anybody in a rural area because we do not have a sufficient transport system. This should be a priority for the next budget. I urge the Minister to consider it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely guarantee it will be considered. I fully understand the pressures those in receipt of DCA are under. We want to enhance their lived experience. It will be considered, in line with other commitments within the programme for Government. It is a commitment within the programme for Government and will be delivered on within the lifetime of this Government. I note the Deputy's strong support for the measure. We will continue to work with her on it.

Community Employment Schemes

95. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current strategy for community employment, the number of sponsor groups, participants and supervisors and whether any changes are planned to the scheme this year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26196/25]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: On behalf of my colleague Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh, I ask the Minister for Social Protection the current strategy for community employment, the number of sponsor groups, participants and supervisors, and whether any changes to the scheme are planned this year. Will he make a statement on the matter? This relates to community employment in the round, including CE schemes, Tús, RSS and others.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach atá na scéimeanna seo. Tá siad ag déanamh an-jab i ngach cuid den tír. Tosóimid le CE agus beimid in ann RSS agus Tús a phlé ar ball. Community employment schemes make an extraordinary contribution right around the country. I have engaged with many of the schemes over recent months since my appointment as Minister. There are currently 19,693 participants and 1,223 supervisors on 810 CE schemes across the country. Government investment in CE will amount to some €370 million in 2025. This is an investment in communities and in people right across our island.

The objective of CE is to enhance the employability of disadvantaged and long-term unemployed people by providing valuable work experience and training opportunities within their local communities as a stepping stone to employment in the open labour market. CE also supports important and essential local community services.

A number of changes have been made to support CE sponsors in the recruitment of participants. Provision has been made to allow participants who reach 60 years of age to remain on a CE scheme until they reach the State pension age. Flexibility has been granted to sponsors to retain existing participants for extended periods in cases where a replacement cannot be recruited immediately. There have been changes to the eligibility criteria to extend eligibility to the adult dependants of those in receipt of jobseeker's allowance and there has been a pilot scheme to extend eligibility to over-50s who are in receipt of credits or a combination of credits and jobseeker's benefit. These changes have resulted in an increase of approximately 500 in the

number of participants in CE in the past 12 months.

I assure Deputies McGuinness and Ó Snodaigh that I am keeping the eligibility criteria, durations and referral process under active review. Personally, I no longer see CE as a labour market intervention. It is much broader and wider than that and has a much bigger impact. I am asking my Department to look at it in a much broader context than the labour market perspective that has traditionally been taken.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I welcome that and gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an bhfreagra cuimsitheach sin. Is cinnte go bhfuil an-éileamh ar an scéim seo i measc na ngrúpaí pobail. Níl sé díreach mar gheall ar dhaoine a chur ar ais ag obair nó traenáil chuí a thabhairt dóibh. Tá sé chun tacú leis na pobail ina bhfuil siad ag maireachtáil agus ina gcónaí.

Regarding the CE and Tús schemes, part of the issue is that there does not seem to be a great deal of joined-up thinking between the two. There is no easy avenue to go from one to the other. While somebody who is on a Tús scheme for 12 months can join a CE scheme, the reverse is not true. There are disparities between the training available to people on a Tús scheme and that available to people on a CE scheme. That needs to be brought into line. There needs to be a broader approach to training for those on Tús schemes. We must also be clear that Tús schemes are not always suitable for community groups because the right supports are not available for participants and community groups when people with particular needs or difficulties are being taken on. It may be a little difficult for a community group to take that on.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as sin. Tá sé seo tábhachtach. The schemes have a lot in common; there are a lot of differences, though. All the schemes - CE, Tús and RSS - were set up with different priorities and different cohorts in mind, initially achieving different things but as they have evolved doing many of the same things. I am definitely looking at all the schemes. They play a vital role. As I look around, there is not a Deputy in the House who does not understand that role. It is a vital role for communities but especially for the participants. I acknowledge in particular the work of supervisors in all three cohorts: CE, RSS and Tús. I have been delighted to be able to make some changes as regards their positions. As I said, their work is so important, not just for the communities that benefit but also for those on the schemes. I want to make sure they are as relevant and as up to date as they were when they were started.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as sin. I welcome his commitment to keep these under review and to look at them in the round because there is a lot of crossover.

With regard to the RSS, I would like to know the Minister's opinions on reform of that and the pilot scheme and moving it to the rural dwellers scheme or bringing more of that in. At present, as the Minister knows, you need either a fishing licence or a herd number to qualify for that scheme. It would be suitable to many more people living in rural Ireland who could avail of it and for whom a placement through that scheme would be very valuable and very important to them and could lead to really positive change in their lives. I would like to hear a little more about that from the Minister, if he does not mind.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Without being cheeky enough to suggest a work programme for the committee, as regards the interaction of CE, RSS and Tús, I would love to engage with Members on that or to hear what they could come up with on it. Deputy McGuinness has raised

an important point that the schemes have evolved over the years. It would be good to maybe stand back and look at them to see if they are delivering for the participants. We know they are delivering for communities, but the profile and the needs of participants have changed, and I want to make sure they are delivering. I will leave that to Deputy O'Reilly and Deputy Wall. Maybe it is something to work on.

As regards the RSS, I have examined fully the RSS review group that was commissioned by the former Minister of State, Joe O'Brien, and I am finalising some work within the Department on that. I am absolutely with the Deputy in terms of the rural dwellers pilot. It would be good to get that up and running. It may feed into any work I have just suggested about the three schemes and their interaction.

Social Welfare Benefits

96. Deputy Aisling Dempsey asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to suspend the periodic means test reviews for carers in receipt of carer's benefit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33130/25]

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I ask the Minister his plans to suspend, or indeed abolish, the periodic means test review for carers in receipt of carer's benefit.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The carer's allowance is the main scheme by which my Department provides income support to carers in the community. There are currently more than 100,000 people in receipt of carer's allowance. Expenditure in 2025 is estimated to be over €1.24 billion.

My Department also provides other supports for carers which are not based on a means assessment, including the carer's support grant, carer's benefit and domiciliary care allowance.

Carer's allowance aims to provide income support to those whose earning ability is greatly impacted by their caring responsibilities and who need income support.

The programme for Government has set out a timeline which commits to significantly increasing the income disregards for carer's allowance in each budget with a view to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of this Government.

Significant changes have been made to the carer's allowance means test in recent years. From July, there will be a further increase which will see the weekly income disregard rise from €450 to €625 for a single person, and from €900 to €1,250 for carers with a spouse or a partner. This amounts to cumulative increases to the disregards of €292.50 and €585, respectively, since June 2022. These increases make the scheme accessible to more people and may increase payment rates for those currently on a reduced rate. A carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €69,000 will still retain his or her full carer's payment. The same carer with an income of €97,000 will retain a partial payment. Before the disregards were increased in June 2022, these figures stood at €37,000 and €60,000, respectively, for a two-adult household.

Means reviews form an important part of my Department's control mechanisms to help ensure people are in receipt of the correct amount. It is important to remember that reviews can lead to increases in payments to recipients as well as reductions. My Department undertakes

periodic reviews to help minimise incorrect payments.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire for that and the very welcome news he has given us in terms of the income disregards. That will be very beneficial to many across the country, I am sure, but specifically in my area of Meath West. Many families have been in touch with me about this matter. I was this morning in a meeting of the committee on children. I am very privileged to have been appointed Leas-Chathaoirleach of the committee this morning. We had the Children's Rights Alliance in with us and I raised with it the issue of the child poverty monitor report, which has already been referred to here today and which I think everyone would say makes for very stark reading. I asked the Children's Rights Alliance about measures like this and asked it how much of a difference it could make to people and it has said to me that to families with children with disabilities, getting rid of this periodic review would make a huge difference. It is an important part of budget 2026, if the Department could at all progress those discussions.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I congratulate the Deputy on her appointment as Leas-Chathaoirleach of the coiste.

Means reviews are an important part of control mechanisms. The C and AG and the Committee of Public Accounts have told us that these reviews need to continue not just for control but also to avoid a situation, such as happened in the UK, where people unwittingly amass very significant overpayments, which had to be recouped and caused very difficult situations for families.

We will ensure that repeated requests for information are minimised and that every effort is made to conduct and complete those reviews as quickly as possible to avoid undue stress. We do not want to cause undue stress. We are very aware of the important role family carers play in society but, equally, we have to balance that awareness and that concern for those carers with a duty to ensure that those in receipt of social welfare payments meet the criteria and receive the correct payment. I absolutely assure the Deputy we will continue our work on minimising repeated requests for information.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: Again, I thank the Minister for his response. Our ambition and our goal is to get rid of the means test completely, and this is a really significant part of it. These people save us untold money every day in the care they provide in their own families. For example, in one family in my area the mother works part-time just for her own mental health, just to have a little breather from the issues she has at home with her child, and the father took on two jobs to pay for the private therapies that they need but have not been able to access publicly. When they underwent a periodic review recently, they lost their access to any payment. That was obviously devastating for them. It is a blow. They feel it is an insult. I know that is an individual case and we have to govern collectively, but I just-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will not comment on individual cases, but we seek to support families such as that who are in need. In order for us to do that, there will always be rules to ensure that schemes are targeted and that we have the resources to meet the scheme. As I said, we are answerable to the Committee of Public Accounts and the C and AG in that regard. They have said the reviews have to continue to ensure that the right payments are being made and that the right people are getting supports from the Department. As I said, however, we will

ensure that repeated requests for information are minimised and, where a review happens, that it happens in as quick a way as possible. In the context of the number of payments being made across all schemes by the Department, the number of reviews is actually relatively small. I will provide the Deputy with those figures in the next session.

Social Welfare Code

97. **Deputy Micheál Carrigy** asked the Minister for Social Protection when he expects to publish the comprehensive review of means testing across the social welfare system as committed to in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32707/25]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Carrigy for his question. Continuing from where we finished with Deputy Dempsey, there were 14,791 control reviews in 2024, which is quite small in the overall carer's allowance paid out but it is a balance that has to be reached. On Deputy Carrigy's question, means tests are a central part of any social protection system to ensure that resources which are limited are targeted at those most in need. Ireland's system of social transfers consistently ranks among the top performers in the European Union for poverty reduction. A key factor in this achievement is Ireland's use of means testing in targeting resources for the most vulnerable in our society. Research including that presented at last week's budget perspectives conference of the ESRI indicates that targeting of supports to more vulnerable cohorts through means testing continues to be important, even as societal income overall increases. Means tests and income thresholds are kept under regular review and a number of significant changes have been made in recent years. A number of changes to means testing which provide for higher income disregards have been introduced in recent budgets. These disregards ensure that where people are in receipt of a social assistance payment and are working, a certain level of income from that work is not assessed in the means test. We are currently conducting a comprehensive review of means testing within the entire social protection system. The aim is to examine various means-tested schemes and identify issues related to their respective means tests. There are more than 90 schemes, many of which are means tested so this is a complex and detailed task. It is my intention that the review's findings will be completed in time to guide decisions regarding potential changes to means testing, particularly in the lead-up to budget 2026 and most definitely in the lead-up to future budgets. The review is nearing completion but it is complex and will require thorough evaluation when completed.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: It is a key commitment in the programme for Government to review the means test across the entire social welfare system. A more consistent, transparent and targeted approach is needed. It needs to be a priority to ensure low-income families, carers, those with disabilities and part-time workers are not unfairly penalised. I ask the Minister to ensure this review addresses anomalies across the schemes and takes into account the real cost of living today and the need to support people trying to balance work and caring. Clarity and a timeline for publication would be welcome. I ask for it to be prioritised in the Department so that this review is done in time and we can make changes for budget 2026.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is complex as it involves 96 schemes, many of which are means tested. A good outcome will be consistency across schemes and in how means testing is applied. We had a discussion this morning about areas it may not need to or should not apply to in the context of work done by those on these schemes. Even though the Department has a budget

of €27 billion, resources are still scarce and they have to be targeted. I want to ensure they are targeted for those most in need, which the means test assists us to do. It has consistently been shown in EU figures to ensure that we target those most in need. A lot more work needs to be done in that space. It is a priority but it is complex given the volume of schemes and the various challenges.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Minister's comments on prioritising those most in need. That is what we need to do, particularly for low-income families, carers, those with disabilities and part-time workers. I welcome consistency in the future. As a public representative, I do not see consistency in how applications are treated. People who are ultimately entitled are turned down on one or two occasions and have to go through an appeals system when it should have been granted the first time. I appeal for consistency in means testing in the future.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is an important aim and one we will try to achieve. This review is not happening in isolation. Means tests and income thresholds are kept under regular review. We made a number of significant changes in recent years. Significant changes have been made to the income thresholds for the working family payment and income disregards for disability allowance, the blind pension, the fuel allowance and farm assist have increased. Next week, on 3 July, the carer's income disregard will increase to €625 for a single person and €1,250 for a spouse or partner which represents an increase for between €332 and €665 since 2021. We are reviewing the overall means test but making changes budget after budget which will continue over the course of the next number of budgets.

Social Welfare Payments

98. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Social Protection to provide an update on plans to abolish the carers allowance means test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32278/25]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This was talked about quite a bit during the election. What update does the Minister have? An féidir leis an plean atá aige le fáil réidh leis seo a leagan amach go cruinn dúinn?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist faoi chúramóirí. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go seasaimid leis na cúramóirí agus an jab iontach a dhéanann siad gach lá. The programme for Government sets out a timeline which commits to significantly increasing income disregards for the carer's allowance in each budget with a view to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of this Government. This is a major change to the carer's allowance and to the Irish social protection system. It is important that we make progress in a way that is sustainable and does not unduly limit our scope to support other vulnerable groups in society. There are a number of estimated minimum costs of between €600 million per annum up to €3 billion per annum. It is important to manage the changes to the means test in a way that takes account of budgetary resources. It is also important to note that we will continue the process of easing the means test. On 3 July, the weekly income disregard for the carer's allowance will increase from €450 to €625 for a single person and from €900 to €1,250 for carers with a spouse or partner. This amounts to cumulative increases in the disregards of €292.50 and €585 respectively, or 88%, since June 2022. The increases in July will mean that a carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €69,000 will retain their full carer's payment and even those with an income of €97,000 can retain a partial payment. After the July change,

some 99% of current carer's allowance recipients will be on a full rate of payment. Many of the remaining 1% will see an increase in their rate of payment. We are continuing to work through the research in this regard. I intend to achieve this programme for Government commitment in the lifetime of this Government. It is also important to note the Department provides non-means-tested supports, including the carer's benefit, domiciliary care allowance and the annual carer's support grant of €2,000, the highest ever, which was recently paid to more than 138,000 carers on 5 June.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The most important thing is clarity. The Minister said the Department will do a job of work to analyse how this will be achieved over the lifetime of this Government. Will the Minister be able to publish that as soon as job has been done? For carers, being able to predict exactly how it will impact them over the coming years will be important. Carers do a huge job and save the State vast sums of money every year but they do it for the love of the person for whom they care. That love is at the centre of all of this. For an awful lot of carers, everything else in the lives focuses around this. For them to have that level of predictability would be very welcome.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Based on our record to date, we have made such significant changes that there is predictability. We will continue to make significant changes to the income disregard. There was an almost 88% in the disregard and the highest ever level of the carer's support grant.

12 o'clock

I continue to invest in carers agus sa jab tábhachtach atá a dhéanamh acu i ngach cuid den tír gach uile lá. Beimid ag cur airgid leis an obair thábhachtach sin i gcomhthéacs na chéad cháinaisnéise eile.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy David Cullinane: At a time when rents are at record levels the Tánaiste's Government has come up with a new solution: to hike them up even further. Its proposal to effectively remove rent controls from new tenancies signals disaster for renters, especially young people, students and their families and anyone who moves to a new rental home. The reality of the Government's plan was always clear, but now it is not just the Opposition saying it. Despite all the spin and bluster from Government and the Tánaiste over the last few weeks, the Central Bank has said the Government's rent hike Bill will be "painful" for tenants. It said "...the social costs and the pain felt by households is not even...". This will hurt young people and their ability to save to buy their own home. This will hurt students and their families who are paying already extortionate rents and this will hurt ordinary working people who find themselves stuck in an ever-spiralling rental trap. The Tánaiste's Government's plan is a green light for massive rent increases every year. His Government spent a full week attempting to disguise the fact its plan shafts renters. It just could not be straight with people, so in a blizzard of confusion we had Ministers tripping over themselves to contradict each other. The Tánaiste declared in this House last week that "We will be taking specific measures to support students; do not worry we

will, because we have their backs”. Then the Minister, Deputy Browne, confirmed the reality there will be no exemptions or special protections for students in the private rental sector or any renters who will be faced with massive rent hikes. The Tánaiste keeps saying this is a balanced plan but nothing could be further from the truth. The Government cannot promise vulture funds that they can increase prices while pretending to renters that rents will not go up. We know who is going to pay and it is renters, so let us be honest that Government housing policy has always been about investors and giving vulture and cuckoo funds free rein to squeeze rents out of hardworking people.

To make matters worse, supply is falling off a cliff. The Government missed its housing targets last year, it is nowhere near close to meeting them this year and now the Central Bank has again revised down its estimates for new completions this year to barely above 30,000, which is far below the target of 40,000. Not only will the Government miss its targets this year, the Central Bank believes it will miss them next year, the year after that and the year after that. All of this is happening in a cost-of-living crisis. Rents are going up at the same time as groceries, insurance and broadband and at a rate far higher than incomes have increased. This is putting a burden which people simply cannot take.

Despite all this confusion there is one absolute certainty, which is that rents will go up and the Government will remove one of the few protections renters have. Rent controls will not apply to new-build homes. They will not apply to existing homes after a renter moves out voluntarily. They will not apply to off-campus student accommodation despite the Tánaiste saying the Government has students’ backs. The average tenancy is just over three years long, meaning very soon almost all renters will be hurt by the Government’s decisions this week. They will hurt tens of thousands of people every year. They will lock families into overcrowded accommodation for fear that if they move their rents will skyrocket. There is absolutely no guarantee these changes will increase supply. I believe rents need to be brought down. The Tánaiste and his Government obviously believe rents should go up. Of course the rent pressure zones should have been extended. That should have been done on day one. The Government should scrap all the rest of its absolutely crazy proposals that will increase the price of rent.

When is the Tánaiste’s Government going to stop punishing renters? Does he now accept that rents will go up as a result of the Government’s decision this week? Will he take the opportunity to correct the record of the Dáil and accept students who live off campus will not be protected under the proposals and will be some of the first to be affected?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cullinane for raising this important issue. I want to be very clear for people watching at home the decisions the Government has taken and the legislation the Government is taking through the Houses this week is legislation that will extend the rent pressure zones. As everybody renting across Ireland knows, the rent pressure zones were due to end at Christmas. Had we not taken action they would have ended. They would have disappeared. Not only have we taken a decision to extend the rent pressure zones based on the advice of the Housing Agency and others, we have also taken the decision to expand the rent pressure zones to parts of the country that were not covered and to do that in a speedy fashion. About 11 counties in Ireland will benefit from that. Rent pressure zones staying in place and going nationwide is a good and sensible thing to happen in terms of protecting existing tenants.

The Deputy quoted the Central Bank report, but of course he just quoted parts of it. The Central Bank also said our rent pressure zone reforms will have a positive effect on supply. Its representatives acknowledge housing projections are subject to uncertainty, but they said this morning it is not impossible to reach the targets, though there are a number of steps that need to be taken. Many of the steps they have outlined are areas where we have seen Government place a priority focus on in recent weeks. These include the establishment of an Coimisiún Pleanála, the decision to extend planning permissions that could have expired, the decision to make more developments exempted - because in some local authorities about 50% of a planner's time can be taken up on small things like attic conversions or modular developments in the back garden - and the new national planning framework we have brought through this House to ensure there is enough land zoned to get to the 300,000 plus homes we need to deliver by the end of 2030. Next month we will see a very significant programme of investment from Government in the key enabling infrastructure to deliver homes, particularly to do with water, wastewater and energy as well. So we are taking steps.

I know exactly what I said about students last week. I said: "We will be taking specific measures to support students; do not worry ... because we have their backs", and we do and we will.

Deputy Mark Ward: We do not believe you.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Cullinane does not need to lecture me about students. When I was Minister for further and higher education we reduced student fees every year and we extended the renter's tax credit to students while Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland continues to expect students to pay way more to access college. Do not worry, and more importantly students should not worry, because in the forthcoming budget we will take more measures to protect students, so please do not try to create this generational anxiety about what we are going to do to support our students at a time when we have more people than ever before in our history accessing third level education. We will continue to support students. I tell the students or the renters or the people Sinn Féin tries to mislead that it is that party's policy to abolish rent pressure zones.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We will freeze rents-----

The Tánaiste: In the Sinn Féin housing plan-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and reduce rents.

The Tánaiste: Just give David his chance this week Matt. You might get a go next week. In the Sinn Féin housing plan the party is in favour of reference rents, which the ESRI said would be unworkable and complex and the Housing Agency said would be unworkable, complex and lead to more disputes. Sinn Féin knows what a reference rent would have meant.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Government voted against freezing rents last night.

The Tánaiste: It would have meant increasing the rent for existing tenants. I do not expect consistency from Sinn Féin on policy development, but a little bit of recognition it contested a general election on the basis of abolishing rent pressure zones and replacing them with reference rents, something the Housing Agency the ESRI and I reckon a hell of a lot of renters do not think are a good idea either.

Deputy David Cullinane: Again the Tánaiste's response is all spin, bluster and blaming everybody else-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Máire Devine: It always is.

Deputy David Cullinane: -----but his Government for the fact it is bringing in policies that will drive up the cost of rent for many people. Students will not buy his line of argument. They will see through his spin. Many students are going to see their rent and the cost of their accommodation increase. They know it. They know the Government does not have their backs. The Tánaiste talks about a balance, but the balance here is tipped in favour of the vulture funds, cuckoo funds and the investors.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Absolutely.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is more money for them and more profit for them, which is always the case under Fine Gael, which represents a cosseted, privileged class, from my perspective.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Hear, hear.

Deputy David Cullinane: Ordinary people who have to pay increased costs on groceries, insurance and now rent are the ones who are paying the price. The Tánaiste should stand up once and for all. He should not be blaming Sinn Féin for something we did not do and take responsibility for his actions. The Central Bank made it clear today this will hurt those same people. Take responsibility for it, stop it, scrap it, do not put institutional investors first and do not again screw those renters who are already paying high rents with even higher rents.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Do not talk to me about the privileged classes when the largest property owner and investor in this House is the Sinn Féin Party. Let us remember Deputy Cullinane's party is the biggest property owner in the Dáil. His party's director of finance Des Mackin boasted to *The Irish Times*-----

Deputy David Cullinane: More spin, more bluster.

The Tánaiste: -----a few years ago that Sinn Féin had "40 or 50 [properties], easily"-----

Deputy Máire Devine: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: -----across the island. He said the party had "...tried to tidy it up some years ago, but it was too difficult".

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This is about the Minister's record.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: They do not like the truth. He went on to say, "In Belfast alone we'd have seven ... Nationally, I'd say it exceeds 40 or 50 ..." The biggest property owners and investors in Dáil Éireann are those in Sinn Féin. Do not give me "We are on the side of the working people". It is a load of bull that people see right through. You are the wealthiest party in this House-----

Deputy David Cullinane: People are not buying any of that bluster.

The Tánaiste: -----and there are no two ways about it. At least have the decency to stand by your policy.

Deputy Máire Devine: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: You are in favour of reference rent. We are in favour of rent pressure zones. It is a balanced package. We are taking measures-----

Deputy David Cullinane: The high energy has fizzled out. Gone.

The Tánaiste: -----to expand rent pressure zones. We are taking measures to make them permanent. We are also making sure we can deliver more supply, because do you know what renters need? Places to rent.

Deputy David Cullinane: We know that, and you are not doing it. It is just spin, spin, spin.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: You are only learning that after 12 years.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before moving to the Social Democrats, I acknowledge the group from New Zealand in our Distinguished Visitors Gallery. They were welcomed formally yesterday. They were so impressed that they came back again today. They might mark a sheet for us about how people performed yesterday versus today.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: GP services around the country are at breaking point. They are oversubscribed and understaffed. It can often take two or three weeks before people get to see their doctors. I spoke to a 90-year-old woman recently. She has to wait three weeks when she needs an appointment. She has a history of dizziness and falls. Oftentimes, she ends up in accident and emergency, which sends her back to her GP. We see the problems there. I also dealt with a child in the constituency the Tánaiste and I represent who needed chemotherapy but the GP list in her new home area was two years long. As a result, she could not get to a GP to get a referral for chemotherapy. This is a ticking time bomb, and it is about to go off. GP services are the foundation of our health service. If they crumble, everything else will collapse. The Government is sleepwalking us into a disaster because it is not treating this with the level of urgency it demands.

A new report this week states that we will need at least 940 GPs over the coming 15 years in order to meet the demand that exists. Where is the Government's plan to deliver these GPs? I acknowledge that some new training posts have been created, but that is just scratching the surface of what is needed. We need instead a sense of urgency. However, there has been nothing but foot dragging. The most recent example of this is the strategic review of general practice. This review started in 2023 and was supposed to be completed that year. More than two years later, there is still no sign of it. How long more will have to wait for action? We do not need more reviews. We know what the issues are. It is blindingly obvious that we need more GPs. We know what the barriers are for GPs. Why is the Government not taking action to address the shortfall?

A critical reform that must be rolled out is the introduction of salaried GPs. This is where GPs would be directly employed by the HSE. When GPs go into medicine, they do so because they have a passion for making people better. They did not necessarily go into medicine to be businesspeople, accountants or employers. What they want is a better work-life balance. Having a salaried position provided by the HSE is the answer to that.

I must also address the issue of the GP “deserts” across the country, particularly in rural areas. These are places, where we are unable to get people to set up their own practices. The concept of salaried GPs is something that most of those in opposition agree with. The introduction of such GPs is also the subject of a commitment in the programme for Government. In light of that, what exactly is holding this up? Successive Governments have talked about the reform of GP services for decades, but the GP contract has largely remained the same for 40 years. At what point will the Government stop talking about it and start doing it? When will it start taking the GP crisis seriously and when will we see the introduction of salaried GPs?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising this issue. She is right.. It is a real challenge in lots of communities, including the ones we are proud to represent in Dáil Éireann. I am grateful for the capacity review report she referenced in terms of the ESRI and the detailed work it has done, which will assist in workforce planning and which shows the growth in GP capacity that will be necessary in light of the growing and ageing population we will have in Ireland.

In fairness, the Deputy acknowledged some measures that have been taken. I contend that numerous measures have been taken to increase the number of GPs practising in the State. The annual intake to the GP training scheme increased by approximately 80% between 2019 and 2024. Some 350 new entrant training places were made available from 2024, and 346 new entrants commenced training last year. It is encouraging that almost all of the new entrant training, even though the number increased significantly, have been taken up. The intake for 2024 can be measured against the fact that 286 people went into training in 2023. GPs are also being recruited from abroad. That commenced in 2023 under a joint HSE and ICGP international medical graduate rural GP programme. There are currently 118 of those GPs in practice, and a further 18 have completed the two-year course. Funding has been provided to bring the number on the scheme up from 118 to 250.

We have increased investment in general practice to try to address some of the cost issues that many GPs talk to us about. The budget for general practice went to €211 million under the 2019 GP agreement, with a further €130 million under the 2023 piece. There are approximately ten commitments in the programme for Government that relate to supporting general practice, including structured chronic disease management programme expansion and the full national coverage for GP on call. One of the positive developments we have seen in our constituency is the roll-out of the out-of-hours GP service in Loughlinstown. That service that did not exist five or six years ago. There is also the provision of additional supports for GP practices in rural areas and areas of increased need because the lack of access is not equal across the country.

I do not have a specific note on salaried GPs. All I can say is that the Deputy is right. Salaried GPs are a good idea. I visited one salaried GP practice in Deputy Gannon’s constituency. The name escapes me right now, but he knows the doctor. It is a good model, but we need to see this become more the norm. There is funding provided to the HSE for the roll-out of salaried GPs. As Deputy Whitmore stated, there are many doctors who want to deliver medicine but who do not want the challenge of running a small or medium-sized business, as these practices often are. We can learn a lot from that model. I will ask the Minister for Health specifically to outline to the Deputy her plans to roll this out. However, it is something that the Government and I are very much in favour of. It provides another option to further increase capacity.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The name of the programme in question was GP Care for All. Unfortunately, last year they had to come to the Dáil to campaign to be kept open. Clearly,

that small proportion of GP services that follow the model we want, and that was agreed under Sláintecare, have to fight to stay open because the Government has not been supporting them sufficiently.

I will give the Tánaiste some statistics in response to those he provided. Six in ten GPs across the country cannot take on any new patients. They have closed their books. The measures the Government has brought in only scratch the surface and have not resulted in the changes we need to see in the number of GPs. Of those who took up the 350 new entrant positions the Tánaiste talked about, 30% will go to Canada, Australia, the UK and New Zealand. They will emigrate and bring their skills with them. We will train them here and they will move overseas. Those are the facts. Our GPs are crying out for support. Our patients are crying out for medical assistance. Will the Tánaiste please take his head out of the sand and deal with this crisis before it becomes insurmountable?

The Tánaiste: I assure the Deputy that my head is firmly up in the air. There is a lot of work going on in this area. However, as the she and I know from talking to GPs, not just in our county but also across the country, it is not just about the number of GPs. It is also about the supports they want to allow them to hire more nurses, the triaging of patients and out-of-hours services. The Deputy referred to GPs leaving the country. The figures I put on the record show that GPs are coming to Ireland. Some 118 GPs have chosen to come to Ireland and it their home. They are very welcome, and we are thankful for them being here. They are already in practice and treating patients. A further 18 are in the process of completing the course. There are plans to get the number up to 250.

Let me be clear that I am aware of - and am not in any way disputing - the huge challenges that exist in terms of capacity. People are waiting too long too see a GP. There is a need to ramp up capacity in general practice further, not just the number of doctors but also the number of support staff. The Deputy's point about salaried GPs is a serious and constructive one. I take the point that we were dealing with a new model. We found a way forward in respect of that. I would like to see an acceleration of the roll-out of salaried GPs. I will ask the Minister for Health to liaise directly with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: In the past two weeks we have seen the very concept of vaccination being undermined by the incumbent Secretary for Health and Human Services in the United States. It is at times like this that the science-led approach to vaccination we have in Ireland is so important.

The HPV vaccine was first made available to teenage girls in 2010 and subsequently provided to teenage boys from 2019. The Tánaiste might have been health Minister at the time. In 2022, the HSE ran a campaign to provide the vaccine to young women and men who had missed the vaccination when they were in school. The campaign was named after Laura Brennan, a young woman who campaigned to raise awareness of the HPV vaccine and who died from cervical cancer. The scheme was regarded as a success and it was expanded in 2023.

The programme for Government, published in January, pledges to extend the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up vaccination programme to anyone under 25 years who missed the original vaccine. I have been trying to find out when this new programme is going to be rolled out but nobody will tell me. I have been on to the Department of Health with parliamentary questions and I have had replies from the HSE. Each time, I am being told about other stuff: I am being told how important the HPV vaccine is, which I know. I am being told about a new scheme

targeting young Traveller and Roma people, which is great, but there does come a stage when one feels that somebody is deliberately not answering the question because they know that the answer is not going to be popular.

The Irish Cancer Society has also raised the status of the catch-up scheme with officials. It was suggested to it that a broad catch-up campaign could undermine the initial take-up of the vaccine by schoolchildren, and that there are some international studies to back up this point.

In order to try to clarify the matter, I raised the future of the Laura Brennan HPV campaign with the Taoiseach on 21 May. He said it was a fair question and he would ask the Department of Health to come back to me. I have not heard anything since.

Could the Tánaiste answer three questions for me today? Is the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up programme going ahead, as was committed to only six months ago in the programme for Government? If it is going ahead, when will it go ahead? If it is not going ahead, could we get a clear statement from the Minister for Health about the rationale for it not going ahead, and why we are abandoning a programme that everyone felt was working effectively to protect young people in Ireland from the scourge of HPV-related cancers?

The Tánaiste: It seems the Taoiseach stole my line, because I was going to say I would find out. I thank Deputy O’Gorman for raising a very important issue. I will answer the questions directly, but I join with him in talking about the importance of a science-led, evidence-based approach to vaccination.

I am very proud that largely, but not exclusively, in this House we have taken an approach across party lines, where we follow the evidence and listen to the doctors. As a result of that, we have seen lives saved and cancers prevented. I knew Laura Brennan personally. I wrote to her parents as recently as last week. She was an incredible young woman, who has saved countless lives by dedicating her final years to working to promote the vaccine. Her family are very proudly continuing that work.

As Deputy O’Gorman says, we did also expand the vaccine to boys. By the way, this did not happen by accident. There was an organised and concerted campaign to run down the vaccine and to suppress vaccination rates. There was misinformation and disinformation and downright mistruths and online campaigns. Thanks to Laura Brennan spearheading the campaign, we collectively managed to see the uptake rates increase again, working with clinicians and the HSE.

We have given a commitment to extend the catch-up programme. In direct answer to the Deputy’s question on whether it is going ahead: we put it in the programme for Government, and it is going ahead. If there is anybody in some part of the Civil Service who thinks they know better, I assure them that we intend to deliver on the programme for Government commitment. I passionately believe in this, as I know Deputy O’Gorman does too.

I did not know this question was coming up, so I do not have a direct answer for the Deputy on when it will happen, but I undertake to speak to the Minister for Health today on the matter and I will come directly back to him on the issue.

I am always open to hearing if there is a particular reason or obstacle that I am not aware of, but this is a very important catch-up campaign. There is a reason it is in the programme for Government. I expect it is something on which there is cross-party support. I will revert to the Deputy directly on it.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Tánaiste. As he says, Ireland has a good take-up of the HPV vaccine, but at a time when vaccine scepticism is being mainstreamed, our take-up rates have been falling. A rough estimation is that approximately 16,000 eligible Irish kids are not taking up the vaccine each year. That is why the catch-up scheme is so important.

We know the risks from the HPV virus and that it can materialise years or even decades after the initial infection – cervical cancer, oropharyngeal cancer, penile cancer, vaginal cancer – life-threatening and life-altering illnesses. I thank the Tánaiste for his response. Could he commit to a clear statement from the Minister for Health in a reasonable period, perhaps in the next three weeks, telling us that the campaign is going ahead, as the Tánaiste suggests, and giving us a timeline for that? However, if it is not going ahead, could she explain the rationale behind the fact that a public health campaign everyone says is delivering and is protecting young children is not going ahead?

The Tánaiste: I give that commitment. We will come back in three weeks with a definitive plan on that. While I am on my feet, I suggest, as this relatively new Dáil commences, that every Member of this House would publicly commit to supporting the vaccination programme. There is no room for pseudoscience or wannabe doctors who are not doctors. I want to know if every single elected representative in every single political party is committed to supporting the HPV vaccine for young boys and young girls, one that can effectively eradicate a form of cancer in this country. What an incredible thing to say. We have it within our grasp over a number of years the ability to effectively eradicate a cancer, one that disproportionately affects young people, especially young women, but not just women. We have an opportunity here through vaccination and other means to effectively eradicate it. I invite all Members of the House to use the opportunity of Deputy O’Gorman’s question to recommit to vaccination and to push back against the misinformation out there. I will commit to coming back within three weeks to the Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Today marks another dark day for the Government’s housing record. The original target for 2025 of 41,000 new builds has been binned. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has cut the official target by 20%, stating that possibly only 34,000 homes will be built this year. Last year, only 30,000 homes were built, again far short of the Government’s target of 40,000. This Government is in reverse in terms of the biggest crisis happening in this country. The promise in the programme for Government is that 300,000 homes would be built. Right now, the Government is going to meet half of that figure, based on the number of houses currently being built.

I have submitted freedom of information, FOI, requests to every single local authority in the country, in order to understand the scale of the crisis. The data I have received through these FOI requests fully contradict the Government’s information. We asked local authorities, first, the number of homeless people in the State. Their figure is that 16,472 people are currently homeless. When we asked the Government for the homeless figure, we were told there are 15,580 homeless people. The Government is currently understating the number of homeless people in the State by 892. The Government’s ability to count the number of homeless people is out by nearly 1,000.

We also sent an FOI to every local authority in the country to find out how many people are on housing waiting lists. The councils told us that there are 75,000 people currently on housing waiting lists. The official Government figure is 58,824. Here again, the Government is undercounting and understating the number by 16,000. Its ability to count the number of people on

housing waiting lists at the moment is out by the population of Tullamore. That is an incredible situation.

We also FOI'd local authorities on the number of local authority homes that are empty. In the jaws of the worst housing crisis in the history of the State, there are 3,779 council-owned homes empty. Having empty homes in the middle of a housing crisis is akin to exporting food in the middle of the Famine. It is wrong. The fact of the matter is that we are paying nearly €600 million to house people in RAS and HAP homes, while so many local authority homes are empty.

I mentioned the Government and competence previously in relation to this, but perhaps I am giving it too much credit. Is it the case that in the middle of a Government freefall in terms of housing, it is misleading the general public on the number of people who are on housing waiting lists and the number who are homeless? Can we trust a word out of the Government's mouth in terms of these figures?

The Tánaiste: I hate to burst the Deputy's gotcha moment but I suggest he might wish to interrogate his numbers. I am not sure whether we should do a show of hands, but I imagine there is not a Member of Dáil Éireann, other than himself perhaps, who is not aware of the fact that there can be duplications. There can, of course, be people involved with more than one local authority. There can be people in my constituency who can live between Greystones, Bray and Dún Laoghaire and they might be in touch with the two local authorities there. Going further south, people could be between Wicklow and Wexford. If you go to the west, they could be between west Wicklow and Kildare. If the Deputy wants to hand me over all of that data and information, he can but this is what people do when they seek to be divisive. They try to dispute official figures. These figures are not figures calculated by the Government in a party political sense. These are figures calculated by the State in a robust, impartial manner. They often deliver very difficult news for Government from a political point of view. Could we at least have the decency to respect the impartiality and robustness of those who gather statistics in Ireland? If we start trying to erode belief in statistics, that is part of a bigger agenda.

The Government is committed to the delivery of more than 300,000 homes by the end of 2030 - that is clear in the programme for Government. That is what we need to get to and we are taking big and bold decisions in the here and now to deliver those results over the next number of years. That means delivering measures that, when looked at in isolation, can understandably be critiqued or questioned but when you look at them in the round, all of the measures we are taking are to try to get a bit of momentum back into private investment in our housing market to increase supply.

We saw during the lifetime of the last Government that the number of houses very significantly increased from approximately 20,000 a year to a bit more than 30,000 a year. If we are being honest, they then plateaued. They plateaued at a level that is too low. That is why we are now taking measures to try to increase supply. It is why we have taken the decision on planning permission extension and on making more developments exempt from planning, particularly in gardens, attics and the like. It is why we published, and got through this House, a new national planning framework to provide more zoned land. It is why we are establishing a housing activation office - to break down silos. It is why we will invest significantly more in Uisce Éireann in the weeks ahead for water and wastewater treatment plants as well. We have a lot more work to do.

On the number of social homes, yes, we have more work to do but something else is also true. The Deputy must get invited to the same events I get invited to in my constituency. We are seeing a very significant increase in the number of social homes come on-stream. Last year, roughly the largest number of social homes were allocated since the 1970s. There were never more social homes allocated in my lifetime than there were last year. We need to keep that momentum and seek to do more.

One point I agree with the Deputy on is that council owned homes can lie empty for far too long. I have had a lot of discussions with a lot of people who are saying, “Hang on, if only I could get into that house. I do not need the devil and all done, I just need it to be safe and warm.” That is why the Government intends to issue a circular to all local authorities to make it clear that health and safety should be the only grounds for the delay of the giving out of a local authority home, not the bells and whistles they sometimes go on with.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: When the Tánaiste talks about increases in the building of houses and increases in the building of social homes, he is talking about increases from a floor of the worst housing collapse in the history of the State. He is talking about a figure of literally zero in terms of those increases. On getting these figures wrong and duplications, you cannot be on two social housing waiting lists simultaneously. You cannot.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: The Deputy said homeless.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Let us talk about the figure-----

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: He said homeless lists.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We will get to the homeless one. The Tánaiste is understating his figures. The official figures are understated by a population of 16,676. That is extraordinary. Either that is incompetence and an inability to count the number of people who are on waiting lists at the moment-----

Deputy Helen McEntee: Who is incompetent?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----or it is an attempt to hide the fact.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: Who is incompetent?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The reason I think the Tánaiste is misleading the people is that he has previous on this. Right up to the jaws of the last general election, the Government was determined to give the impression to the people of Ireland that 40,000 homes would be built that year. As soon as that election was finished, the information became very clear and that statement from the Government, a number of senior Ministers and the Taoiseach himself was wrong. It is important the Tánaiste comes clean with people on this. This housing crisis is far too serious for misinformation. People need to know what is happening in this country.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: There was not as much pirouetting and spinning at my daughter’s ballet recital compared to what I just saw there. The reality is this is far too serious to engage in conspiracy theories.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That is why everybody is laughing over there.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: The Deputy suggested I went around counting people. The

reality is we have robust, politically independent, impartial structures in our State-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: They are inaccurate. Here are the FOIs. I am giving them to the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: Sorry, no. The Deputy can wave his sheets of paper but I want to know who in the public service he is calling incompetent?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: These are public servants.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: It is our public service. It is ours, we live in a Republic. It is our public service and it does a bloody good job and I want to know-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: These are public servants.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: Just wait a second now, Mr. Angry. Wait.

Deputy David Cullinane: Well, now.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: I want to know who in our public service or what agency Deputy Tóibín believes is wrong in relation to our housing figures. I made the point about duplication and how you can report homelessness in more than one area. That did not suit the Deputy so he switched his argument for the next stage. The Deputy is right. We are coming from a very low base after a very difficult, deep financial recession in this country. We are working on trying to make progress, day in, day out. We have new ideas and are taking big, bold decisions every day to reach the 300,000 homes. The Deputy is simply over there throwing brickbats and engaging in conspiracy theories. I wish him well.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The council FOIs are not conspiracy theories.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Today, I want to speak to the Tánaiste about the escalating crisis in policing across south Tipperary, a crisis made worse by the deplorable policy of neglect, under-resourcing and mismanagement by this Government and the previous Government. In communities across south Tipperary, from Carrick-on-Suir to Clonmel, Ardfinnan, Cahir, Cashel, Ballyporeen and Tipperary town, people are telling me they do not feel safe any more. They do not feel protected. We now have a situation where a single garda can be covering multiple towns and parishes, particularly at night. There is no back-up. There is no visibility and there are no patrols. The doors of our smaller, rural stations are rarely, if ever, open.

Meanwhile, drug activity is creeping further into rural communities and towns and criminals are getting even bolder because they know the situation. They know the numbers of gardaí are not there. However, what really beggars belief is the Government's decision to push ahead with the disastrous new Garda divisional model, which has resulted in Tipperary Garda headquarters being moved to Ennis, County Clare. That is a mad decision. This is centralisation gone daft and the consequences of the plan are plain to see - confusion, lack of local knowledge, demoralised front-line members and communities who feel abandoned.

We have now learned that of the 120 gardaí who graduated last week, one came to south Tipperary and one left the same day, Garda Michael Cussen. He was a wonderful officer who

returned to his native Cork and I thank him for his dedicated service for the previous ten years to the people of Cahir and Cashel. One came and we lost one, so we are standing still. All of this is happening while gardaí are being trained in their hundreds in Templemore and going to the east coast or to Dublin. They need gardaí too but we cannot have them in Dublin at the expense of the rural areas.

Does the Tánaiste accept that south Tipperary is in the grip of a garda manpower crisis, not just a staffing issue but a public safety emergency? How does he justify the decision to shift the Garda headquarters from Thurles to Ennis? Will it be returned or will the decision be reviewed? Can the Tánaiste tell the House exactly how many extra gardaí came, although I just told him? Only one extra garda came. Those are the facts of it. More urgently, will he commit to an adequate increase in gardaí numbers for south Tipperary so that rural people can feel safe in their homes?

This is not just about statistics. It is about real people - farmers, shopkeepers and families young and old who no longer feel protected in their own homes. It is also about front-line gardaí who are doing an excellent job, to be fair to them, with no back up. They have no resources.

Indeed, we saw two gardaí quite seriously injured - Garda John Walsh, an excellent garda in my area, who was savagely assaulted - and I wish him well - and Garda Philip Ryan. There are 12 gardaí in the Cahir-Clonmel district out sick. That happens and it is unfortunate, especially if they are injured on duty. A lady garda was injured recently. She was violently assaulted and it is not good enough. They need to have numbers.

The Tánaiste Simon Harris: I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this issue. I join with him in sending best wishes to the local gardaí he referenced who experienced assault. An attack on a member of An Garda Síochána is an attack on our democracy and should rightly be condemned. Indeed, in this House in recent years and under the leadership of the then Minister, Deputy McEntee, we significantly increased the maximum penalties for those who assault a member of An Garda Síochána, or indeed our emergency services more generally. I thank the Deputy for highlighting that and join with him in the condemnation of that.

As he knows - and he knows I will say this but I have to say it - the Garda Commissioner is operationally responsible for the allocation of Garda resources. Of course, the Minister for justice and the Government are responsible for making sure the gardaí have the resources, budget and policy they need to do their job effectively.

I am informed that when allocating and transferring garda members to and from any division, consideration is given to commitments and undertakings outlined in the annual policing plan. It looks at local crime trends, workloads, policing arrangements, local population, geographical area, size and transfer applications that can arise regarding welfare, personnel issues and concerns. I am told that, as of April of this year, there have been 658 gardaí assigned to the Clare-Tipperary division and that 371 of these have been assigned to stations in Tipperary. These gardaí are supported in Tipperary by 62 Garda staff. I am also informed that, as of the end of May, 79 Garda vehicles have been assigned to Tipperary.

However, the Deputy is right that we need to increase our Garda numbers significantly. He is also right that there is a direct correlation between people's sense of safety and Garda presence and visibility in a community. That is absolutely true. The Deputy will know what I am going to say about this. I am saying it only because I believe it is true. Templemore was closed

twice or three times. It was first closed during the economic crash and the Fine Gael–Labour Government reopened it subsequently. It was also closed during the Covid pandemic. The closures obviously had a significant impact on the pipeline of new gardaí, but we now have 14,223 Garda members. The number of Garda staff has continued to increase steadily over recent years, having reached a record high of 3,501 at the end of 2024. This dipped ever so slightly, to 3,493, in April this year.

On the issue of the transfer from Thurles to Ennis, I will pass the Deputy's concerns on to the Minister for justice and ask that he pass them on to and engage with the Garda Commissioner on them. We want to see a very significant increase in the number of gardaí over the coming years. We have the budget, Templemore up and running and specific commitments in the programme for Government on considering a second college and the options it might bring. Of course, the latter would see more gardaí across the country, including County Tipperary.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply but it is simply not acceptable that we are standing still. As I have put to the Commissioner before, officers, be they male or female, are put in danger if they are sent out on their own in a patrol car to all kinds of incidents. We saw what happened to Garda John Walsh after he had to go out on his own. Please God, he will recover. It is terrible that gardaí must go up and down boreens in the middle of the night on their own. Some days, there are no gardaí available in Cahir or Cashel stations. These are tourist towns, never mind all the villages in the hinterland. It is just not acceptable and not fair to the Garda members who are in the region doing their best.

The lack of cover in Carrick-on-Suir would be laughable if it were not so serious. There are three gardaí in a town that used to have 18. There were four sergeants but I think there is one now. Clonmel station is trying to cover this.

We see what happens at peaceful protests, such as the one in Dundrum when the IPAS residents were being moved in. I was there myself and we saw what happened. We had the siege of Dundrum. Two hundred gardaí, from the riot squad and dog squad to the equine unit and God knows what, arrived. Consider the cost of this. At the same time, a house was burgled in Cullen, about 15 miles away, and no garda could be got. That is the norm. Therefore, there is overkill when it suits the Government. What is happening is not acceptable. It is not safe to have gardaí on their own covering the kind of area in question.

The Tánaiste: I am definitely not directing my remarks at the people of Dundrum – far from it. I met some of them when in Clonmel, but we have seen that huge pressure and challenges have been imposed on the gardaí in dealing with extremist elements in certain places. They visit my constituency as well. I thank the gardaí, who often must operate in the face of considerable abuse, which includes people sticking phones in their faces. They have to show considerable strength to try to keep the peace, so I thank An Garda Síochána for the work it does.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Not in Tipperary.

The Tánaiste: However, I am taking the Deputy's broader point and on this occasion I am agreeing with him in that we obviously need to do more to increase the Garda presence. I assure him that the programme for Government, and also the pipeline we are now seeing from Templemore, will see us on a more positive trajectory as a result of the foundations we have put in place over the past several years.

I also assure the Deputy that the safety of our members when out and about patrolling is of paramount importance to the Government and Commissioner.

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

Deputy David Cullinane: I have lost count of the number of times I have raised the need for funding for Waterford Airport in the House. In fact, I have raised this several times with the Tánaiste – almost a dozen at this point. I have also raised it several times with the Taoiseach and the relevant Minister. Despite all the personal statements of support I have received, more of which I have no doubt I will hear from the Tánaiste, what I request has still not happened. A commitment was given in 2019 but there is still no funding six years later. There is genuine frustration right across the south east because three local authorities are funding this, namely those of Wexford, Kilkenny and Waterford. Despite all the promises, all the information sought and all the clarifications given, the funding has not been given.

I do not have a difficulty with funding going to other airports but, over the past several years, whereas Kerry, Donegal, Knock, Cork and Dublin airports have received very significant capital funding, no funding was provided to Waterford Airport because it does not have the runway extension. Can the Tánaiste tell me once and for all when the funding will be given? When can we have a fighting chance in the south east to have air connectivity with Britain and the rest of Europe?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cullinane for raising this issue again. I acknowledge he has raised it frequently. I would make the point that when we have worked together, across parties in this House, on issues relating to Waterford and the rest of the south east, including the university in recent years, we have managed to make progress together. This is a similar issue. Genuinely across the House, there is support for what is requested. The programme for Government commits to working with all stakeholders to quickly progress the Waterford Airport project to lengthen and widen the runway, building on the commitment decision of 2019. That I believe, is the wording in the programme for Government. In line with that commitment, I have spoken to the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, and I am aware that he is engaging with local representatives, including Deputy Cullinane, on the next steps. I want to be clear that I am fully committed to advancing this project in line with the programme for Government commitment.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Under section 41 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner must inform the Minister for justice about any major issues. On 1 June, Evan Fitzgerald tragically and very publicly took his own life after getting bail on being charged after an undercover Garda operation. Why did the Garda Commissioner not brief the Minister for justice on the details of this case and the facts that there was an undercover operation and that the guns were supplied by An Garda Síochána? More important, is it appropriate and right that I, as a member of the Opposition, had to ring the Minister for justice about this and inform him about it? Is it correct that I had to tell him to go to the Garda Commissioner to ask him about the full details of this case? Would we have ever known the full details of the case considering what was said in court on 4 March last year? Would we have ever known the full details if I had not to ring the Minister for justice on 3 June in relation to this?

The Tánaiste: I extend my sympathy to the family of the young man, Evan Fitzgerald. He was a countyman of mine. The incident was a great shock in the local community and County Wicklow. I understand this is a complex case. Obviously, I am not privy, nor should I be, to

when the Garda Commissioner does or does not use the provision in the Act. That is a matter between the Commissioner and the Minister, but I understand the Minister for justice has sought further information from the Garda Commissioner on the case. I also note the comments of the Taoiseach last week on this issue and the need for a review. I support the Taoiseach in his comments on that.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Central Bank housing figures, out today, show with terrifying clarity the housing disaster that the Government's policies have created. Not only did the Government mislead the public in the election by stating 40,000 homes would be built last year but it will not reach anywhere near 40,000 homes this year or next year. It is also pulling the plug on social housing projects due to commence on site in the coming weeks. These figures show that the biggest blockage to solving the housing crisis is this Government's policies. The Government is delusional in thinking that allowing rents to rise even higher will solve this crisis. It is clearly disconnected from the reality of the generational anxiety, despair and social division that his policies are causing. It is a shame that it is making renters, students and workers pay for its policy failures. Why will the Government not implement our homes for Ireland State savings proposal, which could leverage the €160 billion held in Irish accounts to build thousands of affordable homes, the type of supply our young people need and want? Why will it not make the equivalent of a Covid-period response to this housing crisis, which is now a complete and utter social catastrophe?

The Tánaiste: We are treating this as an emergency. It is a housing emergency and that is why we are taking big decisions each and every week to try to increase housing supply. We have increased housing supply from the floor to around 30,000 homes each year. We need to increase that significantly to deliver 300,000 more homes by the end of 2030. We have been following the evidence base of the Housing Agency in decisions we have made in recent weeks. We have published the report of the Housing Agency, which is the body that is meant to assist with accelerating housing supply. We have followed its recommendations and extended rental protections and we are introducing legislation on no-fault evictions, but we are also trying to take a balanced approach. Funding is always important but I believe the constraints here are not funding. Funding will be forthcoming, with more through the national development plan. I believe planning, water and infrastructure are the key areas that we need to focus on in the time ahead.

Deputy Charles Ward: Two weeks ago, the Government approved legislation to amend the defective concrete scheme to allow for retrospective payments, extend the timeframes and include new provisions for vulnerable families. I voiced my opposition to the fixing of a cut-off date of 29 March 2024 for the increased scheme cap and the updated grant rate, as I believe it is extremely unfair and will leave a number of families behind. I hope this can be considered when the Government is drafting the Bill. The Bill is well overdue. Impacted homeowners are desperately waiting for its implementation. I cannot stress the urgency of this enough. I get calls every day from distressed families wondering when the legislation will come in so that they can pay their bills and move forward in life. When will the legislation be published? Will it be published before the summer recess? Will the Tánaiste commit to ensuring that it is passed as soon as possible?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for the constructive way in which he has been engaging on this issue on behalf of his constituents in Donegal. I am pleased with some of the progress that we have been able to make together after the Minister, Deputy Browne, worked intensively with Deputy Ward's constituents and the advocacy groups in Donegal. I will ask the Minister to

reflect on the Deputy's point regarding the cut-off date. I will also ask him to come back to the Deputy about the publication of the Bill and the timeline. The Government is certainly eager to get this done as quickly as possible. We are conscious of the severe stress and frustration that people are living under.

Deputy Michael Collins: My constituents are deeply concerned about the proposed closure of Perrott House mental health care facility in Skibbereen, County Cork. This residential care facility, which is staffed for 24 hours, has been home to many long-term residents, providing them with essential programmes like horticulture, music, poetry and art, as well as access to the local library, church and shop in Skibbereen. The HSE plans to move the residents to St. Stephen's Psychiatric Hospital in Glanmire, 100 km away, disrupting their lives and community ties. This decision has had a devastating impact on residents and their families, with no consultation involved. Having seen what has happened in nursing homes over the past few weeks, we feel this is another abuse of the elderly, the most vulnerable in our society. Will the Tánaiste intervene? When I am talking about intervention, I know that these people want to stay in Perrott House. I tried to put a hand out to Perrott House to get some explanation of what is going on but it refused to give us any information. It consulted with the families five or six weeks ago to say something was going to happen, but it has not told them where their loved ones are going to go or if they are going for one month, six months, 12 months or for life. The situation they find themselves in is scandalous.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Collins for raising this issue. I am not in any way doubting the accuracy of what he says or his bona fides on it, but if true, that lack of communication would be quite extraordinary. I must say without knowing all the details that the idea of moving people 100 km is extraordinary at any stage in a person's life, least not in the latter stages. I know the Department of Health has engaged with the HSE on this matter. It has requested an urgent update on the issue, including information on the resident and family engagement strategy that might be in place to ensure transparency but also to ensure that service users and their families remain confident in all current and future service arrangements. The HSE continues to review on a constant basis the operational suitability of all mental health facilities to meet the needs of people with mental health difficulties, including Perrott House. I will certainly directly engage on this and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I wish to discuss the significant burden that Revenue's enhanced reporting requirements for employee benefits are placing on small- and medium-sized enterprises across Ireland. While the aim may be transparency, the reality is that SMEs must now report even the smallest non-cash benefits, sometimes just €10 in value, to Revenue on or before the day that they are provided. As the Tánaiste knows, SMEs comprise more than 270,000 businesses in Ireland and are already facing many challenges. These new requirements add a disproportionate layer of bureaucracy, forcing business owners to divert precious time and resources away from their core operations. Many SMEs do not have in-house payroll or HR, making it even harder to keep up with these obligations. If a small business waits until the next day to report a minor transaction, it may face a €4,000 fine for breach, which is a significant risk for businesses already under pressure. Is it really necessary to require same-day reporting for every small benefit? Will the Tánaiste commit to reviewing the real-time regime to reduce its administrative burden and help preserve the viability of small businesses in Ireland?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Brennan for raising this issue. This Government is keen to support small and medium enterprises. They make up the backbone of our economy and every community that we proudly represent in Dáil Éireann. We have taken two measures already.

The SME test makes sure that all proposals that come to the Government are put through the prism of what their impact on our small and medium businesses will be. We have established a new small business unit in the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. Obviously, Revenue applies the rules in an impartial way but I will certainly ask the view of the Minister for Finance and ask him to engage with the Revenue Commissioners and revert to the Deputy about this, because we certainly do not want to see any bureaucracy above and beyond what is required to ensure Revenue can do its job.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I am looking for an update on discussions relating to school secretaries and caretakers. In my time in office, I have gone out of my way to visit as many schools throughout Wicklow and Wexford, from Riverchapel as far as Carnew. A general concern from secretaries and caretakers is that they are simply not receiving fair treatment for their key role in ensuring the smooth functioning of our schools. This involves many issues, such as equitable pay and access to public service pensions and protections, which is leading to a lack of security and financial stability on retiring. They highlighted sick pay. Incredibly, there is no entitlement to sick pay or bereavement leave. One caretaker with almost four decades of experience in the same school put it to me that SNAs and teachers would retire with their pensions and futures secured while he would walk away with simply a bunch of flowers. This is not good enough. These concerns are being replicated throughout Ireland.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I join him in acknowledging the unbelievable contribution that both secretaries and caretakers play in our school community and thank them for the work they do. Obviously in recent years, progress was made through the WRC and engagement with the secretaries to change the rate of pay and the way in which they were paid. Work is underway to follow through on that and put in place a similar structure for our caretakers. Any future requests, particularly relating to pensions, will have to be agreed across the Government - not just in my Department, but in the Department of public expenditure and reform. We will need to engage on that as a Government when making any future decisions, and not just as it affects secretaries. That engagement is happening.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In the area of special education, hundreds of children do not have an offer of a school place. They number in excess of 250 and possibly in excess of 260. Many more children have an offer but their offered places will not be ready for 1 September. I have one such example in Corpus Christi National School in Drumcondra in Dublin. This is a major concern. We potentially have hundreds of children without an appropriate school place for 1 September. Considering we are fast-tracking planning for attic conversions, are we doing something about planning for school buildings with places for children with additional needs? What emergency actions is the Government taking to ensure that every child has an appropriate school place come September?

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is important to outline that as of the end of April, 399 new classes and one class that has been given a legal direction to open, comprising a total of 400 new special classes, are being opened, coupled with places that have become available due to natural movement, meaning 3,900 new spaces are available. What I expect as Minister and what is happening now is that all of those places are being designated. Those young children and people who are known to the National Council for Special Education are being provided with places. The situation is not where we want it to be. This time next year, I hope we will be in a position to say that every child will know exactly where he or she is going. A huge number of children have been allocated places. They know where they are going. That process is

continuing throughout the summer. It is so important for planning and making sure that places are open come September that those designations happen earlier and that schools approve and agree earlier. That will happen next year. For children entering school this September, where their classes are not *in situ* yet and those need to be modular, arrangements are being made with the schools to make sure that children are being brought in and are part of the school community, with transitioning mechanisms in place. Alternatively, in some instances where children are only four years of age, they may spend another year in a school. Where they want to be in school, those transitional arrangements are being put in place.

1 o'clock

Deputy John Clendennen: I commend the progress the Government has made in public health over recent years, leading the way with many global initiatives. Alcohol labelling is a welcome initiative but I have concerns around the timing of its implementation. From a domestic perspective, there is growing uncontrollable uncertainty regarding global trade, and the Irish whiskey sector has found itself in the eye of the storm. Tullamore D.E.W. in my constituency employs almost 100 people and the whiskey sector throughout the country has seen considerable growth and employment in recent years, particularly in rural areas. In the best interests of providing certainty to the sector, will the Government commit to deferring the introduction of alcohol labelling and, if so, for how many years? When will the Government be in a position to make a final decision and announcement?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clendennen. I, too, am very proud of the progress we have made on public health. We have much more work to do. There is a legitimate issue of timing when it comes to labelling. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Heydon, has shared economic concerns relating to the policy due to the uncertain trading environment, which has been raised with him by many colleagues trying to do their business internationally. The Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has competitiveness concerns. As the Minister with responsibility for trade, I, too, have concerns regarding the current trade and tariffs environment we are navigating our way through. The Minister for Health is committed to working with all of her colleagues across the Government to find a resolution to this. We are very proud of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act but we will make a decision in the coming weeks on the timing of the labels. I personally believe a deferral will be required.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The programme for Government commits to reforming the disability allowance and addressing anomalies in the current means test. That commitment is vital and timely. One of my constituents - a wheelchair user with spina bifida and hydrocephalus - saw her weekly payments drop from €211 to just €36 per week when her partner changed jobs for marginally better pay to help support her. Not only that, but she has now been asked to repay €52,000 in back-dated disability allowance, dating back to when she first started receiving the payment at 16 years of age. It is nothing short of shocking and completely unacceptable. A system that penalises care, compassion and effort is a system in urgent need of reform. Will the Tánaiste outline how the current review of means testing addresses cases like this and when meaningful reform can be expected?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil for raising this issue. He is right. Sometime, means tests can just be mean. We have to make sure that they are fit for purpose. That is why the programme for Government specifically makes this commitment. We want to do a thorough deep-dive on means tests, particularly where there are anomalies or poverty traps or they do not align with other parts of Government and societal policy and direction of travel. We made

some progress in recent years in terms of people working and access to medical cards, but there is clearly much more to do. We will publish a new national disability strategy shortly. That will probably be before the recess. It is in draft form and a lot of good work has been done. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, will lead on this review, so I will ask him to revert to the Deputy with a specific timeline for the means test review.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I wish to ask about Duchenne muscular dystrophy. We recently had young people in the AV room who talked about the challenges they faced. It is a wasting disease. There is a drug but it is not available here yet. It is available in the North. Would the Government look at early access as a shared island? The problem in the North is that it does not have the money to administer the scheme. The problem here is we do not have access to the drug. It seems logical to move ahead on that. I am aware of the Tánaiste's work as regards nurses in the past. Would he be open to looking at this as a possibility for the children on the island of Ireland?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Crowe for his very constructive suggestion. Tomorrow, we will have a meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council, which will be an opportunity for colleagues across the island of Ireland to get together. I will raise the issue of DMD on the meeting's margins. If it is possible for professionals throughout the island to work together in the interests of patients with a rare disease, I am sure that is something everyone would like to see happen. We need to do more regarding rare diseases and quick and timely access to medications. The Minister for Health is very committed to this. There will be a new strategy in respect of rare diseases shortly also. The HSE has launched an application tracker to increase transparency in the medicines assessment process. I will look into this issue and revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: On that same issue, Duchenne muscular dystrophy is a muscle-wasting progressive illness that normally starts affecting boys aged between two to three years. It is a life-altering condition. One parent said her four year old could be knocked down by gust of wind. The condition is progressive. Walking can sometimes become difficult and the patient can become a wheelchair user. The disorder has no cure and needs to be acted on extremely quickly. Givinostat is a drug that has been shown in other trial areas to be extremely effective. Parents are desperate to get access to this drug. The EU approved the drug and fast-tracked it on 5 June. The Irish State needs to do the same. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics needs to give approval to the drug. The difficulty is that drugs can take up to two years to be approved in Ireland. This is largely due to understaffing issues. The UK has fast-tracked and approved the drug. This is vital. Parents have marched and have been outside due to this issue. The State must do all it can to approve this drug so that these young boys do not have their conditions deteriorate and do not wait any longer.

The Tánaiste: I agree with a lot of what the Deputy said. The idea that any parent has to watch his or her young child in such a fragile state when the parent knows there is medication available that could significantly improve the child's quality of life and health is not right. The HSE is engaging on this matter. In light of it being raised in the House today by a number of Deputies, I will seek an urgent update as well.

On the issue of staffing, the Deputy is right. We have had to increase the number of staff allocated to the assessment process. My understanding is there are 34 additional staff being hired across the pricing and reimbursement process. I will get an urgent update and revert to the Deputies concerned.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The building of 106 social homes in Blessington was halted recently, which makes no sense to me during a housing crisis, where money is apparently not an issue in this case and the homes had planning permission. Will the Tánaiste explain exactly what happened with these homes and when building will start? There is no clarity as to whether or when building will start.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Whitmore. As she can imagine, I have been looking into this situation as well. Like her, I want to see it progress. I have corresponded directly with the Minister for housing on the matter. We are going to have a review of the national development plan. If the issue is one of funding constraints - it should not be - I am eager that we rectify it in that plan. The review will happen next month. I will revert to the Deputy with a further update.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I wish to highlight something that is happening across County Carlow, namely, the proliferation of solar farms. To be clear, neither I nor anyone I know in Carlow is against renewable energy regeneration, nor are we against our neighbours and friends who make a living from having wind or solar farms on their lands. In the area surrounding Rathoe village, though, there will potentially soon be in excess of 1,000 acres of solar farms. We are not saying that solar or wind farms should not exist. We are just saying that we need regulation.

The programme for Government commits to completing the second phase of the land use review, which aims to balance environmental, social and economic considerations. Anecdotally, wildlife is being disturbed with the development of mass areas of solar farms and many believe that this could be contributing to the marked increase we see in TB cases throughout the country. In my locality, a farmer who has not had TB on his land in more than 30 years recently lost more than a quarter of his herd to it. Will the Tánaiste let me know when we will see solar and wind farms being regulated?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Callaghan for raising this issue. It is one that is raised with me often. The Deputy is correct, in that these people are not against renewable energy. Far from it, but they want to have a rational understanding of how we best use the land in our communities with all of the various competing interests. As the Deputy said, our programme for Government commits to completing the second phase of the land use review, which aims to balance environmental, social and economic consideration. The second phase follows on from the first phase, which was completed in March 2023 and led by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, and focused on evidence gathering. The final report for phase 2, which was independently chaired, was submitted to the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 2 May. The review describes current land use patterns and the various demands on land on delivering on our national commitments. The preparation of the report did involve active engagement with a broad range of key stakeholders. The Ministers will now, before reporting to Government, consider the report, which I understand to be substantial, with a lot of work, research and consultation over the last four years. Once we have a definitive timeline for that coming to Government, I will revert to the Deputy, but I understand the time sensitivities of this.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Like other colleagues, I want to raise not only the awful deteriorating disease that is Duchenne muscular dystrophy, but also the need for an approach to an early access programme along the lines of what is in Belgium, the UK and the US. In my constituency, there are two very unique and special boys, Conor and Dean Thompson, who

have been spearheading the Build for the Boys campaign. Speaking to families like theirs last week when they were here about the impact it has on parents watching their boys deteriorate and lose that ability to walk over time, when there is that access to medication, brings into focus our role as legislators to ensure we keep the pressure on to enable an early access programme. The tragedy is knowing about - to which Deputy Crowe alluded earlier - and having access to givinostat on the island. How do we ensure this story is not replicated for all the other people who suffer from rare diseases?

In the programme for Government, there is a very clear commitment to implement an early access programme. Can a compassionate access scheme be included as part of that, and that the very sensible recommendations of the Mazars report on how to streamline this process, adequately staff it and increase the capacity for communications with patients for access to these drugs be taken on board and prioritised by the Government as a matter of urgency to stop these stories coming to us all the time and to put in place real structures that families can have confidence in, especially when afflicted by rare diseases?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Moynihan so much for raising this and for his advocacy on behalf of Conor and Dean and so many children and patients more widely across our country who want us to get this right in terms of access to medication. I could point out that we have made good progress. From 2021 to 2024, we allocated an additional €128 million for new medicines. That facilitated the introduction of 194 new medicines in Ireland and I am pleased to say, in particular, 49 of these are for rare diseases. However, I do take the point about the system. We need to get a system that is more agile and responsive in advancing the programme for Government commitments. The Deputy's suggestion around a compassionate access scheme is very sensible. I will just make the point - and I say this not to be adversarial to the industry - that obviously, the State has a job to do. So too does the industry in how it approaches these matters to get it right. I would also point out that we could do more on joint procurement at an EU level and, indeed, working with our colleagues across the island. We will have a chance through the new framework agreement that will be required between the Department of Health, the HSE and the drugs industry to maybe tease through these issues later this year. I will relay the Deputy's views and inputs to the Minister for Health as a result of this.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I wish to raise the substandard and dangerous state of disrepair Drogheda ambulance station is currently in. I have over recent months raised this directly with the Minister and during a Topical Issue debate several weeks ago, I elevated major concerns around subsidence, mould, electrical faults and security and safety concerns among other things. I requested that the Minister engage with the National Ambulance Service on immediate works. I also asked her to seek an update on the long-mooted new base for paramedics in Drogheda. I also requested that she visit the station to see this dire situation for herself. To my knowledge, I do not think any of this has been actioned just yet.

This week, local media are reporting that chunks of the building are falling down, exposing holes where the rain is causing further electrical problems and that paramedics in this base, believe it or not, have to wear a raincoat to work. It is wholly unacceptable that front-line workers in my constituency, or anywhere else for that matter, are left to work in such unsafe, unsanitary conditions. What is worse is that this is known by senior figures in the National Ambulance Service and, indeed, by the Minister for some time and yet the situation is deteriorating by the day.

We need urgent intervention here. Any risk posed to the paramedics working in this sta-

tion is risk posed to the lives of the people of Drogheda and beyond who they serve. I ask the Tánaiste to follow up with the Minister directly as a matter of urgency.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising that issue. I absolutely will follow it up directly with the Minister for Health. As the Deputy said, we want all of our public servants, including our front-line emergency staff, to work in fit-for-purpose but most importantly safe environments. That sounds like a very serious situation. I will directly speak with the Minister for Health and ask that we make contact with the National Ambulance Service as well.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is a pity the Minister of State has just left. I want to raise a situation about a special class in Ballyporeen school in County Tipperary. The principal there, Mr. Shane Molan, and the community council have come together. The community council purchased the old school. They upgraded it with a grant and are willing to give it at a very low cost - a nominal fee - to the school. Six children were enrolled in this class, and they had approval. The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, stated that there is only one child in the class. Five have qualified from the school for the special needs class. They have been left in limbo and it is so late in the year now. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, is not in the Chamber but, to be fair, he is doing his best and he has insisted that the NCSE engage with the school because there is goodwill there. The community council wants to provide it and the building is on the same campus. It is a unique situation. However, these people had the expectation of a place but now it has been pulled. The same happened in Bansha, although maybe it had not gone as far, and Killusty. I know Deputy Michael Murphy raised this last week as well. We need engagement with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and we need the NCSE to be fair here and acknowledge there are five children in the school.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: My daughter, Treasa, teaches there and is very happy there, so I know the situation intimately, as Deputy Michael Murphy does from Councillors Murphy and Máirín McGrath. The situation is-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have to conclude, Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They were so excited and looking forward to the school. The building is ready. The building is being officially opened shortly. We need a resolution to this.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGrath very much for raising this important matter. I will speak with both the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, with regard to that and see if we can find a resolution that works for everybody and most particularly works for the children. As the Deputy said, their excitement was palpable with regard to this. Let me talk to the two Ministers and ask them to come back to the Deputy directly to see if progress can be made.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I rise today to speak for a mother, Michelle O'Toole, who spent thousands not on luxury, but on love. Her daughter Katie was faced with a harrowing surgery abroad where a full removal of the pancreas, spleen and gall bladder had to take place in London because it was not available in Ireland. Katie was ultimately forced abroad, and Michelle's only thought was to be by her side at this very difficult time. However, no support came from the State in terms of travel or accommodation - no guiding hand. What parent has to bear this alone? It is a really difficult situation for a child to be left alone overseas in a hospital bed. The Government speaks of compassion, but there is really no compassion here with regard to this

family who have paid taxes all their lives.

I have reached out to the Minister and the HSE, and now I am reaching out to the Tánaiste in order to show compassion for this family and families like it who are forced to travel abroad through the travel abroad scheme, which is a good scheme. However, I believe that because we are essentially outsourcing this support, it is only right and fair, for major surgeries in particular, support is provided to family members to accompany their loved ones abroad.

The Tánaiste: Absolutely. I thank Deputy Lawless for raising this issue on behalf of Michelle and Katie. I hope the outcome of that very significant surgery has gone well. I appreciate the Deputy highlighting this issue. I am going from memory and past experiences but, generally, the scheme would try to be compassionate and engaging with regard to supports for family members who may need to travel and so forth. If the Deputy can send me the details again, I will speak directly to the Minister for Health and see if anything can be done.

Further Revised Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Agriculture and Food has completed its consideration of the following further Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Vote 30 - Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.19 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.59 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.19 p.m. and resumed at 1.59 p.m.

2 o'clock

Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I move: “That the Bill now be read a Second Time”

I am delighted to bring the Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025 before the House. It is vital that we have an effective legal framework in place to support copyright and intellectual property. It is a necessity for the economic health of the creative sector, which is a significant employer in the State.

This short Bill introduces amendments to the Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Act that are necessary, following a Court of Justice of the European Union, CJEU, ruling, delivered in September 2020. This ruling found that Ireland had not adequately transposed a 2006 EU copyright directive on the sharing of royalty payments between producers and performers of recorded music and was not fully compliant with international copyright conventions, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, WIPO, Performances and Phonograms Treaty, WPPT, and the Rome Convention. The State had not: provided clear obligations for producers to share royalties with performers; ensured that equal treatment is provided to nationals of countries outside the European Economic Area, EEA, that are party to international copyright conventions; or specifically provided for how royalty payments are to be shared between performers and producers in the absence of an agreement between them. This Bill will restore Irish

legislation - the copyright Act - to full compliance with EU and international law. It sets out a new process for the agreement of division of royalties between music performers and producers, extends application to nationals of countries outside the EEA that are party to international copyright treaties and grants the function of final arbitration of disputes to the Circuit Court.

The Bill contains five sections. Section 1 defines the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000 as the principal Act amended by this Bill.

Section 2 amends section 208 of the Copyright and Related Rights Act. This relates to the matter of equitable remuneration as provided for by Directive 2006/115/EC. The amendment provides for the insertion of five new subsections, (3A) to (3E), inclusive, in section 208 and the deletion of the existing subsections (4) to (9), inclusive. The new section 208(3A) provides for a default split of equal parts of payments between producers and performers, less reasonable collecting costs. This default 50-50 split is similarly provided for in two-thirds of EU member states. The new section 208(3B) provides that the proportion of single equitable remuneration payable to the performer and the owner of a sound recording may be agreed by or on behalf of the parties concerned. This is similar to the existing section 208(4). The new section 208(3C) provides that in instances where parties cannot reach agreement, and where at least one party objects to the default arrangement, that party - performer, copyright owner or both - may bring the matter before the Circuit Court to obtain a determination of the manner of the division of the single equitable payment.

Section 3(1) inserts a new section which allows that any applications made under the existing section 208 that have not been finally determined will be transferred to the Circuit Court. Subsections (2) to (4), inclusive, provide for the appeal process on points of law, from the Circuit Court to the High Court, and from the High Court to the Court of Appeal. Section 3(4) also provides that any existing agreements made under the existing section 208(4) will remain valid.

Section 4 provides for an amendment to the definition of “qualifying country” contained in section 287 of the Act to include performers who are residents of countries that are contracting parties to the WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty and the Rome Convention. This brings Irish law in line with our international obligations.

Section 5 provides for preliminary and general provisions setting out the Short Title to the Bill and how the Bill is to be commenced. This will be done by an order of the Minister. It is intended that sections 2 and 4 will commence shortly after the Bill is enacted and that a slightly later commencement date will apply in respect of section 3.

An amendment to the Bill is under consideration by the Office of the Attorney General. This would strengthen the appeals process by adding a provision similar to current section 208(6), but linked to the new arrangements provided for in this Bill. This amendment may be presented on Committee Stage.

It is essential that we enact the Bill to ensure that the State is fully compliant with the 2006 EU copyright directive in line with the CJEU’s judgment of September 2020. A robust and well-functioning legal framework supporting copyright and intellectual property more broadly is, as already stated, essential for the economic well-being of the creative sector, which employs approximately 80,000 people and which contributes enormous value in terms of creativity and innovation.

I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to an engaging debate with the Deputies

present.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome that the Government is introducing legislation to address issues relating to the incorrect transposition of the EU copyright directive identified by the High Court and the CJEU. Legislation is necessary. We understand that. A more equitable distribution of royalties is absolutely welcome, but the Bill the Government has brought before the House is poorly thought out, regressive and ill-conceived in terms of the mechanism available to artists to vindicate their right to resolve disputes. The Government is shoehorning into this legislation a change of venue from the Controller of the Intellectual Property Office to the Circuit Court. I cannot see the sense in this. It is at odds with the general policy direction of the Government regarding the courts, whereby alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are encouraged. In this instance, the Government will contribute to the logjam that exists within the courts and possibly negatively impact access to justice due to likely increases in the cost of progressing and resolving a dispute. I do not see why the Government would take such an approach. The Minister of State has not adequately explained or justified that approach, especially in light of the controller's office continuing to handle all intellectual property cases other than music and sound recordings and, most importantly, in light of the lack of engagement with those performers on whom the Bill will impact.

Sinn Féin will support this Bill proceeding to Committee Stage in recognition of the need for legislation in this area and in light of the approach taken in some of its provisions. However, in advance of Committee Stage, I encourage the Minister of State to reflect on the issues highlighted and engage with the representative bodies of those impacted and hear their concerns in full with a view to amending the legislation.

I would like the Minister of State to address the concerns I am raising. What discussion has he had with the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in relation to this Bill? Will he outline in full the engagement and consultation he has undertaken with the representative bodies and those in the sector? What is the justification for disputes involving music and sound recordings being treated differently from any other type of intellectual property?

Sinn Féin wants to see stronger protection and fairer compensation for artists. In that context, I commend my party colleague and spokesperson on arts and culture Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh on bringing forward the Taxes Consolidation (Rights of Performers and Film Workers) (Amendment) Bill 2025, which would ensure equal treatment for Irish performers compared with their international counterparts and ban the use of buy-out contracts that deny performers ongoing revenue for their work. I also commend an Teachta Ó Snodaigh on his culture and arts policy, not only for being a comprehensive vision for the arts and culture but also for the manner in which he went about developing it. He had meaningful engagement with stakeholders and those it would impact.

If the Minister of State can address the questions I have put to him and learn from the approach taken by an Teachta Ó Snodaigh in terms of speaking to the people that legislation and policy will impact, then this Bill will be a net positive. It is up to the Minister of State now/ I urge him to rise to the occasion.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: While I would usually welcome any move to address some of the lacunas in our copyright law which ensure that creatives do not get their just desserts, there are parts of this Bill that concern me. We only got sight of it for the first time last Friday, and I have made a complaint to the Government Whip about that. The convention is that Bills

are produced at least two weeks before they are discussed. That is not a political charge but applies to all TDs. If TDs, including backbenchers and Opposition Deputies, are to do their work properly they need time to address issues contained in legislation.

While this is a short Bill, it provides for fundamental change in terms of the approach to copyright. As the Minister of State mentioned in his introduction, the Irish High Court referred a question to the CJEU for a preliminary ruling on a case taken by the Recorded Artists, Actors and Performers, RAAP, and Phonographic Performance Ireland, PPI. At question in case C was ensuring that those involved were properly funded and proper rights were given. The approach that the Government is taking here is as a result of some of the findings of that court. While the Minister of State is trying to present this legislation as a tidying up of the law and arguing that it is technical a technical measure arising from the case taken by RAAP, the Bill in fact sets out to fundamentally alter how disputes around copyright in music and sound recordings are resolved. Previously, the Controller of the Intellectual Property Office had oversight but all of a sudden we are moving towards the Circuit Court having oversight. That is hugely challenging and is not fully explained here. Indeed, I do not think most people have grasped that fundamental change. Hopefully the Minister of State will elaborate on Committee Stage as to why such a fundamental change is being presented as a minor one. It could have huge cost implications for creatives.

Another concern is the fact that the Government is moving to a system of individual cases. People will have to take individual cases rather than have representative organisations take cases on their behalf. Again, that is a fundamental change. The approach up to now has been mediation and arbitration because once something goes to the courts and the courts have oversight, things become a lot more legalistic and costly. The parties who generally have the funds to take that approach are big companies and those with wealth behind them rather than individual creatives who are producing or writing the music or who benefit in some way from copyright or related laws.

As important as copyright is, this is not an emergency situation. As a result, we could have teased matters out further. I know that pre-legislative scrutiny was waived by the relevant committee, but I do not think it was informed of the fundamental changes provided for in this Bill. If pre-legislative scrutiny had been undertaken, we could have heard various voices comment on this and the Minister of State would have had an opportunity to explain in greater detail the wide-ranging changes that are proposed. The stakeholders should have been consulted. I will continue to engage with them in the coming weeks before we get to Committee Stage, unless that is fast-tracked as well.

I have already spoken to quite a number of stakeholders across the music sector since the Bill was published. While there is consensus that it is broadly welcome that the Government is finally acting on the RAAP case, many of the key players in the sector feel completely blindsided by some of the changes that the Minister of State has suggested, especially in relation to the courts and who can take cases. Why were stakeholders in the industry, particularly the individual representative organisations for creatives, not consulted before the proposed overhaul contained in the Bill was put forward? The court case made its findings a number of years ago. We have had enough time in which to tease out exactly how to progress this issue and give full effect to the ruling without blindsiding people.

It is worth noting the objectives of the Bill as laid out in the explanatory memorandum. The first objective is that the 2006 copyright rental and lending directive be fully transposed. That

is vital. The directive sets out that authors and performers have an unwaivable right to equitable remuneration. We have been making the case for some time that the right to fair remuneration under EU law copyright law must be respected. Last week, the Dáil passed First Stage of the Bill I introduced to ensure respect for the copyright of performers in the film sector when granting tax relief. My proposal was on foot of a campaign by Irish Equity and the cross-party recommendations of the budgetary oversight committee.

Respect for the legal rights of workers should not be optional for employers. Amid all the other scandals engulfing RTÉ, I have heard disturbing reports of the national public broadcaster requesting that performers waive their unwaivable rights to future residual payments by way of so-called buy-out contracts. I raised this directly with RTÉ representatives at the media committee last week. It is worrying that just as the RTÉ solicitor and head of the regulatory section began telling me categorically that the organisation does not engage in this practice, RTÉ's director of video cut her off mid-sentence to state that there are different forms of different contracts which might be required. I did not get what I wanted, which was that RTÉ would be able to fundamentally state that it is not involved in such buy-out contracts. What sort of culture of *omerta* exists in RTÉ if its own solicitor is cut off while explaining to an Oireachtas committee exactly what has been happening regarding the buying out of people's rights?

The effort to reinforce the rights of performers under EU copyright law in Irish legislation is welcome. I support that aim of the Bill. I also support its second aim, which is to ensure copyright law is compliant with our international obligations under the World Intellectual Property Organization Performances and Phonograms Treaty and the Rome Convention. Nationals of other countries who have signed up to these treaties will now be able to vindicate their rights under Irish law. It is welcome and only right that we recognise the rights of other nationals who avail of those rights in Ireland. However, we need clarity from the Government that the principle of reciprocity will be respected. If Irish nationals from other contracting powers can vindicate their rights here, Irish nationals should also be able to vindicate their rights in those states. That might not need to be stated in the legislation. The Minister of State might clarify whether it is a given in the case of our signing up to these international obligations that all those we are respecting will also respect Irish nationals in such cases.

The third aim of the Bill is to provide for a default equal sharing of royalty payments between producers and performers of sound recordings. This is a commendable and hard-fought win for Irish performers. I commend RAAP on taking its case against the representatives of the major music labels and the State all the way to Europe and winning it. Practices introduced by major record labels had, in effect, reduced the share of earnings for sound recordings paid to performers from what should have been half to approximately 20%. I have heard over the years from recorders and performers about how they have been treated. RAAP, the Irish Music Rights Organisation, IMRO, and *Hot Press* have highlighted these issues over the years. It fell on deaf ears in some ways because we were awaiting the ruling of the court, which was made in 2020. We have waited for this Bill and its introduction represents a good day for the music industry as a whole. It clarifies where the funding should go and I hope performers and producers will benefit accordingly. It will make things easier for all.

We welcomed the ruling at the time and we welcome that it is finally being implemented five years later. However, we have concerns, as already stated, regarding the fourth and final objective set out in the Bill, as detailed in the explanatory memorandum, which is to improve the dispute resolution process. I have not seen a clear explanation as to what was faulty about that process or what the problem was with the controller of intellectual property. In the briefing

note on the Bill, the Minister indicates that the Department has concluded that the controller of intellectual property is unable to fulfil the function conferred on him by the Copyright and Related Rights Act as he is deemed not to have the necessary judicial competence to exercise that function. Rather than give additional powers to the controller, this function is to be shifted to the Circuit Court. Anybody who knows the courts system in Ireland knows it is slow, burdensome and costly. In recent years, the general trend has been to seek to ensure people do not end up in the courts system. In that context, the other approach of supporting the controller of intellectual property to perform his function would have been more appropriate.

The Minister is not removing all the functions of the controller under the copyright Act. He will still be able to resolve disputes regarding patents and designs, trademarks and copyright, just not in respect of sound recordings. This is odd because dealing with those other issues could also end up requiring the judicial competence we are told the controller does not have in regard to this particular issue. I have not encountered in any of the research I have done recently or in the past any complaints about the controller's role. I do not see what the problem can be. Usually, the approach is that if something is not broken, we should not fix it. I am concerned about this change. Many musicians and performers will see going to court and employing legal counsel to pursue royalties as simply being beyond their means. If securing a few thousand euro requires investing in a solicitor and a barrister to pursue the matter in the Circuit Court, the likelihood is that people will not pursue it.

The change in respect of the controller of intellectual property is not the only change. The long-standing framework enshrined in section 208 (4) to (9), inclusive, of the Copyright and Related Rights Act provides for an engagement to take place between a person responsible for playing or broadcasting a recording and a licensing body acting on behalf of copyright owners. These provisions are being deleted and replaced by new subsections (3A) to (3E), inclusive, which not only remove the role of the controller but also remove the role of the licensing bodies. An individual performer who may live off an incredibly precarious income will now have to make a case against an individual copyright owner, which may well be quite a wealthy record label. There is no explanation for this change. The Minister of State might address that when he responds.

The worst thing that can happen is that we discourage those who have particular rights from pursuing those rights where they have been wronged. I do not oppose the Bill but I am concerned at the direction being taken on those two points, namely, the move towards the Circuit Court for dispute resolution and the deletion of the role of organisations that represent artists or performers in respect of copyright.

Deputy George Lawlor: The Labour Party will not be opposing this Bill but we feel we need to look more closely at the whole area of copyright in this country. With our myriad of talent, this is an issue that affects not only the music industry, but the broader landscape of creative arts and cultural expression in Irish society. The matter of equitable remuneration for performers and owners of copyrighted sound recordings in Ireland is rightly discussed and decided upon in this Chamber. It is a topic that resonates deeply in an era when digital technology and globalisation have transformed the way we create, consume and distribute music.

To set the stage - no pun intended - let us first define the context of equitable remuneration. At its core, equitable remuneration refers to fair compensation for the contributions of both performers and copyright owners in the production and distribution of sound recordings. In Ireland, as in many countries, this balance remains a contentious issue, particularly as the

industry navigates the complexities introduced by streaming services, digital downloads and the ever-evolving landscape of copyright law. Despite their invaluable contributions, many performers and musicians struggle to earn a living from their craft. The platforms that allow their voices to reach us often fail to provide fair compensation, leaving them vulnerable and financially underappreciated. This is not just a matter of financial survival, however. It is about recognising the worth of their talent, creativity and dedication. Artists and musicians are not merely commodities to be used for our benefit. They are the essence of what we are. They bring us together, inspire us and often force us to think about things differently. They challenge us to see the world through different lenses and to embrace new ideas. When we support fair remuneration for artists and musicians, we are not simply advocating for their financial rights. We are investing in our culture, our communities and all around us.

As it stands, the legal framework governing copyrighted sound recordings in Ireland is primarily based on the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000. This legislation provides a foundation for the rights of copyright owners - in most instances, record labels - while also recognising the rights of performers such as musicians and vocalists. However, the actual distribution of revenues generated from sound recordings often raises questions of fairness and equity. Performers who bring artistic works to life frequently find themselves in a precarious position. Although they may receive an initial payment for their performances, the distribution of ongoing revenue generated from streams and sales tends to favour copyright owners, leading to significant disparities in income. This imbalance has sparked calls for reform and advocacy for a more equitable system that recognises the contributions of both parties.

To understand the situation in Ireland better, we need to draw comparisons with other countries that have grappled with similar issues. In particular, we can look at the approaches taken to address equitable remuneration by countries like Sweden, France and the United States. In Sweden, the concept of equitable remuneration has been embraced through a combination of collective bargaining and legislation. The Swedish artists' rights alliance plays a pivotal role in advocating for performers' rights, ensuring they receive a fair share of revenues from sound recordings. This model promotes transparency and accountability, allowing performers to negotiate better terms and conditions in respect of their contributions. The success of Sweden's system suggests that collective action can yield positive outcomes for performers, providing a potential roadmap for us to consider.

France presents a more robust legal framework for performers' rights. This is encapsulated in the *droit d'auteur* or author's rights system. In 2016, France implemented laws mandating a fair share of revenues for performers from streaming platforms and other digital distributors, thereby acknowledging their essential role in the creative process. This approach has not only benefited performers, but has also led to a more sustainable music ecosystem. Such legislative measures could serve as an inspiration for us here in Ireland and prompt a re-evaluation of our current copyright laws to ensure they adequately protect performers' rights.

While the United States is a global leader in music production and distribution, it presents a different scenario with regard to equitable remuneration. The US operates under a more fragmented system with significant disparities between the rights of performers and those of copyright owners. The Music Modernization Act, passed in 2018, aimed to address some of these issues by improving royalty distribution for songwriters. However, performers still face challenges in securing fair compensation, particularly in the context of streaming. This highlights the importance of ongoing advocacy and reform, a lesson Ireland can learn from the US experience.

As we navigate these discussions, we cannot overlook the profound impact of technology and digital platforms on the music industry. The rise of streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube has fundamentally altered how music is consumed and monetised. While these platforms provide unprecedented access to music for consumers, they also create new challenges for equitable remuneration. In Ireland, performers often find themselves at the mercy of algorithms and payout structures that prioritise volume over fairness. The fraction of a cent received per stream can make it nearly impossible for many artists to sustain a living solely from their recorded music. This situation calls for a re-evaluation of how digital platforms compensate both performers and copyright owners.

Advocacy for fairer distribution models, transparency in royalties and direct licensing agreements could pave the way for a more sustainable music economy in Ireland. The journey towards equitable remuneration for performers in Ireland is not solely the responsibility of us as policymakers or of legal frameworks. It also requires the active engagement of artists, industry stakeholders and advocacy organisations. Groups such as the Musicians' Union of Ireland and Irish Equity have a crucial role to play in raising awareness of the challenges faced by performers and in pushing for the necessary reforms. By fostering dialogue among performers, record labels and streaming services, we can work towards creating an ecosystem that values and compensates artistic contributions fairly. This collaborative effort will not only enhance the livelihoods of performers, but will also enrich our cultural landscape, ensuring that diverse artistic voices continue to thrive.

As we discuss equitable remuneration, it is essential to consider the broader cultural implications. Ireland has a rich musical heritage that is steeped in tradition and innovation. I look forward to welcoming tens of thousands to Wexford to see traditional musicians at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in August. Musicians contribute significantly to our national identity and cultural expression. By fostering an environment where performers receive equitable remuneration, we not only support individual artists, but also preserve and promote our cultural legacy.

Equitable remuneration can lead to increased investment in local talent and the creation of new artistic works. When performers are fairly compensated, they are empowered to invest in their craft, to collaborate with others and to take creative risks, which is essential. In turn, this can lead to a flourishing arts scene that benefits not only artists, but also audiences and both local and national economies.

From our discussions here today, it is clear that the introduction of legislation guaranteeing a fair share of revenues for performers from digital platforms is vital. This could evolve, creating a system of equitable remuneration akin to those in France and Sweden, which I have mentioned. We must encourage the establishment and strengthening of collective bargaining agreements that empower performers and their representatives to negotiate fair terms with record labels and digital platforms. We must push for greater transparency in the distribution of royalties from streaming services to ensure that performers receive clear and timely information about their earnings. It is also imperative that we invest in initiatives that support emerging artists and provide them with resources to navigate the challenges of the industry. This could include grants, funding opportunities or mentorship programmes. Campaigns to educate the public about the importance of supporting artists and the impact of equitable remuneration on the cultural landscape would be a most welcome move.

The quest for equitable remuneration for performers and copyright owners of sound recordings in Ireland is an issue that requires collaboration, advocacy and reform. By studying and

learning from the experiences of other countries and engaging in meaningful dialogue among stakeholders, we can create a fairer and more sustainable music ecosystem. It must be remembered that music is not merely a product. It is an expression of us all, a reflection of our culture and a source of joy and connection. By ensuring that performers receive the compensation they deserve, we honour and value their contributions and safeguard the future of our vibrant artistic community.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all know that there have been very significant issues with copyright and making sure that artists have a framework within which to work. We know of the initiative during the Covid pandemic and beyond to ensure some element of payment. There is a significant lobby in that regard. It is about artists in general having a sustainable framework for their work. That needs to be offered if we are to ensure that people can express themselves culturally, which is vital.

We are talking specifically about copyright. We will permit this Bill to go to the next Stage and may table amendments on Committee Stage. This is all happening on foot of a particular court case. There have been issues here. We are transposing the EU rental and lending directive. It is all about clarifying how royalty payments from recorded music are divided between performers and producers. This is all happening very fast, having taken a long time to get this point, so I think there could be anomalies here. There could be issues. An Teachta Ó Snodaigh spoke about the fact that there had been a lack of engagement with the sector. That needs to be followed up on. I have already stated that the short timeframe will create difficulties. Any solution that involves putting things through the logjammed courts system in Ireland is not anything I would necessarily be very hopeful about. I would expect there would be some element of industry pushback but I get what is intended here. We need to ensure that is what happens, so we will need to make sure the due diligence is carried out and that, as I said, our particular issues and the issues that recording artists may have would be addressed.

There is a wider issue that needs to be dealt with. Deputy Ó Snodaigh spoke about his legislation, which relates to the campaign that has been carried out about Irish Equity. It is about ensuring fairness and ensuring that payments and royalties are maintained as regards work that has been done. They speak about the fact that there are better frameworks in much of Europe, in Britain and in other places and, as I said, huge anomalies that need to be dealt with.

We know the other issues within the film sector, raised particularly by crew. We have seen cases that have been taken as far as the High Court. This issue falls back to the Government around section 481. While we all think section 481 has played a huge role as regards the film sector, it is about ensuring that we have a thriving film sector and that quality employment is introduced. I, Deputy Ó Snodaigh and, particularly, Deputy Boyd Barrett and others have brought up the issues of blackballing and blacklisting within the industry. They need to be addressed. The issue is that production companies draw down the section 481 money but the DACs are set up as financial devices. Then, once the film is dealt with, the DACs are disappeared, and with them go all the responsibility and all the employment rights that should exist.

There is a wider issue the State needs to look at as regards making sure that when we talk about recording artists or TV and film, we make the framework and the operations in Ireland a lot better. That will ensure sustainability of the industry. We need to look after our workers because that cannot necessarily happen with the way things are constructed at the moment.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to speak to today's legislation. While

I welcome the Bill, I will speak to some of the broader issues it touches on and deals with and some of the issues that come before us today. They fall into the categories of fair remuneration for fair work, first and foremost, and some of the lessons we should be able to learn around the transposition of the legislation and the errors that were made. I wish to speak also to the fragility of the arts and the creative sector, particularly in light of the wider technological context at the moment and what we see coming down the tracks in terms of artificial intelligence, in particular. Finally, I will speak about access to justice and fair procedure.

Starting with fair remuneration for fair work, it is really unfortunate that we have had this state of affairs that has left uncertainty as to what is an equitable split in royalties until now. That certainty about the defaults gives some small protection against being taken advantage of, particularly for these artists, and it is an issue which obviously disproportionately affects people in the arts sector, which is already a sector where the paid-for work they do is often inadequate. I have many friends working in the music business and the movie business and it is just so difficult to see the commitment and the dedication that are required and the personal sacrifice people have to make to simply make a living within these sectors. As a society, we need to value this work and ensure cothrom na Féinne.

I understand that coming off the back of a court ruling, there was limited consultation available for this legislation, but I am keen to ensure we collectively engage with stakeholders ahead of this Bill becoming law. Coming into politics from the human rights and equality sector, we always talked in that field about how when we develop law and policy in this country, it is so important that those people who will be most impacted by that law or policy are consulted throughout the development of that legislation. It is so important we make sure that we properly engage in meaningful consultation with those in the arts sectors who will be most affected by this and who, as we have heard from other speakers, have been somewhat blindsided by some features within this Bill. While core parts of this Bill are a legal requirement to transpose the directive, we should explore ways in which we can strengthen it even further.

That raises two points, and they are the next two I want to explore. They are the lessons learned around the transposition and then, as I mentioned, the fragility of the arts sector itself. As regards the lessons to be learned around the transposition, we have had, due to this issue, over 20 years during which artists and producers have had uncertainty about the equitable division of royalties. The correct transposition is welcome, but we should not have to see these things come about due to court rulings. It is really important with this directive and all directives that we get it right the first time, and part of getting it right is that consultation phase. That is what will help us get it right and learn from situations like this in order that we can fulfil our EU obligations and our wider obligations to the people affected by the laws we pass.

Then there is the fragility I have referred to within the arts sector. As we know, it is already hard enough to make a living from creative work, and royalties and the like can be the difference for people in the arts between paying their bills and not. They sustain people in that craft which we all benefit from. That is important to remember because the arts sector itself is a small enough percentage of our population, but all of us, to an individual, consume arts and culture in different ways in our daily lives and we all benefit from it. “Ag tacú leis na healaíona”, as the RTÉ ad that is on all the time goes. We are all consumers of our arts. It is vital that we do better as a society to support artists through measures around royalties but also wider arts funding and schemes like the basic income for the arts. I am a member of the culture, communications and sport committee and very much welcome the fact that today, or in recent days, we have heard that it will be extended. I will be looking for an expansion of that programme to make sure it

reaches more and more artists into the future.

Looking at this legislation, however, it seems to me that we are rearranging the deckchairs on the *Titanic* because this is all happening against the backdrop of a world where more and more people are having their copyright violated. I was recently at an AI event where one of the contributors explained that we have 12 Booker Prize winners in Ireland and all 12 works have been taken by Meta to feed its AI machine without the permission of a single one of those authors. This is their voices being stolen, their work being used without their permission, and people are profiting off that voice without giving them their fair share. This sits within that wider context and something that we have to look towards much more progressive legislation for. Not only must they continue to contend with online piracy, but AI companies are illegally scraping that work, training models on their voices, their music, their words, their art, in order that they can feed artificial intelligence machines which will pump out artificial culture and artificial art. We need a regulatory framework that will keep pace with those new forms of theft of work. If we do not protect the right of creators to their creative work, we will see an atrophy of that creative work and such a loss to our culture here in Ireland.

Finally, I wish to speak about access to justice and fair procedure which is a feature of this Bill. The responsibility for adjudicating these matters under this Bill is to be moved to the Circuit Court. While that is a step which strengthens fair procedure, it is vital that the system does not preclude those without the means to take a case from the getting justice they deserve. Civil legal aid in this country is inadequate. We are talking about a group of people who are often just trying to scrape by and cannot access expensive legal representation. We have many complex areas of law that can be impenetrable to ordinary people but we cannot let that complexity unfairly deny people the chance to use that law and access justice. Without adequate civil legal aid and timely handling of cases, people cannot afford to use the courts to seek protection even when they have a good case. Those are the features I wanted to raise. I welcome that this error in transposition is being remedied. I look forward to seeing future legislation and a framework that will support artists in the protection of their work.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): As no other Members are offering, the Minister of State has ten minutes to conclude.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank all Deputies for their engagement and comments on Second Stage of this Bill. I am delighted to see the aims of the Bill are not opposed and are supported. I reiterate what I said earlier about the importance of this Bill to ensure Ireland is fully compliant with EU and international law. The Bill sets out a new framework and process for the agreement of the division of royalties between music, performers and producers. That is the scope. It extends applications to nationals outside the EEA who are party to the international copyright treaties and grants the function for final arbitration on disputes to the Circuit Court. It also enhances protections. For those who say what we are doing is ill-thought-out, at the core of this Bill is enhancing protection for both parties - performers and producers. It is to ensure there is a well-functioning legal framework in place to support those employed in the creative sector - more than 80,000 people who contribute significantly economically with creativity and innovation - in the future.

I will address some of the areas raised. I am sure we will follow up on Committee Stage. To respond to Deputy Ó Snodaigh, the general scheme was published on the Department's website in November 2024. I acknowledge the delay in the publication of the Bill. In future, it

needs to be accepted that there should be ample time for Deputies to consider the Bill. It was only published last Monday. The general scheme was also sent to all stakeholders over seven months ago. That sets out the intended needs in the Bill. The two parties, the performers and producers, were contacted by the Department. Officials and I are available to discuss any issues they may wish to raise or are affected by in the sections which are now being included in the Copyright Act. Legal advice was sought. We carefully considered this Bill with the Office of the Attorney General. It was highlighted that the controller of the intellectual property is recognised as not having the necessary judicial competencies to exercise the function conferred on him by the current section 208 of the Copyright Act. We are strengthening that. The Bill also encourages both parties to reach agreement outside court. To say we want to contribute to the logjams in the courts is not the case. In that instance, there would be a default 50:50 split, which is the norm in other member states of the European zone. The Department also consulted relevant Ministers across Government, including the Department of justice with regard to the measures included.

On the issue raised about platforms, that will be considered in the context of the review of the European Commission and the Digital Services Act. Collective action is also possible in Ireland. Nothing prevents parties from negotiating and agreeing between them. As a Government, we are introducing an action plan on collective bargaining. The questions raised have been constructive, which I welcome. We have noted the areas raised and we look forward to engaging with Deputies further in regard to this important legislation on the various Stages of the legislative process.

Question put and agreed to.

Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Teachtairacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): Seanad Éireann has passed the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Bill 2025, without amendment.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Ciarán Ahern - To discuss teacher allocations and class mergers in St. Kevin's BNS

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and St. Kevin's GNS in Kilnamanagh, Tallaght, Dublin 24.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss anti-social behaviour in the Northwood area of Santry.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss why the capitation grant for primary schools is significantly less than that paid to secondary schools.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the need to improve consumer protections of home buyers, arising from a case in County Meath.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the need to provide a stand-alone scheme for the provision of school outdoor play areas.

Deputies Ruairí Ó Murchú and David Cullinane - To discuss budgetary issues affecting SOLAS, and the impact on the delivery of apprenticeships.

Deputy Brendan Smith - To discuss the need for Bus Éireann to lower the cost of travel on the Cavan-Dublin route.

Deputy Dessie Ellis - To discuss the continuing closure of the Kilmore community centre.

The matters raised by Deputies Malcolm Byrne, Naoise Ó Muirí, Ruairí Ó Murchú, David Cullinane, Robert O'Donoghue have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Sports Facilities

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I raise the issue of funding for school facilities, particularly sports facilities such as playing facilities, AstroTurf pitches, renewal of grass surfaces and changing room facilities for voluntary schools. There are some great programmes in the summer works scheme and other newer schemes to do with climate action and preparing buildings for climate change, which are welcome. There is a gaping hole in the funding profile for schools when it comes to outdoor facilities. A key requirement for our schools is to provide non-classroom environments for students to keep them engaged and give them other experiences outdoors. For girls, in particular, it is very difficult to keep them involved in sport as they get older. A key way to do this is through the school system. To do that, a school needs good playing facilities, particularly outdoors. There is no mechanism for that at the moment. Will the Government consider in the medium term putting a scheme together, similar to the summer works programme, in which schools can apply for funding for sports facilities and renewal of sports facilities?

3 o'clock

I am not talking about capital in the sense of acquiring land, but there are many schools in the country that have had facilities for a long time that require renewal. Asking parents and schools to do fundraising without, at the very least, matching funding from the Government is really difficult.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I sincerely thank Deputy Ó Muirí for raising this topic, which he knows is extremely close to my heart. He has years of experience of involvement, in his local community of Clontarf and beyond, in this specific area and this is a great opportunity to delve into it a little bit.

Since 2020 the Department of education has invested more than €6 billion in our schools throughout the country under the national development plan. This has involved the completion of more than 1,375 school building projects. Government support for that investment has delivered real benefits. A recent Government decision has approved €210 million in supplementary capital funding for the Department. This brings the total capital allocation for 2025 to €1.6 billion.

The provision of school places, including for children with special education needs, has been a priority for the Department over recent years and this will continue to be the case. Nevertheless, the Minister for Education and Youth fully recognises the importance of physical activity and recreational facilities for students of all ages. It is important to note the provision of outdoor play areas forms part of the accommodation brief for all new school buildings or where a major building or refurbishment project is being delivered for an existing school. The current design guidance for new primary and post-primary schools includes hard-surfaced play areas for both recreation and physical education activities. The guidance also includes provision of landscaped areas on school sites providing a variety of external informal and social areas to suit the learning development and cultural needs of students during breaks and before and after school, and for a range of more formal curriculum needs.

In addition, the design guidance for accommodation for pupils with special educational needs includes provision of external play areas with soft surfacing and especially sensory gardens. The Deputy has raised this a number of times, including when he was on the city council. The increased level of sensory gardens in our national schools is something we should all be so proud of. They are having a huge impact. My son's school just opened a new one and it is making a world of difference to every pupil.

To the Deputy's specific point, repairs to existing play areas may be considered under the Department's emergency works scheme. The purpose of that scheme is to provide funding specifically for unforeseen emergencies or to provide funding to facilitate inclusion and access for pupils with special needs. The scheme is intended to remedy an emergency situation and usually provides an interim measure until a permanent solution can be delivered. In the case of outdoor play areas this usually only includes repairs to existing play areas, but each application is assessed on its own merits.

Additionally, as the Deputy has alluded to, the Minister recently announced details in respect of the climate action summer works scheme. The purpose of this scheme is to devolve funding to individual school authorities to undertake small-scale building works that, ideally, can be carried out during the summer months or at other times to avoid disrupting the operation of the school. This scheme will operate on a multi-annual basis for a number of categories, including external environment projects, which could include the provision or upgrade of outdoor play areas. The new scheme opened for applications in early May 2025 and all applications must be received by 5.30 p.m. on 30 June.

Deputy Ó Muirí's recommendation has serious validity. I am more than happy to bring that back to the Department of education and thank the Deputy for bringing it to the floor of the

House.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I welcome his comments and appreciate the investment he has outlined in general terms into school facilities. On the challenge with emergency works, I will give Manor House School in Raheny as an example. It is a very popular girls' school. It has a large AstroTurf pitch beside the school which belongs to it. The surface is really poor. It is an enormous job. I doubt it will qualify for any emergency works scheme because the scale of it is too large, but there is a huge opportunity there for the community in terms of partnership and for the school itself in the long term if we can find ways to partner on that.

I also want to raise the situation that has come up very recently in relation to Belgrove Infant Girls' School in Clontarf. Due to its enrolment numbers it has had its funding allocation cut for one teacher, potentially causing serious difficulty in the school. Depending on how the management of that school distributes staff, which I appreciate is a management decision, we could end up with a situation where there are 35 pupils to one teacher in that school. The Minister of State will understand that would be a very challenging situation for the school and for the management. I am raising it in the hope the Minister of State will raise it with the Minister, so it is looked at.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I fully empathise, especially with the comparison with Manor House School. I happen to know the pitch quite well from previous exploits as a really bad coach. I appreciate a pitch of that size represents serious capital work that is obviously way beyond the schemes laid out that are open at the moment. However, we have seen examples where there have been what I would not call public-private partnerships but community partnerships involving the local authorities and local sports and schools at both primary and post-primary levels to provide new pitches. Obviously, the common-sense approach is to remediate existing facilities, especially when we are talking about all-weather surfaces like 3G and 4G. Those are expensive as they are a bit more than the hard play areas the Department is focused on at the moment, so that is an area where there is not a lack of funding or will but there is a need for a specific stream to cater to that.

The situation of Belgrove Infant Girls' School in Clontarf is one that is coming up in a number of schools around the country. This is the time of year when they come up. The Minister will look favourably where there is a situation the Department can work with management to facilitate. I have no hesitation in saying I will sit down with the Minister for Education and Youth and specifically raise the issue of Belgrove Infant Girls' School in Clontarf on the Deputy's recommendation.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State.

School Funding

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for taking this on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. Listening to him respond to the last matter, I understand his passion for primary schools, which we all share. Primary schools are at the hub of all our communities and we often marvel at the work done by principals in primary schools who not only are they leading in the education of the children in the schools, but they are responsible, essentially, for being project managers within the school as well. Schools get paid a capitation

grant to manage their day-to-day operations and some people wonder what that goes towards. It covers everything from cleaning to electricity, sanitary wear, water, insurance, heating, the school website, security, the fire alarm, the photocopier, waste disposal, accounting and telephone costs. Everything in a normal household or business is managed, effectively, within the school community.

The challenge, as the Minister of State knows well, is those costs have been continuing to rise. In the current school year the capitation payment to primary schools is €200 but it is to increase from this September to €224. However, because of cost-of-living increases announced in the budget last year primary schools received an extra €36 per student in the 2024-2025 school year. Consequently, in real terms the capitation grant for the 2024-2025 year, including the cost-of-living allowance per pupil, was €236, whereas in the coming year it will be €224. While the core grant has certainly increased by 12% and that is welcome, without the cost-of-living provision being made primary schools will be operating on less money in net terms.

I am not going to say second level schools are adequately funded when it comes to capitation either, as they need additional resources. However, the per pupil allocation from this September for second level students is €386. I get that second level students are a bit bigger, but we are still often talking about broadly the same footprint and the same responsibilities that have to be managed within the school. That there is such a disparity - and every time there is a welcome increase that disparity grows - begs the question as to why that difference exists. What we have seen is an increased reliance by our primary schools on voluntary contributions and ones from the wider community. That contributes to a greater disparity between schools. Schools that are better at fundraising, particularly if they are in better-off areas, are much more able to generate income to carry out what is the day to day work of a school. I also raise a question on capitation. I get that it is per head. There is no regard to the physical size of the school or the type of building it is. If you are operating in a really old school that is hard to heat, as opposed to a modern school, your heating costs are far more substantial. There is a need for an overall review to look at the full economic cost of running our primary schools, but there is a question about why the disparity continues between primary and second level.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I had to check my phone because in the Deputy's new guise as Oireachtas AI committee chairperson, I had to see if he had been reading my phone for the correspondence I have just had with the principal of a local national school in my area on more or less this exact point. This is an issue that regularly comes up for every Member of this House and I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline to the House, on behalf of the Minister, the position as to why the capitation grant for primary schools is less than that paid to secondary schools.

As the Deputy knows, the Government is committed to increasing funding to support schools and the programme for Government commits to increasing capitation funding to all schools of all types to ensure they can meet the elevated day to day running costs. The commitment in the programme for Government builds on the progress that has been made in recent years including a more than €30 million permanent increase in capitation funding. This represents an increase of circa 12% on current standard rates and results in the standard rates increasing from €200 to €224 for primary schools and from €345 to €386 per student in post-primary schools from September 2025. Over the past two budgets there has been an increase of 22%, give or take, in the level of capitation rates paid to all schools.

The Department is committed to providing funding to recognised primary and post-primary

schools in the free education scheme by way of per capita grants. The two main grants are the capitation grant to cater for day to day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance and general upkeep and the ancillary grant to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff. Schools have the flexibility to use capitation funding provided for general running costs and ancillary funding provided for caretaking and secretarial services as a common grant from which the board of management can allocate according to its own priorities. Primary schools with fewer than 60 pupils are paid the capitation and ancillary grants on the basis of having 60 pupils, no less. In addition to these grants, €45 million in cost-of-living supports were issued in November 2024 to support all recognised primary and post-primary schools in the free education system. This additional funding announced in the budget is designed to assist schools with increased day to day running costs such as the heating and electricity issues laid out by the Deputy. The funding was paid at a rate of €36 per pupil in primary schools and €55 per student in post-primary schools. Enhanced rates were also paid in respect of pupils with special educational needs and pupils from a Traveller background.

The Department of Education is aware that costs and funding can pose a particular problem for schools, and is constantly working to address this matter and to enhance the financial and other supports available. While not wishing to pre-empt the outcomes of any future budget negotiations or fiscal parameters agreed by Government, the Department will continue to seek and prioritise the funding required to meet the ongoing costs. It is difficult to make precise comparisons between the levels of grants paid and the actual costs of running schools at primary and post-primary level. In general, and put simply, post-primary schools are larger than primary schools. They have specialist rooms such as laboratories, workshops etc. This leads to higher unit costs for heat, light, power, maintenance and cleaning. There are also additional resources required at post-primary level for specialist subjects, such as home economics, wood technology, engineering, graphics and applied technology. There is therefore a difference in the level of capitation funding provided to primary and post-primary schools. The current standard rate of capitation grant is €200 per pupil in primary schools and €345 per student in post-primary schools.

What the Department will not let me say is that it is not that we are comparing apples and oranges. It is that perhaps we are comparing Golden Delicious and Granny Smiths. They are different sized entities, and the pupils are a different size. There are more staff and a requirement for more staff. The costs are on the basis that trying to provide catering facilities in post-primary schools is different from the resources needed for the free hot school meals provided at primary level. There will always be a need to increase the funding for both primary and post-primary but there will always be a difference between those schools which the Deputy and I know clearly through our work.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I totally get that there are differences between schools. Even within the primary school sector, I made the point that an old school that is very difficult to heat is totally different to a new modern build school. However, a lot of the costs will be the same. There is obviously a question about the overall quantum and there is certainly a case for additional funding for second-level schools. It is about the scale of the difference, and I get the Minister of State's point. The last point in the Department's statement is that this year it is €200 per pupil at primary level. It is €345 at second level. Because of a 12% increase applied to both, it will from this September go to €224 and €386. The actual financial difference is continuing to grow. We all know, when we go into primary schools that every one of them is constantly facing the challenges of meeting the day to day

running costs. The model has been used since the 1960s so there is a case to review what is the best economic model to ensure the administrative side of primary schools can be dealt with. I appreciate we are moving into budget negotiations, but the fact that we are now talking about going to €224 for primary school students and €386 at second level represents a significant difference. As a priority we need to address the question of the funding of the administration of our primary schools.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will address three points in response. I will come to a broader point, but the first is that if there are specific schools, the FSSU on behalf of the Department plays a crucial role in seeing where there are funding gaps. In order for the Department to assess the current financial situation, the school needs to engage with the FSSU for the purpose. The Department will refer this school to the FSSU once confirmation of the situation is confirmed. If you have an individual school in your constituency facing specific needs that is where the FSSU can work in tandem with the Department. That is the first specific point. However, when a principal goes to you, they will thank you for that but say it is not going to solve their issue in the next 24 to 48 hours, and you should talk about that.

Another area relates to the need to look at the overall economic model. The Deputy is right. There is no way I can disagree with that. If we are looking at a model based on a 1960s parameter, it is of course time to review or refresh that 60 years on. I am more than happy to make that argument to the Minister on the Deputy's behalf. However, the final point relates to the administrative costs of running schools at primary level. Never mind the 1960s, the administrative costs compared with six years ago are completely unrecognisable. The wonderful advances in special education provision, free hot meals provision and the extra ability for schools to do more comes with a greater cost. It comes with a greater cost, but those costs are not being matched. Those costs and responsibilities are falling on the shoulders of principals, many of them teaching principals. We regularly get questions from constituents as to why their child does not have free hot school meals. It is either due to space or capacity with staff. That is an area that needs review, and I would be more than happy to work with the Deputy to ensure that review is forthcoming and works to the betterment of all our schools.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. The question concerns budgetary issues facing SOLAS and the ETBs and the detrimental impact this may have on the delivery of apprenticeships. We all know the importance of apprenticeships. I submitted this on the basis that myself, Deputy Cullinane and a number of our colleagues heard word on the grapevine about individual LMETBs saying their finances and budget had been slashed. How it was put to me is that in 2025 the budget is possibly more than €40 million less. On that basis we are looking at the possibility that when we are meant to have an intake of new trade and other apprenticeships in July, they could be put back to September or October and some of them could be cancelled. We all know about the housing crisis and it would be unheard of if this were to happen. Usually, we would be talking in here about ramping up the delivery of apprenticeships. I met the Minister and I also met the previous Minister at the opening of facilities in my constituency involved in the training of apprentices. We want to see more of that.

This may have an impact on further education across the board. I refer to all sorts of ap-

prenticeships, including in PLCs, and in community education whereby people study at night either part time or full time. I am incredibly worried, but I hope the Minister will set my mind at ease, and the minds of the stakeholders who have contacted us, as well as people who are looking forward to doing an apprenticeship and those who will require the apprentices. It is vital that he gives the answer that is required.

Deputy David Cullinane: I too have been contacted by the Waterford-Wexford ETB. The issue seems to relate to the contract training programme for apprenticeships. My understanding is that there was a bid process previously, known as a funding allocation request, FAR, to the then Department of Education, based on the number of apprenticeships an ETB would fund and they would get the funding on that basis. Apparently, this year or last year, there was a shift and now there is an allocation as opposed to a bid.

There is also an issue due to the fact that so many of the phase 2 classes are being paid phase 4 funding and rates because of Covid. That is one of the differences. I have been told that there is a shortfall of between €40 million and €50 million across all of the ETBs. I have also been told that in the Waterford-Wexford ETB, up to 500 phase 2 apprenticeships may not go ahead in June, as they will not be called. There is very real concern in that regard. In fairness to Waterford-Wexford ETB, the number of apprenticeships has been increased. Some 1,000 apprentices now go through the doors. There is a new unit on the Waterford industrial estate that caters for an additional four phase 2 electrical classes and there is one additional plumbing class. In the Wexford FET, there were four additional electrical classes, one plumbing class and one metal fabrication class. In the Kilcohan training centre, there is an additional electrical class and also a brand new wood manufacturing class. I expect the Minister will agree that all of these are very important. We want more apprenticeships but there seems to be a funding issue, which we are being told about. We are asking for clarity from the Minister. We are being told this could have an impact on some of the classes due to go ahead in the summer, or that will not go ahead, as the case may be. I do not want to see that happen. Deputy Ó Murchú does not want to see it happen. I am sure the Minister does not want to see it happen. We are trying to establish whether there is an issue, what it is, if the Minister is across it and if it will be resolved.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as an gceist seo a ardú. I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter.

As the Deputies opposite are most likely aware, SOLAS is the State agency responsible for the further education and training sector. A key part of its remit and duties is to allocate funding to the education and training boards to deliver further education and training programmes, including apprenticeships, in alignment with Government priorities. I prioritised the partnerships, which are critical to the success of many of our national challenges, including construction, but also across the board.

I support the apprenticeship system to the extent of broadening and widening it and increasing the number of courses and occupations that can be accessed through the apprenticeship journey. I am very much committed to that path. I also very much want to support the system and to grow it. However, issues have arisen operationally and that is part of the reason we are having this debate.

Each ETB within the system is responsible for ensuring its activities are delivered within the scope of its allocated funding. Engagement occurs between SOLAS and the ETBs on a regular

basis and there are annual reviews. Through the ongoing engagement, a funding pressure has recently been identified for the 2025 apprenticeship budget. This pressure is primarily linked to the cost of State allowances paid to apprentices during their off-the-job training phases. Like the Deputies opposite, I have heard about this both officially and on the grapevine. It is an issue that has emerged very recently.

I assure colleagues that the issue is being taken very seriously and that a pathway forward will be found. SOLAS is currently actively engaged with the ETBs and my Department to identify practical and sustainable solutions. I am taking a very keen interest in the discussions, which are ongoing. I am adamant that a solution must be found.

The demand across the system has grown significantly, especially in the area of craft apprenticeships, with yearly registrations increasing from 5,271 in 2019, up by 35% to 7,113 in 2024. There is an ongoing significant uplift in demand that is placing pressures on apprenticeships. That is a good thing because we want more apprentices in the system, but it does require greater supports and resources to be made available.

Overall, there were 25,000 craft apprentices at the end of 2024, up from 16,000 in 2019. One of the Deputies mentioned the previous backlog in phase 2, which has largely been addressed, but it moves the demand curve up to phase 4. The ongoing pressures have, thankfully, moved through the system, but they are still within the system. The bump is moving along and it is now at the phase 4 stage, which brings its own pressures.

The growth in the system is very welcome. It is also necessary, given the vital role apprentices play, largely in the construction sector, but also in delivering many other key Government priorities such as housing, retrofitting, infrastructure development, energy and in other areas such as telecoms, which are key to our national success.

It is important to acknowledge that there is an inherent complexity in managing a system that is demand-led with a finite funding envelope. Put simply, demand in a given quarter or year can rise or fall, and it can be difficult to accurately predict or model that and then to support and resource it.

The Government has a very strong and sustained commitment to apprenticeships. I wish to make it clear today that no apprenticeship course or class will be cancelled as a result of the current situation. Since the formation of my Department, investment in apprenticeship training has increased by 139% from €142 million in 2019 to €339 million in 2025. There has been more than a doubling of funding. This includes a record €77 million investment as part of budget 2025, the largest ever allocation to the apprenticeship system in the history of the State.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the statement by the Minister that no apprenticeship class will be cancelled. I assume that also means none will be paused. I would like to think there will not be any major cuts across the service in the further education area.

The Minister said the situation has just arisen. Could he explain how this was not foreseen at an earlier stage? I welcome the fact that he is addressing it. Could he give us a timeline for when this will be settled because the reason we have all heard this, both officially and unofficially, is people are very afraid due to the difficulties that have arisen. We must ensure that there is sustainable funding for further education, in particular apprenticeships, because we spend half the time in here talking about the necessity to build more houses. It would not do if we were not providing a sufficient number of apprenticeships. That is accepting the complexity

of the issue, as outlined by the Minister.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister has acknowledged that a funding pressure has been identified so we know there is an issue. The question then is how it will be resolved. I welcome that the Minister said no class or apprenticeship will be either suspended or cancelled. I have been told by the Waterford-Wexford ETB that many of the phase 2 classes for July have not been called, which could affect up to 500 apprentices. It covers very important trades like carpentry and the other trades and skills we need, for example, to build houses. I welcome what the Minister said, in so far as it goes, but could he perhaps provide more clarity on the situation? He is saying this is not going to have an impact on classes being called, yet I have a note that states no apprenticeship class scheduled for July has been called in the Waterford-Wexford area. How does that square with what he said? Has there been some movement since contact was made with us? If that is the case, that would be fantastic. It would be a step forward. Perhaps the Minister could clarify that.

Deputy James Lawless: I am not impressed with the situation either. I would prefer if we were not in this situation. Sometimes in politics, we have to play the hands that we are dealt. Sometimes we would prefer they are different but they are what they are and we have to make the best of them. My job as Minister is to manage the situations that arise.

I have said no class will be cancelled. I did not say anything else. There is a reason for that. I am adamant that no class will be cancelled. I will not say anything beyond that, other than SOLAS is working with the ETBs on an ongoing basis to manage scheduling and how the classes are delivered and their timetables. That will correspond to the budgets they have available to them. That is an ongoing process between SOLAS, an independent agency, and the ETBs. They have that ongoing engagement and will continue to work together. They are fully supported by officials from my Department to get to the bottom this issue in terms of unlocking the resource challenge and moving things forward. The Government, the Department and I am committed to the overall system and to reaching the targets. In the programme for Government, there is a target of having 12,500 apprentice registrations per annum by 2030 and ensuring the successful retention and progression of apprenticeships. That remains a priority for me and the Government. We want to address the funding pressures.

I might come back to the Deputy in due course with the roadmap. I am not in a position to provide it at the moment. However, I can reassure Deputies that this is a very live issue and that it is being actively worked on. I am intent that it will be resolved, but we are a little away from determining the mechanics and outworkings of that just yet. I ask the Deputies to give me a little time to work that through, and perhaps I will update them in due course.

Antisocial Behaviour

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I wish to highlight a matter of real and growing concern in the southern part of my constituency. There has been a recent surge in antisocial behaviour in the Northwood area of Santry, particularly around Gulliver's Retail Park. Families, residents and business owners feel increasingly unsafe due to targeted and aggressive incidents, including reports of cans and stones being thrown at passersby, including children, in public spaces but, more worryingly, racially motivated incidents and incidents of harassment.

This behaviour is not only totally unacceptable, it is deeply distressing for those who live

or work in or visit the area. The atmosphere in Northwood is changing for the worst. This is an area in which people have lived peacefully for the past number of years. What we are witnessing is more than just nuisance behaviour; it is a pattern of intimidation that is shaking the sense of security in a community that was safe and that should be safe and welcoming for all. The area around Gulliver's Retail Park and the nearby residential zones seems to have become a hot spot for these incidents. I have many emails from constituents within the area in which they provided detailed reports. These are not just isolated events; they are evidence of a wider pattern that the residents say has been building in recent months.

In response to these incidents, I am calling for a more visible Garda presence and patrols in the area. My colleague Deputy Kelly provided me with updated Garda figures for this year. Thankfully, Ballymun received three additional gardaí. I am also calling for better public lighting in public walkways and car parks to deter illegal activity. There is a need for a collaborative effort involving gardaí, Fingal County Council and local stakeholders to address this issue and to re-establish the joint policing committees, which have been stood down for more than 12 months now, as a matter of urgency. Given that Northwood spans two separate local authority areas, will the Minister of State clarify the measures that are being taken to facilitate the appointment of the chairs and co-chairs of the new joint policing committees to address these issues effectively and ensure co-ordinated policing and community engagement in the area is taking place?

Let us be clear. Antisocial behaviour affects more than just the immediate victims, it also damages the wider community. It creates fear and poison. It undermines the trust in public spaces. If left unchecked, it escalates very quickly. That is why a co-ordinated and proactive approach between the community and gardaí is urgently required. We owe it to the residents of Northwood and Santry, especially the families of young children, to restore safety, dignity and peace of mind to their daily lives. Antisocial behaviour has no place in our communities and should not be tolerated. This needs to be addressed immediately.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I sincerely thank Deputy O'Donoghue for raising this timely and important issue. At the outset, and before I get into the specifics, I condemn any incidents of racially motivated abuse. I know the Deputy shares that view, as does everyone in this House. It is important to say that sometimes because we can tend gloss over it. Such behaviour is a scourge that we must all stay united in our opposition to.

The Deputy rightly and specifically raised the issue of gardaí on the beat. Getting more gardaí on our streets is this Government's first priority in the area of justice. Increased recruitment and appropriate civilianisation, where possible, is ongoing in order to achieve this goal. The level of resourcing provided to An Garda Síochána is supporting this work. The latest recruitment campaign was successful in attracting 6,700 applications. Newly appointed gardaí will support existing members, such as the 775 Garda members assigned to the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, north division, an increase of 107 since 2015, who are supported by 72 Garda staff, which is up 28 over the same period.

I will address the issues specific to Northwood shortly, but the Deputy asked about community safety partnerships, which are key to addressing local concerns. More broadly, we recognise that we cannot police our way out of complex social problems. In that context, enhancing community safety requires a whole-of-society approach. That is why we are replacing joint policing committees with local community safety partnerships, LCSPs. These

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partnerships, which provided for in the new Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, will build on the good work of the joint policing committees. I was a member of one of those committees in my area. They will have broader membership, bringing together local councillors, gardaí, residents, communities - including minority and new communities - education and business representatives and statutory agencies such as the HSE, Tusla, and local authorities. Each LCSP will develop a tailored community safety plan for its area. Regulations to formally establish the LCSPs are being finalised. I am informed by the Minister that these regulations will be completed shortly.

The success of the pilot LCSPs demonstrated the value of this model. The Dublin north inner city plan included 50 actions across five priority areas and fostered strong collaboration between gardaí, youth services, addiction supports and local authorities. The pilot partnerships were subject to independent monitoring and evaluation with baseline, interim and final reports published. The learning from these pilots is being used to inform the national roll out of LCSPs. A total of 36 partnerships will be rolled out following the finalising of regulations in each local authority area. There will be one in each of the Dublin City Council administrative areas - five in total - and two in Fingal, namely one in north Fingal and another in west Fingal.

Each LCSP will be led by a voluntary chair and supported by a full-time co-ordinator and administrator. The chair will be elected from among and by the partnership membership. While administrative boundaries require that certain areas fall into neighbouring LCSPs, the overarching aim is to maintain a co-ordinated, place-based response to community safety needs. The National Office for Community Safety, based out of the Department of Justice, has prepared a comprehensive guidance document. Additionally, the National Office for Community Safety will establish networks for LCSP chairs, co-ordinators and members, giving opportunities for collaboration to share examples of best practice and request support for emergent issues and co-ordinate and communicate in related areas.

I will probably need to wait until the next slot to address the issues relating to Northwood more fully. However, I understand that gardaí have already increased high-visibility patrols in the Northwood area following a recent robbery in Gulliver's Retail Park. As a result of these patrols, the suspect was arrested by local gardaí and is currently before the courts. Community gardaí are continuing to act with the community in this area. I will go into more detail on matters relating to community gardaí in my next slot. I would do the matter a disservice if I were to just run through the first two paragraphs at this point.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister of State. This issue can be looked at on a cross-party basis. There is no division here between the Opposition and the Government. I welcome the information to the effect that the LCSPs are to be set up shortly. When I was a councillor, I served on a joint policing committee. I found that very useful because you get to know all the stakeholders on the pitch, for want of a better way of putting it. If the Minister of State could expand on the Northwood issue, I would really appreciate it.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I really appreciate the opportunity to come back in. I cannot stress enough how important it is that any of these issues that are brought to the attention of the House are solved by all of us. None of us can claim responsibility. None of us can shoulder all the blame. If we work together, however, we can alleviate the impact of what is happening.

Community gardaí play such an important part in addressing and resolving these issues at local level. Members from the Ballymun community policing team have held Garda clinics

specifically for the residents of Northwood, one of which was attended by the divisional crime prevention officer. The neighbouring policing team has also begun the process of establishing a business watch for Gulliver's Retail Park. Local gardaí have dealt with a number of young people regarding specific incidents of antisocial behaviour in the area. A number of individuals are either engaging with juvenile liaison officers or are before the courts and subject to strict bail conditions.

On behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, I assure the Deputy that local gardaí will continue to work collaboratively with everyone in the community. While enforcement is essential, we also recognise that many of the young people involved in antisocial behaviour have simply strayed onto the wrong path. That is why prevention and early intervention are essential to our approach. The youth diversion projects that are funded by the Department of Justice are vital in this work. These community-based multi-agency initiatives aim to divert young people from criminal or antisocial behaviour at source. There are now 93 youth diversion projects nationwide, with two new projects, in east Clare and north Tipperary, to be operational by the end of this year, ensuring full national cover.

I want to highlight the availability of funding for community-based CCTV schemes. Since 2017, over €950,000 has been approved for 36 schemes, and a further €1 million is available this year. Applications can be made by local authorities. Community groups may request their local authority to apply for funding. Once operational, the LCSPs will be the appropriate forums to co-ordinate such initiatives. On the specific LCSP in the Deputy's area, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, to liaise directly with his office to provide the updated information.

Healthcare (Transparent Payments) Bill 2022: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Healthcare (Transparent Payments) Bill 2022, which I am co-sponsoring with my colleagues Deputies David Cullinane and Seán Crowe. I thank Dr. James Larkin, senior postdoctoral fellow at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, for his research in this area and for his help in preparing the legislation.

The Bill seeks to make it mandatory for pharmaceutical companies and medical equipment suppliers to declare payments, gifts, donations and all other transfers of value made by them to healthcare professionals and organisations. In some cases, these payments create problematic conflicts of interest that can have significant consequences for patients and the public finances. We know payments to healthcare professionals and organisations can create conflicts of interest.

Evidence shows that receipt of payments from the pharmaceutical industry is associated with higher prescribing rates, higher prescribing costs, increased use of specific drug classes, including opioids, and lower prescribing quality. This is significant and, of course, has the potential to have a profound impact on patient safety and the public purse. The popular show "Dopesick" highlighted this to great effect in the context of the opioid epidemic in the United States.

In Ireland, tens of millions of euro are paid to healthcare professionals and organisations

each year by the pharmaceutical industry. While a voluntary register of these payments is currently in place and maintained by the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association, research conducted at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland found that the identity of many recipients is anonymous, while other payments may not be reported at all.

The current voluntary system is inadequate. The Healthcare (Transparent Payments) Bill 2022 is needed to bring Ireland in line with international best practice and is a measure in the interest of industry, professionals, organisations and the general public. This legislation would require pharmaceutical companies and medical equipment suppliers to declare all payments to the HPRA on an annual basis. Failure to do so could result in a fine of €100,000.

The Bill also provides for the HPRA to establish and maintain the register and ensure it is searchable and accessible to the public. The establishment of a centralised, State-run mandatory disclosure system in Ireland would enhance health service trust and integrity, create a fair and competitive innovation environment, support Ireland's clinical trials landscape and provide significant cost savings for the HSE. Legislation similar to this has been proposed by TDs from other parties, including Fianna Fáil through former health spokesperson Billy Kelleher MEP. In the US, similar legislation was introduced with cross-party support. Correspondence from the Secretary General of the Department of Health, Mr. Robert Watt, to the Committee of Public Accounts in 2021 noted:

The Private Member's Bill [this Bill] presents an opportunity for a review of the arrangements in place in the context of improving transparency in transfers of value between pharmaceutical companies and healthcare providers.

It is generally positive in that regard. Again, we cannot rely on the current fragmented *transferofvalue.ie* and *transparentmedtech.eu* transparency systems. Peer-reviewed research outlined extensive shortcomings in these systems.

The significant consequences of poorly managed conflicts of interest in healthcare have been highlighted in many countries. Examples include the US opioid epidemic, which I mentioned, and the pelvic mesh scandal in Britain. These crises resulted in significant personal costs for thousands of people and significant financial costs for health systems. Ireland is not immune from this and transparency legislation is a key step in preventing such crises. The shared commitment across parties to a strong health service and thriving life sciences sector must be underpinned by a transparency system that ensures a level playing field for ethical industry actors while safeguarding patients. Legislation in the US, France and other countries has proven that payment transparency strengthens public confidence and supports a more competitive and fair research and innovation landscape where the majority of ethical industry actors are not at a disadvantage by comparison with the few unethical industry actors. It is in the interest of everybody to have transparency in the system so we can know and shine a light on conflicts of interest. I look forward to the debate on this and welcome the opportunity to hear from others.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Healthcare (Transparent Payments) Bill 2022 be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, to allow the Joint Committee on Health and the Department of Health to consider matters further."

I acknowledge the intention behind this Bill and thank the Deputies for raising such an important matter. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

Transparency in the relationship between the pharmaceutical and medical devices industries and healthcare professionals and healthcare organisations is of great importance. The Government agrees with the general principles of this Bill. There should be transparency in transactions between commercial interests and healthcare providers. This is so the public can be assured patient care is based solely on clinical evidence and experience and is in the best interests of patients and their safety.

Payments or other financial supports between the pharmaceutical industry companies, commonly known as market authorisation holder, MAH, companies, to healthcare providers, HCPs, or healthcare organisations, HCOs, are referred to as transfers of value by the industry. Such financial supports are common both in Ireland and abroad. These transfers have had a positive impact on our healthcare system and benefit patients and the public by advancing medical research, conducting clinical trials and ultimately delivering numerous innovative medicines. It is important that such partnerships continue. However, transfers of value can create conflicts of interest, and I understand that some international research has linked them to higher prescribing rates, higher costs and lower prescribing quality.

This Bill seeks to enhance transparency by establishing a statutory register of transfers of value. The Government is not opposing the Bill as enhanced transparency is ultimately aimed at protecting the public. However, transparency is only one way of ensuring accountability, minimising and eliminating conflicts of interest and thus ensuring the best care possible. There is already a suite of measures in place designed to ensure transparency, accountability and public disclosure while minimising conflicts of interest, which measures I will now outline across four broad areas.

First, there are the Medicinal Products (Control of Advertising) Regulations 2007, which are enforced by the medicines regulator, the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA. The HPRA operates an advertising surveillance programme to ensure compliance with the regulations. The HPRA's monitoring of the giving of moneys or support by pharmaceutical companies to healthcare professionals and healthcare organisations falls within the remit these regulations, via regulation 21, which relates to inducements and hospitality. If breaches are identified by the HPRA through the different elements of its advertising surveillance programme, including during inspections, the HPRA takes appropriate follow-up action with the MAH company to address those breaches.

Second, there are the Ethics in Public Office Acts 1995 and 2001, as amended, which require HCPs in designated public positions or directorships to disclose interests that could influence their official duties. Sections 17 and 18 of the 1995 Act and section 11 of the 2001 Act mandate the disclosure of material interests. This act requires HSE employees at or above grade VIII salary, which is €81,144, to declare interests that could influence their duties. Examples of declarations include: occupational income over €2,600 from non-HSE sources; travel, accommodation and meals funding; shareholdings over €13,000 or 5% of a company; or gifts, property or services over €650.

For public health employees outside the remit of this Act, section 17 of the HSE's national financial regulations prohibits all employees from receiving benefits or hospitality that could

compromise integrity. Nominal benefits must be disclosed to their line managers. In addition, the code of practice around the governance of State bodies advises against giving and receiving gifts or benefits that could affect judgement and that could reasonably give cause or be perceived to cause a conflict of interest.

Third, there are professional codes of conduct and ethics for healthcare practitioners. While HSE employees have obligations under the Ethics in Public Office Act, many healthcare professionals are not HSE employees. However, across the regulated professions, there are codes of conduct and ethics in place. These codes of practice set standards for conduct, and include stipulations such as the following: professionals must avoid entering into agreements that may result in actual or perceived conflicts of interest; manage and declare conflicts of interest; not accept inducements, financial or otherwise, or incentives that could reasonably be perceived as affecting their professional judgement for reasons of personal or commercial benefit; and must not accept any gifts or favours from healthcare pharmaceutical companies or patients and that could reasonably give cause or be perceived to cause a conflict of interest. For example, codes of conduct across professions include: the Medical Council's Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners; the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland's Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Nurses and Midwives; the Dental Council's Code of Practice relating to: Professional Behaviour and Ethical Conduct; the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland's Standards and Ethics for Pharmacists; and CORU's Codes of Professional Conduct and Ethics for its regulated professions.

I will outline the voluntary pharmaceutical industry's self-regulation codes of practice. There are two main pharmaceutical trade bodies in Ireland, the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association, IPHA, and Medicines for Ireland, MFI. They operate a disclosures system for their members. IPHA represents pharmaceutical companies that manufacture or supply originator or on-patent medicines. MFI is a pharmaceutical industry body that represents member companies which manufacture non-patent medicines such as generic, biosimilar or value-added medicines. Members of both IPHA and MFI must disclose financial interactions with healthcare professionals and healthcare organisations, HCOs. Examples of transfers of value include payments for research and development, donations, sponsorships, consultancy fees, registration fees, and travel costs. Disclosures can be made on IPHA's website, which includes data from up to 50 companies, 11 of which are non-IPHA members. These disclosures are filed annually and are available for three years. However, this method of voluntary disclosure is only mandatory for IPHA members.

While the measures across the four areas I just outlined contribute to improved transparency, accountability and public disclosure, the Bill before the House gives us the opportunity to do more. The Government is supportive of the principles outlined in the Bill, and such measures would also be welcomed by key stakeholders, including patients. However, broader consideration than what this Bill currently provides for is needed. This Bill presents a potential opportunity to ensure that it is built on a national framework that achieves a balanced approach of enhanced transparency, ethical collaboration, accountability and public disclosure to maintain public trust in our healthcare system. The welcome development of a national framework should include analysis of: existing measures and their effectiveness; international best practice; minimising unintended consequences; proportionality of an enhanced framework for transparency, and structural engagement with key stakeholders. In particular, consideration of costs is required, particularly as the Bill envisages expanding the role of the HPRA to receive declarations from pharmaceutical companies, maintain a register of payments made by phar-

maceutical companies and carry out audits and inspect the books of pharmaceutical companies. Any such granting of powers would require resources and additional capacity. Therefore, an appropriate funding model will need to be scoped, assessed and determined, including in the context of whether Exchequer funding is required.

These proposals contain wide-ranging powers and responsibilities. In addition to assessing the funding model, consideration of the parameters and safeguards of these powers will also need further consideration. This is to ensure a proportionate approach and to also acknowledge circumstances where commercial sensitivities may arise. In this context, the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll McNeill, has written to the Joint Committee on Health outlining these matters and her support for an exploration of them in further detail. The Department of Health will also give consideration to how well current measures are working and to what more could be done. It will consult further with the HPRa about the role proposed. Such due diligence is necessary in advance of implementing measures such as legislating for a register as set out in this Bill. As a result, the Government amendment seeks to allow time for the committee and the Department of Health to conduct their analysis and consideration before the Bill progresses. This is necessary as, given that a suite of measures is already in place to encourage transparency, a holistic consideration encompassing regulatory and legal considerations is required in advance of the introduction of any further measures. This is needed to ensure that any measures are proportional and achieve their goal of increased transparency with minimal or no unintended consequences. I welcome the debate and again thank the Deputy for raising this important matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Toole might permit me to welcome the members of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann from Wexford who performed for us earlier. I am sure everybody had the pleasure of their music today. Welcome all, especially Aggie and Michael.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Gabhaim buíochás leis an gCeann Comhairle, an Aire agus an Teachta Uí Ruairc. I thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising this most important issue. I thank the Minister of State for providing the Minister for Health's quite comprehensive briefing notes. I have only skimmed through them, but I will refer to them.

I have to state the obvious. We have an ageing and increasing population, with a rise in chronic diseases, new diseases and increasing reliance on health services, drug interventions and surgeries. All of this will come at a significant cost to the individual patient and, of equal importance, the State, from the perspective of reimbursement. If we look back to the foundation of medicine, which underpins all of our endeavours through health services and those working to deliver them, the Hippocratic oath is founded on the principle "First, do no harm". That persistent balance of risk and benefit has to be paramount in all decisions that we take. Everything must be patient focused from the outset.

If we take a business analogy, which is probably linked to our national focus on economics, economic development and GDP, as have said on many previous occasions, if we consider the well-being of our citizens, then as important as value for money and risk-benefit analysis are for fiscal prudence, they are of paramount importance for both the patient and the entity responsible for reimbursement - in this case, the State. The patient and the State must know that there is no bias in the system.

4 o'clock

I have a couple of suggestions that may be helpful for today and for whatever the outcome or decision by Deputy O'Rourke is. If companies want to help to inform patients about health, they could perhaps pay into a central independent body, that could then give grants to people with a track record of giving evidence-based information to the public. As a pharmacist who no longer practises, I believe that any company running a disease awareness campaign should declare in its advertising that it is doing so because it is developing or marketing a product to treat that ailment. Similarly, all educational materials should bear the same declaration.

I will not go too deep into this because I struggle with it, despite having had to study some of it for a time. Difficult in all as they are to navigate, econometric models suggest - the evidence is there - that marketing has more influence on drug usage patterns than the publication of new evidence. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of the proposal is required. There has been a lot of information gathered over the past 30 years from the United Kingdom. It is quite weighty research.

I wish to mention the matter of voluntary self-regulation codes of practice. The very word "voluntary" must have a red ring around it. Disclosures can be made on the IPHA website. Even a simple review of the current processes, and possibly changing the description to "must" rather than "can", will instil confidence and contribute to transparency. I note that this method of voluntary disclosure is only mandatory for IPHA members. We are now in a space in this country where, because of shortages of product, there is the sourcing of many unlicensed or exempt medicinal products from companies that may not actually be members of IPHA. There may be gaps in information, but I am saying this purely to put it into context. I will go through the information after this debate.

Another example is that of the World Health Organization, WHO, and the World Health Assembly, WHA. The WHA is effectively the executive of the WHO. It was initially set up to be 100% funded by the member states. According to information from the WHA website, though, the funding is 84% from philanthropy and 16% from the member states currently. The philanthropic section has undeniable links to industry funding. There are different pathways. It has been that way for many years. There is an absolute need in that regard. It is beyond our scope, but on 19 May, we signed up to the WHO pandemic treaty, so there will be a connection between our national system and the WHO system. That is something that we also have to have on our radar in the context of Deputy O'Rourke's Bill.

At the end of the day, this is about getting the maximum benefit in a transparent fashion for the patient, first and foremost, and for us. We are moving towards a State-funded drug reimbursement scheme, which is to name only one of the devices used in the public and the private sectors. We are using the National Treatment Purchase Fund to avail of the private hospital system to help clear waiting lists. There is that inextricable link now between the public and private health services. The transparency of the sponsor must be to the forefront of our consciousness. We get the best outcome for the patient, but we should be fully conversant with all parties involved in achieving that outcome.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I am delighted to be one of the Bill's cosponsors with my colleagues, Deputies O'Rourke and Cullinane. I am disappointed that the Government is putting this on hold for 12 months. I thank Dr. James Larkin, who is a senior postdoctoral fellow at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RSCI, for his research and assistance in the preparation of the Bill.

When this issue first arose, most people listening in on this debate would have thought there was already sufficient legislation in place. Unfortunately, when we dug deep down, that was not the case. It is very much an issue of self-regulation. As my colleague stated, payments to healthcare professionals and organisations can create a conflict of interest. Evidence from this jurisdiction and others is that payments from the pharmaceutical industry is associated with higher prescribing rates, higher prescribing costs and an increased use of specific drugs. There is a saying: “Big pharma, big pockets”. Unfortunately, that issue has impacted families and individuals across the world. There are many horror stories about how this happened that we are all familiar with. The idea that we would ask people to voluntarily register for these payments does not make sense in the world that we live in today.

One of the facts that has emerged is that the RCSI found that the identities of many of the recipients are anonymous. This is supposed to be the register of interests of those who have got payments, yet we have come across entries with no name. It does not add up; it does not make sense. The Bill is proposing that failure to register would result in a large fine of €100,000. We are open to amendments if people feel that should be higher. The Minister of State is talking about referring it to the health committee and having more discussion on it. Why is this not already *in situ*? What is the delay? What was the reluctance to try to legislate in this area? It seems like a logical practice that, if people are getting funding off a particular pharmaceutical organisation or group, there should be some sort of tracking device. That is what the Bill tries to set out. It is good for patients. It is good for the industry that it be monitored. It is good practice for, and in the interests of, everyone involved.

I was in the audiovisual room earlier. There were people there from Queen’s University. They were talking about the hugely positive work and co-operation that they were doing in the whole area of health, North and South. We travelled north when I was Chair of the health committee. We looked at all-Ireland cancer facilities. People in County Donegal were availing of cancer treatments there. There are others. It makes sense that we try to work with one another across the board. The idea that the industry can have *carte blanche* or that someone can pay some individual to possibly prescribe a drug is nonsensical and bizarre. It is totally wrong.

I raised earlier with the Tánaiste the case of children with muscular dystrophy and, again, it is children on the island of Ireland. The challenge for these children is that they cannot access this drug, and the families are saying it is time-sensitive. What happens to the child, and it is mostly young boys it affects, is that they basically waste away and end up in a wheelchair and eventually die very young. There is a child in my constituency called Archie and his family have been doing massive fundraising. They are not only seeking access to this drug that is currently not available in the South of Ireland, but they are also trying to fundraise for a genetic procedure in the US and trying to raise millions of euro. The Minister of State might have come across it. In the North, it is similar. There is a child there called Alfie and, again, his family are trying to do it. The problem in the North is that they have access to the drug, but they do not have the funding to roll out the drug. In the South, we have the funding to roll out the drug, but we do not have the drug. I suggested to the Tánaiste that he raise it possibly on a shared island basis and that we would try to look at this.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this particular issue. I am raising it as part of this Bill because it is important for patients, but it is also important for their families. There is no linkage between this company trying to pressurise people to roll out this drug or anything else. There is no linkage on that basis.

I will go back to the question again as to why we are delaying it. The surprise for most people is that they would have thought there was already robust legislation in this whole area for monitoring the payments to individuals and groups. That is at the heart of what we are trying to do in this Bill, but there are other elements of it as well. I am disappointed we are kicking the can down the road and leaving it for another 12 months. If the Bill was passed, it would probably take a number of years to try to get it up and running and so on. There are a lot of practical solutions within the Bill, particularly with regard to those who would hold the register and so on. There has been a lot of thought put into the Bill. I commend those who were at the centre of drawing this up and those who brought it to our attention. I say well done to all who drafted the Bill and brought it before the House. I look forward to others taking part in this debate. I ask the Minister of State to try to clarify the reason for the delay and why this legislation is not in place.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to take this opportunity to follow up on Deputy Crowe's point. Many of us attended that briefing in the audiovisual room on those suffering from Duchenne muscular dystrophy. As Deputy Crowe said, we are talking about it impacting children and young boys at a very early stage. He made the most significant point of all, which is that there is very little time, as all these families know. In one case, we met with a family who had two boys, one of whom gets the givinostat, because he was on a previous pilot, but the other does not. They are absolutely fearful of the impact of not having it because they have seen the benefit of having it. Deputy Crowe put forward a possible cross-Border solution, a shared island solution, or call it what you will. I ask the Minister of State to bring that back to his colleagues in government. It is absolutely necessary. I do not think he will find too many people complaining about delivering on that.

I commend Deputies O'Rourke, Cullinane and Crowe on the Healthcare (Transparent Payments) Bill. I would much prefer if this was progressing beyond this point. If there are anomalies or issues that needed to be dealt, they can be dealt with on Committee Stage. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, provided a comprehensive solution.

I accept the argument is won with regard to the necessity of this legislation. What are we talking about? We are talking about making it mandatory for pharmaceutical companies and medical equipment suppliers to declare payments, gifts, donations and all other transfers of value made by them to healthcare professionals and organisations. We have research carried out by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RCSI, and James Larkin. A fair number of us have seen "Dopesick", have read *Empire of Pain* and have seen what happened with the Sackler family and the Purdue company and OxyContin. To call it a disgrace is inadequate; there is no term for what was done other than it was utter and outright evil. The reality is when payments were made, it made it a hell of a lot easier for them to sell their drug. The biggest issue of all was the fact that it was based on a complete and utter lie, which was the idea that they had found this pain relief mechanism - this opioid - that would be slowly released and work absolutely perfectly and there would be no issues as regards addiction. We know the time release was dealt with very quickly. People just had to lick the particular tablet to get around it. Following accidents or whatever, people who never would have found themselves in this situation ended up with brutal addictions and when they could not access OxyContin, they ended up on street drugs such as heroin and other drugs. It ravaged many communities in America. There was the whole scenario then of people who followed up with pill mills and all the rest of it.

We are aware of the issue we have with prescribed drugs and narcotics in this State. We need to make sure we are playing on a level playing field and have a system that works. The

biggest problem is the lack of transparency regarding these payments at this point. We are talking about a huge number of conflicts of interest.

There are consequences for patients but also for public finances. I spoke earlier about the fact that there are certain life-altering, life-changing, life-improving and life-saving drugs at which we need to look. I accept that at times it can be expensive, but we definitely do not need to be losing money while others are getting rich. As I said, we need to ensure transparency and that we do not certain allow scenarios. It was not just one dirty deal, as happened in the situation we spoke about with Purdue, it was a million dirty deals. The impact has been phenomenal. It is an impact that will continue long after this period of time.

We know the current voluntary system is absolutely inadequate. We need a centralised State-run mandatory disclosure system. Obviously, this would enhance the HSE as regards trust and integrity. It would be a fair and competitive innovation environment and it would support Ireland's clinical trials landscape, which is absolutely necessary. At times we come in here to request additional finance for additional services and medicines, but we could be talking about cost savings here. I get it that the argument is won in this regard.

I agree with Deputy Crowe that this should have happened a hell of a lot sooner. A fair question is around why it has taken so long. As I said, I do not buy the idea that it will take a year, but within that year, we need to make sure this is ready to run. There can be no hold-up in this regard. Nobody is going to come in here and vote against this or make an argument against this. This is about improving human health and ensuring people are looked after properly and that everything is absolutely above board. My colleagues spoke about the declarations to the HPRA, if there is a need, and that if there were breaches, there would be a means of enforcement. We mentioned fines of €100,000. However, we are all open to changes in that regard. When we have breaches, we need to ensure we provide real enforcement, real leverage and real power. We all accept that we cannot leave big pharma or uncontrolled capital to have its way. This is about protecting people and patients and ensuring we look after our people and the public finances.

I commend everyone who spoke today and, in particular, Deputies O'Rourke, Cullinane and Seán Crowe for making it happen and following up on a huge body of work done by the RCSI. We need it to happen. It is as simple as that.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank the cosponsors for bringing the Bill to Second Stage and all the Deputies for an engaging discussion on the issue. It is an important matter and, as previously stated, the Government fully supports transparency in the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare professionals regarding transfers of value to healthcare professionals or organisations.

It is clear that we all agree on the need for transparency and high ethical standards in healthcare professions. There should be transparency about transactions between commercial interests and healthcare providers. This is the Government's intention and we have measures that place obligations on healthcare professionals as well as the pharmaceutical and medical products industry to achieve this. As outlined earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, such measures include: the Medicinal Products (Control of Advertising) Regulations 2007; the Ethics in Public Office Acts 1995 to 2001, as amended; professional codes of conduct and ethics for healthcare professionals; voluntary self-regulation; and codes of practice for industry.

These measures clearly support accountability and transparency and ultimately promote a high standard of patient care. However, a whole-of-system approach is needed so the public can be assured that healthcare provider recommendations are based solely on clinical evidence and experience. This prioritises the best interests of patients and patient safety. Transparency is important, but it forms only one part of ensuring accountability and ethical collaboration and eliminating conflicts of interest.

The Government appreciates what this Bill aims to achieve, but a broader consideration is needed to achieve this. The Minister for Health supports the broad principles of the Bill and has written to the Joint Committee on Health stating her support for an exploration of transfers of value between the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare practitioners and organisations.

It is necessary that any examination encompass the regulatory and legal aspects in advance of any measures being introduced. Such considerations need to include international experience and best practice, a review of current measures, consideration of the appropriate monitoring of measures to provide assurance on compliance, minimising unintended consequences, opportunities for improvement in an Irish context aligned with best practice findings, and value for money and data protection considerations. It is clear that progress in this area needs to be multipronged and involve engagement with the pharmaceutical sector, medicines agencies and international experts. Our goal should be first to establish best practice, benchmark the existing measures in Ireland against it and consider any improvements that could be achieved. In particular, proportionality of future measures needs to be considered to ensure any sanctions are proportionate to the obligations and that any potential measures are in line with international experience and best practice. Consideration of minimising unintended consequences is also required to ensure any proposed improvements are aligned with best practice.

It is necessary to ensure that any future measures achieve the objectives outlined above and are appropriately aligned with data protection obligations. While the Government is supportive of the broad principles outlined in the Bill, as are key stakeholders, including patients, further and broader consideration is needed in advance of this Bill progressing. The amendment to the motion that seeks to have the Bill read a Second Time in 12 months is to provide the opportunity to see this additional due diligence completed. We should not lose sight of the fact that transparency forms only one part of ensuring accountability and managing conflicts of interest. Our joint goal should be to provide the best care possible for patients and healthcare service users. It is essential that further and broader consideration take place in advance of this Bill progressing. The amendment to the motion will allow for this further consideration and analysis of how the Bill interacts with existing transparency and accountability measures.

I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter, and Deputies Crowe and Ó Murchú for raising the situations regarding muscular dystrophy and the individual cases they already raised with the Tánaiste. I undertake with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, to put our collective shoulders to the wheel on that issue as well.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank all the Deputies on both sides of the House for their contributions on this Second Stage debate. In particular, I thank Deputy Toole, my constituency colleague, with whom I previously discussed this legislation. She has a particular interest.

This is an important intervention we are trying to make from a number of different perspectives. We have touched on a few of them. I point to the marketing budgets of pharmaceutical companies and compare them with their research and development budgets and ask why they

are as they are. At the root of this is the suggestion - and there is plenty of evidence to support it - that marketing and advertising has a direct influence on the prescribing behaviours of clinicians. Not only that, there are examples, including extreme ones, such as the OxyContin epidemic in the United States, where powerful, wealthy pharmaceutical companies influenced clinical indications in respect of pain. There are many examples where new conditions have been identified on the basis of there being a product available to treat them, the medicalisation of many conditions that were not medicalised in the past. Why? It is because a product needs to be sold. With such significant amounts of money - and these companies have eye-watering amounts available to them - there is potential for conflicts of interest and perverse incentives. We have seen many examples of that over the years. I can point to the examples of OxyContin, opioids, Sacklers' Purdue Pharma and the "Dopesick" example which is at the extreme end of it. We heard yesterday in the audiovisual room from two people I want to thank, Dr. Kieran Harkin, medical director of Merchants Quay Doctors and co-founder of Access to Medicines Ireland, and Ms Kath Sansom, founder of Sling the Mesh UK. The impact of those products on many people was very damaging and there is certainly a case to be answered.

The patient safety issue has been well articulated and well evidenced. The connection between givinostat and Duchenne muscular dystrophy is not about patient safety at all. The issue is about a finite health budget. In every country in the world, as those on that side of the House will rightly say, the amount of money we are spending on medicines is increasing. It is eye-watering and the demands are increasing because of innovation, much of which is publicly funded and much of which is privately funded. Incredible medicines are being produced. However, if we use branded products and patented products where generic or biosimilar medicines are available, we are not using that pool of resources efficiently. We are just doing that because that is what we do, it is what we have done in the past or because we have a special relationship with a sales representative or, worse, the company has treated us to X, Y and Z or certain gifts or benefits. From the point of view of the public purse, there is harm and damage. The risk is, if we are being *flaithiúlach*, lazy and not diligent about how we are spending taxpayers' money at one end because we are familiar and have those relationships, we cannot support the children in need who have Duchenne muscular dystrophy. The budget will have run out because we have wasted it or not used it efficiently. That is where we need transparency and accountability about how we use these funds. That is where the connection is for those children. I fully support them in their need to access givinostat. If the potential is there for early access on an all-Ireland basis, or however we go about it, we certainly must pursue it. We have processes for assessing those products and we know they have been licensed at EMA level. We need to get them to children in Ireland and in this jurisdiction. This relates directly to this Bill in the sense that we have to use the available resources for spending on medicines and health technologies as efficiently and effectively as possible, particularly in the context of the opportunity to avail of a drug like givinostat, which can provide incredible benefits. I have a nephew with degenerative muscular dystrophy who lives in Belgium. He left Ireland, as did the child of one of my constituents who now lives in England because the supports there are far better. Deputy Ó Murchú mentioned another family. This drug is transformational. There is a child in the clinical trial who, at 18 years of age, is still walking. He is a huge Donegal GAA fan, goes to all of their training sessions and does the announcements. He is statistics mad. To see that when in very many of these cases, including that of my nephew, children are wheelchair-bound at 12 or 13 years of age shows that this is transformational stuff. One sibling in the family has had the benefit of this drug in a clinical trial and the other sibling is waiting, like all of the rest of the children in Ireland. This stuff is incredible. I have no issue with it being put through the system in terms of the assessments and all of that. I understand the need for objectivity but we should

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not deny these children access to this drug.

I may have gone off on a slight tangent but I hope I am making the point clearly that we have a limited resource and we have to use it well. This legislation will help us to use that limited resource well and, in doing so, increase the opportunities for new and groundbreaking drugs to be made accessible to children in need.

I do not support the 12-month delay. This is a 2022 Bill. It has already been on the books for three years. We have our slow processes in here but I do not think anything the Ministers of State have given as a reason for delaying it for 12 months cannot be done without such a delay. We will have Committee Stage. In reintroducing this Bill and rolling it over from the previous Dáil, there was a suggestion that we would amend it, but that would have delayed it further. I recognise the need for changes to this Bill and would 100% welcome further scrutiny at committee and from other stakeholders. I welcome the considered response from the Ministers of State and the general positivity around where we need to go with this, but I hope they will understand that we cannot live with the 12-month delay. That said, I know how the numbers work in this House but whatever the outcome of the vote on Wednesday, I encourage us to get cracking on this legislation. I welcome all of the contributions to the debate this afternoon.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 4.34 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 24 Meitheamh 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 4.34 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 24 June 2025.