



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe  
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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## **DÁIL ÉIREANN**

*Dé Máirt, 23 Meán Fómhair 2025*

*Tuesday, 23 September 2025*

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

*Paidir agus Machnamh.*

*Prayer and Reflection.*

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2 o'clock

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The budget the Minister's Government announces in two weeks' time must be about ending the rip-off, getting costs under control and supporting workers and families. Households struggle just to make ends meet, hammered by soaring prices at every turn. Yesterday, Kantar reported that grocery prices have shot up again in the last 12 weeks. Of course, people did not need a research report to tell them that; they feel it every time they go to the supermarket. Under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, living costs have become unaffordable and people cannot believe their ears when they hear the Government dig in and insist it will not take action to tackle the crisis. Last week, we were in here raising the fact that three energy companies had announced big electricity price hikes to kick in from early next month. Since then, a fourth company, SSE Airtricity, has announced that it, too, will increase its electricity prices from October. Hundreds of thousands of households will be forced to pay out even more for their electricity. Some 300,000 households, remember, are already unable to afford their electricity bills and these are working people who just cannot keep up. Yet, the Government waltzes in to withdraw energy credits when they will be so desperately needed. I suppose we should not be shocked by yet another out-of-touch decision.

The public expenditure Minister, the Minister's colleague, Deputy Jack Chambers, said at the weekend that the Government is conscious not to increase costs for people but this is the same Government that has chosen to hike up the prices of petrol and diesel, home-heating oil, rent and student fees. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, also stressed that he will, as he put it, have a "return to normal budgeting" but there is nothing normal at all about the way households are being fleeced. There is nothing normal about the severity of these electricity price hikes. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael allowed this energy rip-off to happen. At no point have they stood up to the big companies, which get away with gouging customers because, frankly, the Government is a soft touch when it comes to them. Not alone has the Government sat on its hands and done nothing but it has pushed back against our proposals to reform the energy market and get costs under control. The consequence of the Government's inaction is that

households are left to wonder how much more they will have to pay out just to keep the lights on.

The Minister cannot wash his hands of his failure to tackle these runaway energy prices and then waltz in and cut the supports on which so many households depend. Níl daoine in ann glacadh leis na harduithe seo ar phraghas an leictreachais. Ní chóir don Rialtas an socar funnime ar a bhfuil líon mór teaghlach ag brath a tharraingt siar. We have had Minister after Minister telling people that they understand the pressure that households are under. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Finance all say that they get it. They say that talk is cheap but Government talk and hot air is proving very expensive for workers and families. Lip service will not put manners on these companies, reduce energy bills or ease any of the pressure people are under. What we need is action. I invite the Minister today to tell households that he will protect them from these energy price hikes. I want him to tell them that there will be provision for energy credits in the forthcoming budget.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I thank Deputy McDonald for the question. At the outset, can I say that she does not have a monopoly on empathy or compassion for householders-----

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Nobody is suggesting that we do.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----when it comes to addressing the difficult circumstances that members of the public find themselves in as a result of cost-of-living pressures? It is important to point out that this Government has done a huge amount in respect of those cost-of-living pressures. By looking at what was done in budget 2025, the Deputy is invoking those measures today as a means of assisting people. She was not so supportive of those measures when we announced them 12 months ago-----

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----and indeed 24 months ago. In budget 2025, a wide range of measures were introduced which had the effect of protecting members of the public from the excessive costs that were arising as a result of inflation. We introduced an increased payment in respect of the rent tax credit; it went up from €1,000 to €2,000. There was the extension of the 9% reduced VAT rate for gas and electricity. That very real measure was introduced for the purpose of ensuring we reduced the cost of energy for householders. We also saw the extension of mortgage interest relief until the end of 2025 and the €300 lump sum payment in respect of the fuel allowance. That is not even getting to the double-month child benefit payment.

The Deputy is correct in stating that there were two €125 electricity credits for households. They were very effective at a time when there were very high energy prices and inflation was out of control. Fortunately, we are now in a position where inflation has come down. Let us be clear that this Government will continue to introduce measures in respect of the forthcoming budget that will have hard-pressed families at the centre of them. My colleagues, Jack

Chambers and Paschal Donohoe, will have that at the forefront of their considerations when it comes to the measures contained within the budget.

The Deputy will note that in April we decided to extend the VAT reduction to 9% on gas and electricity, a measure that will save households €70 for gas and €55 for electricity. This decision was further supported by the announcement made in June by the Minister, Darragh O'Brien, of a 40% reduction in the renewable electricity PSO levy for 2025 and 2026. Also, from September, there will be a significant increase in the number of people who qualify for the fuel allowance.

In terms of other pressures that people are under, and other costs, at the beginning of June the carers' support grant increased to €2,000, which is its highest level ever. That benefited some 138,000 carers. Last week the income level disregard increased for the carer's allowance. This Government has therefore introduced a whole range of measures in the past. I assure the Deputy that when the Government comes to announce the budget two weeks from now there will be measures in it that will have hard-pressed families at the centre of considerations.

We also need to look at the fact that parents of schoolchildren have been given considerable support by this Government. The back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance, which is paid out over the summer months, has been extended to foster carers for the first time. Parents who have schoolgoing children at present do not have to pay for schoolbooks because of measures that were introduced by the Minister, Norma Foley-----

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----and brought forward by the Minister, Helen McEntee. The Deputy might not like the fact that a huge number of measures have been taken by this Government to relieve pressure on hard-pressed families. The fact of the matter is that any fair assessment of what is being done shows that this is being done by this Government.

I must say that the Deputy's concern about what is going to happen in the forthcoming budget is misplaced. I assure her that the Government will be placing hard-pressed families at the centre of its deliberations. I look forward to seeing Sinn Féin's budget proposals to see what it is putting forward. I will be interested to see if it will again adopt the measures we introduced previously and which it denigrated when we introduced them.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Minister does not have a monopoly on being out of touch or hollow self-congratulation because his buddies in Fine Gael are right there with him.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is right that inflation has tamed but costs and prices are still sky high. I have instanced four separate electricity companies that are telling us that prices are going up as early as next month. Prices are up and a record number of households cannot meet their bills. That is the reality of the situation. I will make no apology to the Minister or his friends across Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry crew for arguing the case for households, workers and families who are struggling in the here and now. I am simply stating that the Government should support our proposal, which it will see in our pre-budget

submission, for the payment this winter of €450 in energy credits that households desperately need. If, as he says, the Minister shares an empathy and compassion and understands how badly families are struggling, he should have no difficulty confirming that the budget will contain that precise measure.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I am the Minister for justice. I am not the Minister for Finance or the Minister for public expenditure.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** You are taking Leaders' Questions.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I do not announce the budget terms two weeks before the budget is announced. We will all have the opportunity to hear the budget two weeks from now when it is announced by the Ministers for Finance and public expenditure. On hard-pressed families, the Deputy has not responded to the issues I have raised about the measures we have taken in the past.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** She did.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** They cannot just be ignored.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** There are record levels of electricity arrears. That is the response.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** The Deputy cannot ignore the past.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That is the response.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** The Deputy cannot ignore what we have done in the past and now try to claim credit for what we did previously in circumstances-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** There are record levels of electricity arrears.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----when Sinn Féin did not support those measures at the time we announced them on a previous budget day. Let us consider the VAT rate on energy costs. We have retained the 9% rate. That will be dealt with on budget day and we will wait to hear what will be announced. I am not going to pre-announce the budget. What I will do, and what I assure the Deputy that the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers will also do, is read carefully Sinn Féin's budget submission. If there are good proposals in it, they will give them consideration. If there are not, and it is just populist outrage, they will ignore them, as they should.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** The families of one in five children in Ireland, which means more than 225,000 children, now live below the breadline. Ours is a relatively wealthy country and yet more than 5,000 children are homeless. Those are 5,000 children in emergency accommodation who are doing their homework on the floors of hotel rooms or family hubs.

Far too many are living in overcrowded homes with multiple generations all under one roof. The Minister may not be the Minister for Finance yet, but his party has the housing portfolio and he is the TD for Dublin Bay South. Across the communities that the Minister and I represent, multiple generations and branches of family trees are crammed into one tiny space because of the housing crisis and disaster. At the hardest edge of the crisis are those children in housing insecurity, who are facing the awful prospect of eviction. The thought of that resonates with all of us. Families are in despair. Individuals are in despair.

I talked this morning with my Labour Party colleagues, who are hearing daily, as I am, from people who are becoming increasingly desperate because of the lack of housing. Increasingly, our representatives, and I am sure the Government representatives, are finding they can offer those people nothing because there is no safety net for families, or anyone else, facing eviction.

We learned today that the Minister for housing has written to councils about the tenant in situ scheme, which was the safety net that the Government introduced to keep families in their homes when landlords were choosing to sell up. In March this year, new restrictions from the Government all but eliminated the safety net for far too many people. No new acquisitions were sanctioned across Dublin city or in Cork. Under criticism from the Government's own councillors, the Minister, Deputy Browne, has now issued a letter to local authorities. We hear it states that they can now proceed with more acquisitions up to a value of 30% of their original 2025 budget.

However, those commitments are for 2026, so it seems that the Minister is borrowing into next year, kicking the can down the road and doing nothing for families whose applications under the tenant in situ scheme have already been rejected this year because central government, it seems, has turned off the tap. The numbers involved are rising.

As I have said, our representatives are dealing every day with families facing eviction and families whose applications have been turned down. We are hearing about despair, people who see no future for themselves and people who, horrifically, are even expressing suicidal thoughts because of the lack of hope in this housing disaster. Where are they to go? What are we to offer them? What is the Government to offer them? There is so much the Government could do. It has said that putting hard-pressed families at the centre of the budget will be its priority. If so, let us hear from the Minister on whether he will use the budget to restore the tenant in situ scheme to full functionality. Will he ensure local authorities prioritise housing children, as per our Labour Party Bill, which he had supported previously? Third, will he go further and act to end the eviction of children? We could do that. The Minister could do that. He could prevent evictions of children in homelessness beyond the 5,000 that have already occurred.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank Deputy Bacik for her question. Obviously, child poverty is an enormous issue in this country and an enormous one that the Government wishes to respond to. The Deputy will have heard the Taoiseach, and indeed the Tánaiste, say that child poverty will be at the centre of the budget that is forthcoming and will be announced two weeks from now. I can understand why the Deputy wishes me to give information in respect of the budget that is forthcoming in two weeks. I cannot do that. We are just going to have to wait to realise what the content is when it is announced. However, the Deputy can be sure – the Government will be adamant about this – that tackling child poverty is a central aim.

The Deputy talks about the impact the housing crisis is having on children. We are fully aware of that. The Deputy is not the only one aware of the impact it is having on children and families. Although she displays great empathy, I have not heard any practical solutions from her on how we can improve-----

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Our motion tomorrow.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Our motion tomorrow.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----and alleviate the issue in respect of housing.

We have repeatedly stated that the most effective way of getting people off the homelessness and housing lists is to ensure a greater supply of housing in our society, and available housing. Although the Deputy can criticise the Government for the amount, we have stated that this is our commitment. When you look at the figures produced, you can see definite progress in respect of it. Between July 2020 and the end of quarter 1 of 2025, 48,939 social homes were added to the social housing stock. That is a very significant number and cannot be ignored. Also, more than 13,100 homes were brought back into use under the voids programme. The Deputy will know from having been a TD for the city of Dublin that there are too many voids in Dublin, which means houses unused. We need to get them back into operation so families can get back into them. The years 2023 and 2024 saw the delivery of newly built social housing reach levels not seen since the 1970s, with almost 16,000 social homes built over those two years.

We are aware, and I am sure the Deputy is also, that our population is increasing very significantly. The population increased in the 12 months up to April 2024 by 98,000. This is putting huge pressures on the system. We have to recognise that although the Government is making a considerable effort and getting a lot of social housing developed, there will be issues because of the population rise.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Government is failing abysmally. This is farcical.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please. It is not Deputy McDonald's question.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** When we add the housing assistance payment and rental accommodation scheme data, we see that 2,712 housing supports were delivered in quarter 1 of 2025. The Deputy also mentioned the tenant in situ scheme. That scheme has worked. It has worked throughout the country. I note there will sometimes be issues in respect of Dublin, but the measure-----

*(Interruptions)*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputies, allow the answer.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----has been important in the prevention of homelessness since its introduction in 2023. The Government is providing €325 million in 2025 for local authorities to buy second-hand properties.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Of course increasing supply is a huge part of resolving the housing crisis. We will be putting forward constructive, costed proposals in our alternative budget next week, just as we did in our manifesto last year, on how to increase the supply. The reality is that the Government has not met its own targets on house building. The Minister knows that.

On the tenant in situ scheme, of course it was a safety net that was introduced. We all agree it should have been introduced; however, the Government has gutted it, filleted it, so it is simply ineffective. All of us, including the Minister's own backbenchers, are hearing it.

Our Labour Party motion tomorrow is putting forward practical, constructive ways in which the Government can address the specific issue of child homelessness.

The Minister said he is not going to announce budget proposals now. The Government could, however, take two of the steps we are calling on it to take in the motion we have tabled for tomorrow, which I hope it will support. Those steps do not involve budget proposals and could be taken now. One, will the Government pass our Labour Party Bill to protect families with children from homelessness and, two, will it restore the ban on no-fault evictions where children are involved? That simple measure would be a stopgap for sure, but it would offer struggling, despairing families some immediate safety net and respite.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** As I said to Deputy McDonald, when the Labour Party produces its budget proposals, we will take them into account and the Government will give them consideration. I have no doubt that will happen in respect of that matter.

On what the Deputy said about the tenant in situ scheme, she should be aware that on 4 March last, the Government decided on a total of €325 million for second-hand social housing acquisitions this year. That is not a feeble effort; it is a hugely significant amount of money that the Government has made available. The funding allocations approach was a change from the approach in 2023 and 2024, when local authorities were issued with a guide number of acquisitions. The purpose of it is to allow local authorities to negotiate the acquisition costs with vendors and landlords and achieve the best value for money. Each local authority has received its individual allocation. The Deputy will be pleased to hear that Dublin City Council is the highest at €95 million for 2025. Local authorities are being provided with significant amounts of money and the Government wants to see them buying properties.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** It has been spent. No new acquisitions.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** It has been spent.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The money is gone.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** For two years, the people of this country have been watching a genocide unfold in Gaza in a complete state of disbelief, wondering how this can be allowed to happen and how so-called world leaders can stand idly by as that genocide is livestreamed before our eyes. I am not dismissing the fact that Ireland recognised the State of Palestine; it was welcome. It is also welcome that more countries are doing the same now, but, ultimately, there is barely anything left to recognise. Gaza has been reduced to mass graves and rubble.

It is two years and too little, too late, not to mention the fact that some of those countries now recognising Palestine are still arming Israel. What exactly has it achieved? Israel has not hesitated in its continuing pursuit of wiping out a population. Why is there such a reluctance to take further action? That is so hard for people to comprehend. It is hard to even believe.

We see footage of multiple babies packed into one incubator. We see parents cradling the bodies of their dead children. We see journalist after journalist annihilated. We then see the Government still dithering over the occupied territories Bill. Israel is starving Gaza and then killing people as they line up for food and water. It is bombing hospitals and refugee camps. It even bombed the team that was trying to negotiate a peace deal. This has been going on for two years. What more could it possibly take for this Government to act with conviction, consequence and the might of the strength of feeling in this country? Where is the decisive action we saw when Russia invaded Ukraine? Where are the sanctions? Where is the proportionate, rational response to a genocide? The western world has watched it all and done nothing. Actually, less than nothing.

A proposal to suspend parts of the EU-Israel trade agreement is finally on the cards. Making the announcement last week, the Vice President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas, said she wanted to be very clear and stated, "the aim is not to punish Israel. The aim is to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza." Let me say that again: the aim is not to punish Israel. After Israel razed Gaza to the ground, murdered more than 20,000 children and bombed every hospital, this despicable and cowardly language is outrageous and shameful. As an EU citizen, I am ashamed of that response. Is the Minister ashamed too?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** What is happening in Gaza is horrific slaughter. It is not just me, the Deputy and every other Member of this House saying that. We saw recently that a United Nations independent commission has ruled that what Israel is doing in Gaza is committing genocide. Many people in Ireland feel a sense of helplessness in the context of what can be done in response to it. My view is that this Government has done more than any other government in the world in response to the plight of the Palestinian people in Gaza. If we look around the world, what stands out is the fact that so many countries, including many Arab countries, have done so little for the cause of the Palestinians in Gaza. In contrast, Ireland has led the way, not just in Europe but also internationally. Like the Deputy, I was very pleased to hear at the weekend that so many other countries, including Portugal, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, the UK, Canada and Australia have decided to recognise the Palestinian state. I refer here to Portugal, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, the UK, Canada and Australia. Very many of these countries are small European countries. They have followed the example that Ireland set when, we along with Spain and Norway, decided that we would recognise a Palestinian state. There was huge pressure on the Irish Government not to do that, but we did it because it was the right thing to do. We can see that the example set by Ireland is being followed by other EU countries.

On the proposals regarding trade between Israel and the EU, when Ireland advocated that we should introduce an occupied territories Bill at European Union level, there was very little support. We now know that other countries are considering and introducing such a measure. That Bill has been very effective from Ireland's point of view in terms of putting the Israel-EU trade agreement on the agenda. Like everyone else in this House, the Deputy is aware of the historical alliances that exist between Israel and certain countries in the European Union. We

can do very little about that, but the pressure Ireland has put on is having an impact. We can see that the EU-Israel trade agreement is coming under consideration. I am hopeful - and I know the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste are hopeful - that when it comes to suspension of that agreement, measures will be taken. Of course, they should have been taken many years ago. However, Ireland is a small country. We are an influential country but all we can do is use our reputation and influence to try to get others to follow our example. We can see that, to date, this has been done. When we look at the cases that were taken at the International Criminal Court, again, Ireland intervened in respect of them.

The Deputy can criticise the Government. When we look at this matter objectively internationally, however, we can see that the Irish Government is one of the most vociferous supporters of the Palestinian people and is standing up to the genocide that is happening in Gaza.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** As the Minister said, we all welcome the fact that countries are now recognising the State of Palestine. We welcomed it when Ireland did so too. The point I am trying to make and the point the Minister is ignoring is that this is literally the bare minimum and that there is hardly anything left to recognise. The bar is literally on the floor when we are talking about Ireland being held up as an example. Unless the international community acts, there will be literally nothing left to recognise.

The Israeli Government has not hidden its genocidal intent. The Taoiseach acknowledged that yesterday. He said that some Israeli ministers had genocidal intent from day one, and now it is day 720. When will the response to Israel match the scale of its crimes? When is real action going to be taken? In this country, we could do more. Enacting the occupied territories Bill has been a solemn commitment of this Government - an election commitment that has not yet been lived up. Can the Minister give me a date? When will the Government enact the occupied territories Bill?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** It is in priority legislation and will be enacted and certainly introduced into the Oireachtas this term. I wish to make one important point that is sometimes not emphasised enough. The entity responsible for the genocide in Gaza is the Israeli Government. We all need to point that out and state it repeatedly. Rather than criticising the Irish Government for narrow domestic political purposes, the Deputy should acknowledge the very real efforts that have been made by the Irish Government to support Palestine. She inquired as to what else is being done. We have made responses in respect of the cases that are before the International Criminal Court. We have provided €90 million. We have tried to influence our international partners. As I said, Ireland cannot just dictate to the rest of Europe or, indeed, the rest of the world what foreign policy decisions should be made.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I did not say that. I asked-----

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** We can influence it but we cannot dictate it. She can see what has happened over those horrific 700 days, that people and other countries are gradually coming around to recognising the Irish Government's position is the correct position.

**Deputy Charles Ward:** I am not going to mince my words. The defective concrete scandal is a national emergency the Minister's Government wilfully mismanaged for over a decade. The Government has worked hard to fool the public and portray that we are being looked after, but the truth is we are now in the second failed scheme. My staff see suicidal ideation every week in our office. The uncertainty and the feeling of abandonment in this crisis has caused this. Some 40% of homeowners are living with severe depression. This is the reality and yet there is still no timeline for when IS 465 will be reviewed. Legislation for retrospective payments has still not been published since the grant amount was increased almost a year ago, despite the Minister, Deputy Browne, telling us it would be prioritised in June.

Let us talk about unethical engineering decisions that are still happening. Chartered engineers, under the original scheme, made recommendations for full demolition and yet chartered engineers from the Housing Agency continue to overturn them. People are being told their homes are safe when they are not. Complaints have been made to Engineers Ireland but the Government remains silent at the cost of people's health and safety. The truth is the Government has the power to fix this crisis today. It does not need to wait for the review of IS 465. The defective concrete has been trotted out as a poor excuse for inaction for far too long. The Government wrote the legislation in full knowledge the obstacles it would present to accessing the scheme and continues to hide behind this to this day. Under Irish law the Government can declare a national emergency and issue ministerial guidance and fast-track legislation to address this crisis. The legal framework is there but the will to act is missing.

I need real answers and I would be grateful if the Minister would respectfully give them to me and those affected rather than running down the clock, as usually happens, with people looking over and wasting time. We need answers and we need them now. People are suffering and literally dying. This Government runs down the clock and delays things. Will the Minister and the Government use the powers under the Public Service Management Act 1997 to immediately issue ministerial guidelines to the Housing Agency to stop issuing partial fixes and ensure full remediation of affected homes? Will the Government use its ministerial authority to direct the Housing Agency to reinstate the engineers' original recommendations for further demolition, stop the madness of partial fixes that will fail in the future and follow the science? Finally, will there be legislation to ensure families who were early movers and were reassured they would not be disadvantaged be given the 10% retrospective payment they were meant to get and not be punished?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank Deputy Ward very much. I will try to be as succinct in my answers as his questions were. His first was whether or not the Government would use the Public Service Management Act. The answer to the question is "No". The Government will not use it because the defective concrete block grant scheme operates under its own primary legislation and in November 2024, following the receipt of preliminary results from scientific research in Donegal, the Department announced changes to the way the scheme works for certain homeowners. All homeowners who have been given a non-demolition option have been offered a choice of continuing with the work on their dwelling under the option determined or the option of a full technical review of their application by the Housing Agency. This review will be informed by the current research once the full review of the national standard is complete.

The Deputy's second question was on whether the Government would use its ministerial authority to direct the Housing Agency to reinstate original engineering recommendations. In response to that I would say an appeals panel has been established to assess appeals made under the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act. The panel offers those affected by decisions made by the Housing Agency and local authorities an opportunity to have their cases assessed by an independent group of industry experts. The points of appeal that are available to an applicant include the validation stage by the local authority, the damage threshold determination made by the Housing Agency, the remediation option and the grant amount approved and where a local authority refused to make a grant payment pursuant to a grant approval. It should be noted the appeals panel is statutorily independent in the performance of its functions.

It is independent of the Minister, the Department and, indeed, the Housing Agency.

The Deputy's final question was on whether families who were early movers in the scheme were told they would not be disadvantaged. He wants to know if the Government will pass the legislation to ensure that all homeowners receive the uplift in respect of rates and the cap retrospectively. The decision by the Government in 2021 was to the effect that applicants under the previous grant scheme would not be disadvantaged from being early movers and would benefit from the increased grant amounts that were available under the current scheme upon its commencement in 2023. This was allowed for in the 2022 Act under transitional provisions, and these early movers have benefited from the increased scheme cap and grant rates provided for.

I welcome the Deputy's direct and surgically focused questions. I just wanted to give him those answers as best I could in respect of the matter. I am conscious that he referred to legislation. I am instructed that legislation will be introduced as a priority in the forthcoming term. That is something the Government will give priority to.

**Deputy Charles Ward:** We have unethical engineering going on in this scheme. That cannot be denied. A number of people were downgraded. They were granted full demolition. An engineer came out, did their job, examined it and then it was passed over to the Housing Agency. Someone in the agency looked at that fellow engineer's work and then downgraded it. This is unethical. It is unethical engineering. What is going on has been going on for some time. We suspect that this is widespread and that it will continue. How can we have engineers determining if something is a downgrade when we are reviewing IS 465. They are still coming downgrading people, even though we do not have the review of IS 465? Can the Government please put something in place to suspend this in order that these people will have a chance to get their reviews done properly and not when we are in the middle of a review of IS 465?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I will talk to the Minister for housing who has responsibility for this matter. I will raise with him the issues the Deputy has identified. The Deputy stated that there is unethical engineering ongoing in Donegal. If that is the case, there are mechanisms in place to report engineers who are acting unethically. I urge people who believe they are the victims of unethical engineering to use the appropriate mechanism to report engineers involved in that type of activity. We have an institute of engineers in Ireland. That body regulates engineering performance and anyone engaged in unethical behaviour should be brought to the its attention.

In the context of the issue of defective concrete blocks, from speaking to Deputies McConalogue and Gallagher, I am conscious of the impact this is having in Donegal. The Government has not been found wanting when it comes to providing money to resolve this matter via the scheme. A huge amount of money has been made available in the past and more will be available in the future.

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

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler):** I move:

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Presentation and Circulation of Further Revised Estimates 2025 [Votes 29, 33 and 34] and Third Further Revised Estimate 2025 [Vote 24] (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Motion re Approval of Appointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority (without debate)

- Statements on School Transport (not to exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Energy Costs, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (without debate)

- Statements on Auto-Enrolment (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

- Statements on the Use of Vapes and Nicotine Products by Young People and Adolescents (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

- Motion for Third Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2025 [Vote 24] (to be taken no earlier than 5.30 p.m. and to conclude within 60 minutes, with any division claimed to be taken immediately)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Child Poverty and Homelessness, selected by the Labour Party

Thursday's business shall be Statements on the National Social Enterprise Policy – Trading for Impact (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy George Lawlor

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.;

(b) Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall not be taken, and Government business shall commence at the time when Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach would normally be taken; and

(c) private members' business may be taken later than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on School Transport, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, and on the commencement time for topical issues;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Presentation and Circulation of Further Revised Estimates 2025 [Votes 29, 33 and 34] and Third Further Revised Estimate 2025 [Vote 24] shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Approval of Appointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority shall be taken without debate; and

4. the Statements on School Transport shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

|      | Gov | SF  | Lab | Gov  | SF  |
|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|
| Mins | 35  | 25  | 15  | 15   | 5   |
|      | SD  | Gov | SF  | IPTG | Gov |
| Mins | 15  | 15  | 5   | 12   | 15  |
|      | SF  | ITG | Gov | SF   | OM  |
| Mins | 5   | 12  | 15  | 5    | 8   |

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) in the event that the Statements on the Use of Vapes and Nicotine Products by Young People and Adolescents conclude before 5.30 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 5.30 p.m., when the order of business shall resume with the Motion for Third Further Revised Estimate 2025 [Vote 24]; and

(b) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of the Motion for Third Further Revised Estimate 2025 [Vote 24], with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission shall be taken without debate;

3. the Statements on Auto-Enrolment shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

|      |     |     |     |      |     |
|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|
|      | Gov | SF  | Lab | Gov  | SF  |
| Mins | 25  | 15  | 10  | 10   | 3   |
|      | SD  | Gov | SF  | IPTG | Gov |
| Mins | 10  | 10  | 3   | 9    | 10  |
|      | SF  | ITG | Gov | SF   | OM  |
| Mins | 3   | 9   | 10  | 3    | 5   |

4. the Statements on the Use of Vapes and Nicotine Products by Young People and Adolescents shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time; and

|      |     |     |     |      |     |
|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|
|      | Gov | SF  | Lab | Gov  | SF  |
| Mins | 25  | 15  | 10  | 10   | 3   |
|      | SD  | Gov | SF  | IPTG | Gov |
| Mins | 10  | 10  | 3   | 9    | 10  |
|      | SF  | ITG | Gov | SF   | OM  |
| Mins | 3   | 9   | 10  | 3    | 5   |

5. the proceedings on the Motion for Third Further Revised Estimate 2025 [Vote 24] shall be taken either at 5.30 p.m., or on the conclusion of the Statements on the Use of Vapes and Nicotine Products by Young People and Adolescents, whichever is the later, and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

- speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

- a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(b) members may share time; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on the National Social Enterprise Policy – Trading for Impact, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on the National Social Enterprise Policy – Trading for Impact shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

|      |     |     |     |      |     |
|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|
|      | Gov | SF  | Lab | Gov  | SF  |
| Mins | 25  | 15  | 10  | 10   | 3   |
|      | SD  | Gov | SF  | IPTG | Gov |
| Mins | 10  | 10  | 3   | 9    | 10  |
|      | SF  | ITG | Gov | SF   | OM  |
| Mins | 3   | 9   | 10  | 3    | 5   |

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Are the proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed to?

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** They are not agreed. Every week when the Business Committee meets, I have raised the issue of defective concrete blocks. A year ago, the Government stated that it would extend the increase in the cap to everybody going through the

scheme. How on earth has it not produced the legislation to date? It is cruel. People are struggling to find tens of thousands of euro. I met someone the other day for whom the gap is €200,000. They had a six-year mortgage; they will now have a 19-year mortgage. Their mortgage has doubled. That so-called 100% redress in the west of Ireland compares with 100% redress for pyrite in the east. How dare the Minister say that the Government has stepped up and done what is right.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up. I call Deputy Sheehan.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The people in the west of Ireland have been treated with utter contempt by the Government when it comes to this scheme.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** We are seeking a debate regarding the 2020 death of 87-year-old Liam Farrell in Leitrim in the context of whether an independent inquiry is necessary in light of the many unanswered questions, the Garda peer review and the RTÉ "Prime Time" programme.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** The housing disaster is spiralling out of control. This year has seen the lowest commencement figures in a decade. The Central Bank has just revised its forecasts for this year downwards.

To paraphrase, it is saying that this Government has no hope of reaching its housing targets. Meanwhile, not-for-profit housing organisations are telling us that they have never seen such chaos and they are blaming this Government. The truth is that the Government has totally lost control of housing. The Minister is barely there. We need a debate on this crisis in the House this week.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I seek confirmation from the Government that it agreed to have statements next week on Gaza. I think we do have that confirmation. We might get an initial response. Micheál Martin made a significant statement at the UN yesterday opposing the right of Palestinians to self-determination. Is that now the position of the Government?

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** That is nonsense. Check the record.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Independent Ireland met the Irish Hairdressers Federation today. The federation is in a crisis or, as it put it, a chronic situation. There is a stark future for many hair salons if they do not get a VAT reduction to 9% in January. Hair salons employ thousands of people and apprentices in this country. Suppliers are now refusing to credit many of these salons. There is a huge crisis. Can we bring the relevant Minister before the Dáil to talk about VAT reliefs and other such reliefs to save these salons?

**Deputy Mary Butler:** We had a good and robust meeting last Thursday, which the Ceann Comhairle will be aware of, given that she chaired it, in relation to the Order of Business for this week. Regarding the items raised, the Minister gave a comprehensive answer on the issue of mica.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Pyrrhotite.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** With regard to the other issues raised, we can discuss them at the Business Committee this Thursday.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Not agreed.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

| The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 65; Staon, 0. |                         |       |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| Tá                                           | Níl                     | Staon |
| Aird, William.                               | Ahern, Ciarán.          |       |
| Ardagh, Catherine.                           | Bacik, Ivana.           |       |
| Boland, Grace.                               | Bennett, Cathy.         |       |
| Brabazon, Tom.                               | Brady, John.            |       |
| Brennan, Shay.                               | Buckley, Pat.           |       |
| Brophy, Colm.                                | Byrne, Joanna.          |       |
| Browne, James.                               | Cairns, Holly.          |       |
| Burke, Colm.                                 | Carthy, Matt.           |       |
| Burke, Peter.                                | Clarke, Sorca.          |       |
| Butler, Mary.                                | Collins, Michael.       |       |
| Butterly, Paula.                             | Conway-Walsh, Rose.     |       |
| Buttimer, Jerry.                             | Cronin, Réada.          |       |
| Byrne, Malcolm.                              | Crowe, Seán.            |       |
| Byrne, Thomas.                               | Cullinane, David.       |       |
| Cahill, Michael.                             | Cummins, Jen.           |       |
| Callaghan, Catherine.                        | Daly, Pa.               |       |
| Calleary, Dara.                              | Devine, Máire.          |       |
| Canney, Seán.                                | Doherty, Pearse.        |       |
| Carrigy, Micheál.                            | Donnelly, Paul.         |       |
| Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.                  | Ellis, Dessie.          |       |
| Chambers, Jack.                              | Farrelly, Aidan.        |       |
| Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.                        | Farrell, Mairéad.       |       |
| Clendennen, John.                            | Gannon, Gary.           |       |
| Collins, Niall.                              | Gibney, Sinéad.         |       |
| Connolly, John.                              | Graves, Ann.            |       |
| Cooney, Joe.                                 | Guirke, Johnny.         |       |
| Crowe, Cathal.                               | Hayes, Eoin.            |       |
| Cummins, John.                               | Healy, Seamus.          |       |
| Currie, Emer.                                | Hearne, Rory.           |       |
| Daly, Martin.                                | Kelly, Alan.            |       |
| Dempsey, Aisling.                            | Kenny, Eoghan.          |       |
| Devlin, Cormac.                              | Kenny, Martin.          |       |
| Dillon, Alan.                                | Kerrane, Claire.        |       |
| Dolan, Albert.                               | Lawlor, George.         |       |
| Dooley, Timmy.                               | Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig. |       |

|                             |                           |  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Feighan, Frankie.           | McDonald, Mary Lou.       |  |
| Fleming, Seán.              | McGettigan, Donna.        |  |
| Foley, Norma.               | McGuinness, Conor D.      |  |
| Gallagher, Pat the Cope.    | Mitchell, Denise.         |  |
| Geoghegan, James.           | Murphy, Paul.             |  |
| Grealish, Noel.             | Mythen, Johnny.           |  |
| Healy-Rae, Danny.           | Nash, Ged.                |  |
| Healy-Rae, Michael.         | Newsome Drennan, Natasha. |  |
| Higgins, Emer.              | Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.  |  |
| Keogh, Keira.               | O'Callaghan, Cian.        |  |
| Lahart, John.               | O'Donoghue, Robert.       |  |
| Lowry, Michael.             | O'Hara, Louis.            |  |
| Maxwell, David.             | O'Reilly, Louise.         |  |
| McAuliffe, Paul.            | O'Rourke, Darren.         |  |
| McCarthy, Noel.             | Ó Broin, Eoin.            |  |
| McCormack, Tony.            | Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.   |  |
| McEntee, Helen.             | Ó Murchú, Ruairí.         |  |
| McGrath, Séamus.            | Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.       |  |
| McGreehan, Erin.            | Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán. |  |
| Moran, Kevin Boxer.         | Quaide, Liam.             |  |
| Moynihan, Aindrias.         | Quinlivan, Maurice.       |  |
| Moynihan, Michael.          | Rice, Pádraig.            |  |
| Moynihan, Shane.            | Sheehan, Conor.           |  |
| Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer. | Sherlock, Marie.          |  |
| Murphy, Michael.            | Stanley, Brian.           |  |
| Naughton, Hildegard.        | Tóibín, Peadar.           |  |
| Neville, Joe.               | Wall, Mark.               |  |
| O'Callaghan, Jim.           | Ward, Charles.            |  |
| O'Connell, Maeve.           | Ward, Mark.               |  |
| O'Connor, James.            | Whitmore, Jennifer.       |  |
| O'Dea, Willie.              |                           |  |
| O'Donnell, Kieran.          |                           |  |
| O'Donovan, Patrick.         |                           |  |
| O'Meara, Ryan.              |                           |  |
| O'Shea, John Paul.          |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Christopher.    |                           |  |
| O'Sullivan, Pádraig.        |                           |  |
| Ó Cearúil, Naoise.          |                           |  |
| Ó Feargháil, Seán.          |                           |  |
| Ó Muirí, Naoise.            |                           |  |
| Roche, Peter.               |                           |  |
| Smith, Brendan.             |                           |  |
| Smyth, Niamh.               |                           |  |
| Timmins, Edward.            |                           |  |
| Toole, Gillian.             |                           |  |
| Troy, Robert.               |                           |  |
| Ward, Barry.                |                           |  |

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Paul Murphy.

Question declared carried.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We now move to questions on policy and legislation. I call Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Last week, we got the devastating news that the remains of three-year-old Daniel Aruebose had been found. He was missing for four years and nobody in authority noticed. I think this case has to be a wake-up call for the State in terms of the protection of children and vulnerable people.

GoodPeople Homecare is a company that provided fake Garda vetting clearances to Tusla. Incredibly, this company continues to have a contract with the Minister's Department, providing vulnerability assessments for IPAS applicants. I want the Minister to tell me why this is allowed and I also want him to tell me how much this company, which has breached the law, is being paid by his Department.

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I thank the Deputy for her questions and, like her, I extend my condolences to those who knew and loved Daniel Aruebose. As the Deputy will be aware, there is an ongoing Garda investigation in respect of that matter. The Garda deserves to be commended for the work it has done to date. It was a very difficult search but, ultimately, the Garda tragically found the remains of the young boy. I urge anyone with information to provide it to An Garda Síochána to ensure the investigation that is ongoing is brought to a conclusion.

The Deputy then moved to a question about a company called GoodPeople Homecare. I am aware that an individual who worked for that company was convicted of serious offences before the courts in terms of forging vetting certificates. That company previously had a contract with my Department for the provision of accommodation for Ukrainians. That contract was terminated this month. The Deputy has correctly pointed out, however, that the company has a contract in place to provide vulnerability assessments. That contract was entered into in September 2024. It was a European-wide contract that was put into the public domain. My Department has done an assessment of all the vetting certificates that have been provided and they have been found to be valid.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Minister, feel free to further correspond with the Deputy. Deputy Bacik is next.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Minister did not give me a figure.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** All of us are appalled to learn of the stabbings of a teenager and of a tourist in his 20s in Dublin over the weekend. We all think of those who have been injured and of their families. News of these attacks put fear into people. Knife crime is a real concern for many, particularly in Dublin city centre.

3 o'clock

An Garda Síochána, to much fanfare from the Minister's side of the House, announced an increase in visible policing only recently. That is very welcome but we are concerned that in rural areas and some urban areas we have seen a drop in Garda numbers when read alongside retirement and resignation figures. We have real concerns over numbers of those involved in community policing and concerns over implementation of the Dublin city task force recommendations. How will the Minister give people peace of mind when we see this level of violence and see attacks like these occurring in Dublin city centre in spite of announcements from Garda headquarters and the Department about visible policing on the streets?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** Like Deputy Bacik, I was very concerned when I heard about the stabbing of the two individuals over the weekend but it has to be put in context as well. I received a report from An Garda Síochána at the end of August this year in respect of knife crime. It showed that knife-crime seizures were up and knife-crime injuries were down. In general, knife crime as a criminal offence is down. That has to be taken into account. Also, regarding Garda visibility, the Deputy will be aware herself from being around the city that we have an increased Garda presence in Dublin city centre. I want to see that rolled out through the country in all the villages and towns as well. In order to do that we need to get the recruitment of gardaí up. I am pleased to say that the numbers are going in the right direction. Some 200 hundred new recruits entered into Templemore in August of this year and in November, at the next passing out, 200 will be coming out. The numbers are looking good but the secret to Garda visibility is increased Garda recruitment.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I raise the issue of the new SNA review guidelines with the Minister. At a time when we should be increasing the support for our students, the Government - despite saying disability is a priority - seems determined to make it more difficult for children to get adequate support. The new SNA review guidelines appear focused on gatekeeping and rationing and not supporting children. The review window is too short, the criteria is too restrictive and the process will leave mainstream classes and special education classes in competition with one another. Will the Government agree to the suspension of the new SNA review guidelines until adequate consultation happens with schools, SNAs, unions and parents to ensure every child is provided with the support they need to reach their full potential? Go raibh maith agat.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank Deputy Cummins for her question. To answer it straight, no, we will not suspend it and it needs to be put in context with what is being done in respect of special education at present. There are over 23,000 SNAs currently in place in the education system, which is an increase of 43% since 2020, and budget 2025 added 1,600 SNAs, the largest increase to date. Almost 21,000 special education teachers support children with special needs. Therefore, there is a huge amount being done in the area. I am conscious that there are demands on the system that need to be filled and I know, from speaking to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Ministers, Deputies McEntee and Foley, that a huge amount of work has been done. Some 407 new special classes were sanctioned for this current academic year, 300 of which were in mainstream schools. There is a lot being done but we will not suspend the guidelines.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I raise the issue of wind turbine regulations and guidelines. Where are they? I am raising this in the House for the past 14 years. We need to utilise wind energy. It is very important that we do that as part of the move towards green energy. However, we do not have up-to-date guidelines, never mind regulations, for large turbines. Every Minister for planning and energy has promised them over the past 14 years. Communities are highlighting this throughout the country. In Laois, large turbines are planned to be erected right across the south of the county. These are massive turbines without up-to-date guidelines or regulations. We need to protect communities when putting in turbines where they are zoned in the county development plan to ensure proper set-back distances and that people are protected from noise and shadow flicker. When are we going to see the wind turbine guidelines? They are long-promised. Draft ones were brought in in 2019 but they never went any further than that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy. The Minister to respond.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I have a Bill before the Dáil - the Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025. Perhaps the Government might support that?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I apologise that I cannot answer Deputy Stanley's question. I cannot tell him when the wind turbine guidelines will be available. However, I am aware from discussions with my colleagues that these are required. I cannot give him an answer. I do not have it. There is no point in me making it up.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Will the Minister write and tell me?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** We will come back to the Deputy and provide him with information. As regards the guidelines, we cannot ignore the fact that at times 40% of our energy is being provided by wind. Wind is a great success and it is really part of the transfer from fossil fuel to a more appropriate fuel that is at the forefront, wind energy.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Recently, we were told that 20 new gardaí are being appointed into Limerick city, where they are much needed. How many can the Minister give me in the county as well? County Limerick is a big place, with 40 sq miles per Garda station. There is Bruff Garda station and a new Garda station at Newcastle West. When the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, talks about recruits, he says that 200 are going in and 200 will come out. According to the last statistic before he became Minister, we had 400 going in and only 145 or 150 coming out. I am delighted the Minister is confident that 200 are going in and 200 are coming out. How many will be replacements for retirements? How many gardaí will we actually get on the ground? The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, came out last week and had a go at me about putting city against county. I am not. I am looking for equality for city and county. The protectors who are in the Minister's remit are needed in the county and the city. How many are going to come in to replace the retirements? How many gardaí are we actually going to get?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** The biggest problem I face as Minister for justice is that every elected representative and member of the public I meet wants to see more gardaí in their

community. There is a positive story behind that when we reflect upon it. It was great that 20 gardaí went to Limerick city. I do not decide where new recruits coming out of Templemore go. I know everyone wants them. As I said earlier in response to Deputy Bacik, if we can get 200 in each intake into Templemore, and there are four or five intakes per year, at the end of each passing out we will find ourselves with lots of gardaí going around the country and available. That is the policy objective.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** Some 17 months have elapsed since HIQA was tasked with the objective of looking at the totally inadequate accident and emergency services in the mid-west, particularly in Limerick University Hospital, and making recommendations on what should be done. They informed us at the time that they would take a year to report, which we did not agree with but had to accept. Some 17 months have now elapsed. I have a reply from the Taoiseach dated 6 November 2024 confirming that the final report would be available in May 2025. We are nearly at the end of September 2025 and I am very anxious to know when that report will materialise. Is the Government committed to implementing the recommendations when it does?

**Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill):** The Deputy will be aware that I updated the House in May that HIQA had looked for an extension of that timeline, and intended to finalise the report in September. I can confirm to the Deputy that I have not received it from HIQA yet. It is the intention of the Government to examine the recommendations of HIQA and take them extremely seriously. I have not seen it and have not received the report yet.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I want to raise with the Minister my concern that there is no structure in place between local authorities and Uisce Éireann. If an engineer in a local authority wants to make a representation about a connection, he or she is treated in the same way as a member of the public. I ask that the Departments would sit down with Irish Water and the local authorities to set up a proper structure. I know of one housing project belonging to a local authority that is now delayed six months because we cannot get the water and sewerage connections as there is such disagreement between them. A structure must be put in place. I ask that this would be done at the earliest possible date.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank Deputy Burke for his question. He highlights an issue that many of us experience in our local communities where there is a delay in major infrastructural residential development because of not getting a connection with Uisce Éireann. There definitely should be a process in place whereby local authorities and Uisce Éireann can engage. I am surprised there is not. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy James Browne, in respect of that matter to see whether anything can be done at departmental level to ensure there is direct contact between local authorities and Uisce Éireann.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The Minister will be aware that in April there was a lot of concern in the Cork city area about the amalgamation of units across four Garda stations into two units, in Carrigaline and Douglas, and Bishopstown and Ballincollig. Subsequently, and after many years of campaigning on behalf of the people of Cork, with public representatives and Cork Chamber of Commerce and so on, I am glad to see for the first time in a long time a decent allocation of gardaí in Cork. I know the Minister is going to tell me it

is the Garda Commissioner who decides where Garda resources go, but I know he was briefed on this when he visited Cork in April.

Does he at least agree that it is not an ideal situation to see two different Garda stations being served by the same unit, and that it would be a good use of additional resources to ensure every station, including those in Carrigaline, Ballincollig, Bishopstown and Douglas, have a unit of their own, ensuring those big areas of population - busy areas with young populations - have a full-time unit monitoring crime in the area?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** As the Deputy said, I was down in Cork before the summer and saw the great work that is done by members of An Garda Síochána in the Cork area. I am aware of the issue in respect of units. I hope the Deputy will forgive me if I do not throw myself into the middle of it. It is an operational matter for the Garda Commissioner. The last thing I want to do, as Minister for Justice, is to start issuing operational diktats to a Commissioner. He is the expert on how to run An Garda Síochána. I set the policy but it is up to him and senior management to dictate what happens in respect of whether units are available to each area or not.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** Yesterday on Eden Quay, a 17-year-old boy was stabbed by a group of four or five men. Disturbingly, those involved used e-scooters as getaway vehicles. They were dressed in black clothing and were able to leave the scene quickly. This is not an isolated issue. Across the country, e-scooters are increasingly linked with antisocial behaviour, drug activities and reckless use on footpaths, creating a real risk for families and especially older people. We also know from Temple Street hospital that 20 children under the age of 16 have already presented this year with head injuries from e-scooter incidents, many of them serious, despite the fact they are under-16s and not permitted to use them. I ask the Minister whether the Government is considering further measures or updated legislation in this area, such as vehicle registration for traceability, possible insurance requirements and education for parents and young people, to ensure e-scooters will be used safely and responsibly and not misused for antisocial behaviour and criminal purposes.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** Notwithstanding the fact that the culprits on Eden Quay were using e-scooters and were wearing black clothing, I can assure Deputy McCormack that the strong likelihood is that they will be apprehended. The Garda has great success in apprehending people involved in those types of violent criminal attacks in the city centre. We saw that a suspect was arrested in respect of the injuries sustained by an English tourist on Saturday evening.

I will give consideration to what the Deputy said. However, I know from An Garda Síochána that it does seize e-scooters from people under 16 years of age and that needs to be done continuously and repeatedly. I will engage with my colleague in transport, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to see whether he has any proposals in respect of regulating them on a wider basis.

**Deputy James Geoghegan:** At a meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts at the end of June, the then Garda Commissioner confirmed he had reported to the Minister on the controlled delivery operation that related to the late Evan Fitzgerald and the shocking incident in Carlow.

The then Commissioner went on to say that he took note of the comments made by Senator Michael McDowell on 24 June in the Seanad about what was or was not said in the currency of a live bail application, and that he had referred those comments to the Garda ombudsman, Fiosrú, for consideration. On the RTÉ "This Week" programme that subsequent Sunday, the Garda ombudsman confirmed that there is nothing further to be considered by it. I raised this issue previously in July when the Minister, Deputy Chambers, was standing in at Leaders' Questions. He indicated he would raise this with the Minister. My question then and now is whether the Minister considered the matter concluded regarding what was or was not said in that District Court bail application, or the report he received from the Commissioner. Has the Minister discussed these issues with the new Commissioner and does he intend to carry out any further inquiries on the matter?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I am conscious that at present, there are two live issues before the courts in respect of that investigation. One of the associates of the late Mr. Fitzgerald has pleaded guilty so there has to be an issue with regard to sentencing in respect of his plea. Second, another individual, I understand, has not yet made a plea so there could be a trial so I am not going to get involved in the detail of that.

I would make one point. I have discussed this matter with both the former Commissioner and the current Commissioner. We are lucky in Ireland that we have a low level of firearms in this country. If you look at the injuries sustained from firearms in this country, they have stopped recording them because they are negligible. Part of the reason we have such a low level of firearms in the country is because of the work done by An Garda Síochána stopping weapons from coming in. That has to be a central part of its function.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** As the Minister is aware, the week before last there was an "RTÉ Investigates" programme on the death of Liam Farrell, a man in Roosky, County Leitrim who was found dead on his back door in January 2020. The situation the programme exposed was a very lacklustre investigation by An Garda Síochána. Anyone who saw it - I am sure the Minister did and I know he is aware of the case - was shocked as to what had transpired. The family, Liam Farrell's son and his wife, are here today and they are looking to have a meeting with the Minister in respect of this. They are looking for a proper investigation into what happened. The investigation the Garda carried out was completely inadequate. Liam Farrell did not get a proper post mortem. There was no forensic post mortem. The scene of the crime was not sealed off properly; it was compromised. The man's body was covered in blood and there was bruising all over the body. It was a scene where everyone who was there, including the family and other people who were there, recognised he was the victim of an assault and yet there was no proper investigation carried out into it. Will the Minister meet the family and ensure there is a proper investigation into this situation?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** At the outset, I should say that I have no difficulty meeting the family. I am happy to meet the family. In fact, I was down in Carrick-on-Shannon on 8 September last and Deputy Scanlon asked me to meet the family. I agreed to meet them on 8 September but unfortunately it did not suit them. There is no issue with me meeting them. I am due in front of the justice committee, chaired by the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Carthy, at 3.30 p.m. so it is going to be difficult for me to meet the Farrells today or right now but I have

no difficulty meeting them at some convenient time in the future. I saw the "RTÉ Investigates" documentary and I am aware of the case of Mr. Farrell. By the way, I extend my condolences to his son Brendan and all the family. I have discussed it with the former Garda Commissioner and the current Commissioner but rather than give a narrative here as to what I have been apprised of, I am happy to meet with them. I cannot do it today-----

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** That is okay.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----unless Deputy Carthy is happy to put back the committee meeting and I will meet the Farrells. I am conscious they are here but if Deputy Carthy cannot, I will not be able to meet them now.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I noted the Minister's comments earlier today with regard to a discussion about the occupied territories Bill and a date for such. He said the Government can influence but not dictate the position of our partners in the EU and elsewhere around the world. I agree with that 100% but I also acknowledge that there has been ongoing pressure, let us say, from the Opposition in this Chamber and then from the Government in Europe and beyond, that has led to some countries, for example, recognising the two-state solution. Credit where credit is due but the Israeli State is now threatening to annex the West Bank and occupy more territories, so we do have an urgency to show leadership once again. In that context, what is the delay? We had the summer. Can we try to get this done as early as possible in this term? Can a commitment be given today to that effect?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I am conscious that everyone in this House has, to a large extent, contributed to the occupied territories Bill. As the Deputy knows, Deputy Lahart did an excellent job chairing the committee that did pre-legislative scrutiny on that Bill. The report is now being published. That was necessary in order that pre-legislative scrutiny would be done and for it to be progressed through the Houses of the Oireachtas. Notwithstanding the fact that it has not been enacted yet, it still has been extremely impactful in our negotiations with other countries. I know from the Chief Whip that next Tuesday, there are going to be statements on Gaza in the House so that would be an opportune time for the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach to update the Deputy in respect of where and when the Bill will be introduced.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** As has been said previously, there is a 17-year-old boy in the Mater in a critical condition because of a vicious stabbing on Sunday night. Earlier this year, an 11-year-old was stabbed by another school pupil and the horrible reality across many of our communities is that knife crime and the carrying of knives is very real. Unfortunately, in the communities I represent in the inner city, there is somewhat of a siege mentality among some young men who feel the need to carry a knife. The response to date has been about more gardaí, stop-and-search powers and longer sentences, none of which are really going to address the problem. My question to the Minister regards the antisocial forum set up by the Government in 2020. Where is that now at and is it going to report? The reality is that gardaí are really stretched and with respect to longer sentences, we have an overcrowded prison system. On stop-and-search powers, there was a report commissioned by the Minister's own Government in 2021, which said that such powers are not going to be effective in cutting down on knife crime.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I refer to what I said to Deputy Bacik earlier on in that there was a very informative report published by An Garda Síochána at the end of August, which showed that knife crime is down, knife seizures are up and knife injuries are down. However, that is of cold comfort to the 17-year-old young man who was injured over the weekend and indeed the 11-year-old. This is a more complex problem than simply amending criminal justice legislation.

It is an educational issue. The Deputy is correct, regrettably, when she suggests that some young men think it is necessary for defensive purposes to carry knives. If that happens and a knife is produced, there can be cataclysmic consequences not just for the victim but also for the perpetrator, who may not have intended to use it.

The antisocial behaviour forum was discussed in the Department by me recently. Work is being done on antisocial behaviour. In regard to where the forum is, there will be further engagement with the stakeholders in respect of it. I do not want to give an absolute commitment as to the outcome but there will be further consultation with the stakeholders.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Ballymun, in my constituency, is a strong and proud community. As the Minister knows, having visited Ballymun recently, following decades of underinvestment by successive governments it is facing huge challenges ranging from poor housing to lack of economic opportunities. The community has been promised so much but is dealing with issues such as high poverty levels and a recent increase in drug-related and gang-related violence and intimidation. Today's Movember health report shows that men in areas of high levels of deprivation, such as Ballymun, are 150% more likely to die before the age of 75 than those living in less deprived areas. Having visible community-based gardaí is a key measure to ensure community safety. The level of Garda presence in places like Ballymun is 20% below the national average. When will the Minister increase the Garda allocation to Ballymun and deliver a north-east inner-city level of funding in order for the Ballymun implementation board to undertake vital community prevention work with young people, families, community groups and schools?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** As Deputy Hearne said, I had the pleasure of being in Ballymun to meet the integration forum there. A huge amount of excellent work is being done. I am alarmed by the statistic that Deputy Hearne has put onto the record of the House. It is frightening that men in Ballymun are 150% more likely to die in the circumstances he has outlined. Deputy Hearne wants more gardaí on the streets in Ballymun, and so do I. The way I need to do that is to recruit more Garda. Then it is a matter for the Commissioner to decide where they should go. I certainly see the benefits of having more gardaí on the ground doing community policing in places such as Ballymun.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** There has been no public eyecare service in south Tipperary for more than 12 months. The former permanent consultant, Dr. Hillery, retired last September. She provided a wonderful service for a long number of years. She gave more than adequate notice. Unfortunately, the HSE has failed to fill the vacancy and provide a vital service. There is now a huge waiting list, running into thousands, with hundreds of children on the list who have never been examined. The HSE advertised a permanent post on a temporary basis. Of

course the post was not filled. Bizarrely, the HSE has readvertised the permanent post on a temporary basis. What is going on? Why has permanent post been advertised on a temporary basis on two occasions? When will we see a proper facility in operation again in south Tipperary?

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I thank the Deputy for the question. I am familiar with the issue as our constituencies border each other. It has been raised with me by people living in south Tipperary. I have been in contact with the new integrated health area manager in the HSE in relation to this. The Deputy is right. The waiting lists are increasing because of it. I met one of the employees when I happened to be out and about one day and she raised the issue with me. I will speak to the HSE locally in that area again. I will revert to the Deputy in writing, if that is okay.

### **Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025: First Stage**

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to make provision whereby the Minister for Education shall make regulations governing the implementation of an affordable school uniform policy in schools; and for this purpose, to amend the Education Act 1998.

I welcome the opportunity to introduce the Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025 along with Deputies Ó Laoghaire and Clarke. I thank both Deputies for their work on this Bill. Throughout the country, parents are being hammered by the cost-of-living crisis. The enormous expense of clothing their children for school is a huge part of that financial strain. For many, back-to-school costs run into hundreds, if not thousands, of euro, turning what should be an exciting time into a period of dread. This is not just a perception; it is a reality confirmed by new numerous analyses from the Irish League of Credit Unions, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, and Barnardos, among others. The CCPC has made it clear that restrictive school uniform policies are stifling competition, driving up costs and embedding avoidable expenses that are simply unsustainable for households. Barnardos found that back-to-school costs average at €725 for primary school and €1,100 for secondary school. Some 60% of parents are worried about these costs, 27% have used savings to meet them and 15% were forced to borrow to meet them. In relation to school uniforms, just 14% of respondents to the Barnardos survey said their school had an affordable school uniform option, while 92% said their school required crested or branded uniform items.

This Bill is a direct, practical response to provide real relief. It would mandate every school to adopt a cost-conscious uniform policy. It is built on common-sense principles that seek to ensure clear labelling of optional versus mandatory items to prevent unnecessary spending, to provide multiple retail options so that parents can shop around for the best value, and to minimise the use of expensive branded items that can exclude students from activities.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The cost of children returning to school is an annual issue. Year in, year out a consistent theme from my constituency of Longford-Westmeath is the cost of uniforms, but never so much as this year as families grapple with the cost of living. The current

system, as Deputy O'Rourke said, embeds avoidable expenses. The CCPC's recent investigation urging generic uniforms and a competitive tender process is significant and we need to listen.

This Bill would mandate schools to adopt cost-conscious, common-sense policies such as clear labelling around what is optional and what is mandatory, multiple retail options, and minimal use of expensive branded items. It would require sensible policies that allow uniforms to be reused by siblings and support the second-hand use, sale and swapping of school uniforms. We cannot stand by as families are hit by payment demands from every single angle. The CCPC has raised the alarm. We are bringing in this Bill to address those concerns and to reduce the costs on parents. They need a break. This Bill would provide it to them.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The summer months should be a time of respite and enjoyment for families. However, for far too many families it is a time of stress and worry as they try to figure out how to get on top of back-to-school costs. The costs are absolutely enormous, as the research by the Irish League of Credit Unions and others have identified. Many families are getting into debt or struggling with their savings to try to ensure their children, particularly if there are multiple children, have the uniforms they need and to meet other back-to-school costs. I welcome the progress that has been made in recent years due to the campaigning of antipoverty groups and Opposition parties in the area of schoolbooks. However, it is still the case that we do not truly have free education at primary and post-primary levels in this State. It is still the case that people are shelling out significant sums for such items as iPads and tablets, for the so-called voluntary contributions due to the underfunding of schools, and for school uniforms. This Bill would make a significant difference. It would ensure that schools put in place an affordable uniforms policy to ensure there is maximum reuse of uniforms. It would require clear labelling in terms of what is mandatory and what is optional. It would ensure that people are able to buy items from multiple retailers. Some schools make great efforts to try to accommodate parents by ensuring that they have options and that there is flexibility there. Unfortunately, there are schools that go to equal lengths almost to require the purchase of expensive items that should not be necessary at all. This legislation can make a significant difference in terms of people's pockets.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** No.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

### **Presentation of Estimates: Motion**

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I move:

That, notwithstanding Standing Order 222 of the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business or the Resolutions of the Dáil of 1st April, 21st May, 16th June and 25th June, 2025 the following Further Revised Estimates for Public Services for the year ending 31st December, 2025, be presented to the Dáil and circulated to members on 23rd September, 2025, being a date later than that prescribed for the presentation of Estimates:

Vote 24 — Justice, Home Affairs and Migration(*Third Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 29 — Climate, Energy, and the Environment (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 33 — Culture, Communications and Sport (*Further Revised Estimate*).

Vote 34 — Housing, Local Government and Heritage (*Further Revised Estimate*).

provided that the following Further Revised Estimate shall not stand referred to the relevant Select or Standing Committee, as the case may be, pursuant to Standing Orders 103(1)(a) and 222(2):

Vote 24 — Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (*Third Further Revised Estimate*).

Question put and agreed to.

**Approval of Appointment of Members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority:  
Motion**

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann, noting that the Government agreed on 10th September, 2025, to propose, for the approval of Dáil Éireann, the appointment or reappointment, as the case may be, of the persons concerned to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, and pursuant to sections 9 and 10 of the Legal Services Regulation Act, 2015, approves the appointment of Simon Barry and William Abrahamson with effect from 1st October, 2025, by the Government to be members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority in accordance with that Act, and the reappointment of Shane Galligan, with effect from 1st October, 2025, by the Government to be a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority in accordance with that Act, such appointment or reappointment being for a period not exceeding four years from the date of appointment or reappointment, as the case may be, as the Government may determine.

Question put and agreed to.

**School Transport: Statements**

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I am pleased to be here today, with the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, who has responsibility for school transport in the Department, to share an update on school transport. As the House will be

aware, the school transport scheme is a hugely significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of my Department.

In the current school year already almost 178,000 children and young people are being transported on a daily basis to schools throughout the country. This figure includes pupils travelling on mainstream services, pupils who have arrived in Ireland from Ukraine, those residing in international protection accommodation services, IPAS, centres and also dedicated services for children with special educational needs. The scheme has expanded significantly over the past six years and we have seen an almost 50% increase in the number of pupils travelling on all services. This growth has been especially marked in the area of special educational needs transport, which now represents almost 60% of the scheme's total costs, while serving around 13% of pupils. This reflects the Department's continued commitment to inclusive access and tailored supports for young people who need them.

Since 2018, investment in the scheme has more than doubled, from €200 million to €512 million in 2024. We have continued to expand the number of students benefiting from the school transport scheme. It is important to stress that point. Every year, the number of young people accessing school transport has increased. However, there are, of course, particular issues in some areas of the country due to the growing populations and growing demand for school transport services in these areas. In my county in particular, and in other commuter areas and larger towns, where we have seen population growth, a young population and a young school-going population, there have been particular challenges. I stress that everything is being done to ensure that all services are in place as soon as possible.

This is a very important issue and is, of course, particularly important for children and young people with special educational needs and their families who require appropriate school transport provision in order to allow their children to attend school. Resolving these difficulties is a priority for me, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the team with which we work in my Department, working closely with Bus Éireann. It is important that everybody is focused on ensuring that transport arrangements are put in place as soon as possible. Particular issues have arisen in my county but every day, transport solutions are being found and issues are being resolved for families and, in particular, for children. While the situation is dynamic with solutions being found on a daily basis, those currently without transport represent a very small number of pupils on school transport services nationally. Everything is being done to ensure that those final challenges are overcome.

To outline the magnitude of the scheme, over 149,000 pupils are now travelling on mainstream services, almost 5,500 pupils who arrived in Ireland from Ukraine have been provided with school transport and 23,500 children are travelling on dedicated services for children with special educational needs. Millions of kilometres in school transport routes are provided every day. Every five years, new tendering processes must happen in line with our tender rules.

The school transport 2030 review, published in early 2024, represented the most comprehensive assessment of the scheme since its establishment in 1967. It was informed by extensive consultation with families and students, including those with special educational needs and all other stakeholders. The review outlines a path to expanding access to an additional 100,000 pupils by 2030 while promoting sustainable transport and improving integration with the wider public transport network. That work has already started through

pilot programmes. A key outcome is to reduce the number of individual car journeys to school, supporting local communities and our national climate objectives. Achieving the Government's ambition of 260,000 pupils on school transport services would result in significant gain for the environment and a huge societal gain. Importantly, our young people and their families will benefit the most. This is clearly evidenced in the review for the school transport scheme. For households in rural areas or those with limited access to public transport, the scheme plays a critical role in enabling parents to engage in the workforce or pursue training or education. We all know that, for the most part, things have changed for many families. Both parents are working. To be able to get to work and do school dropoffs, perhaps, where there is more than one sibling, to different schools in different directions is complex, stressful and challenging. That is why it is so important. It is why we, as a Government, are absolutely committed to rolling this out to as many students as possible.

The review also demonstrated the impact on pupils who use school transport. They are developing valuable life skills, including independence, time management and confidence in navigating public transport services. Those skills support long-term development and are beneficial in many ways.

The scale of the scheme is significant. We all understand that any changes, particularly of the magnitude we are talking about, need to be planned and implemented well. This is particularly relevant given the issues that have arisen in the current school year with regard to having access to enough drivers and vehicle shortages. Careful consideration must be given to how best to expand the scheme and to cater for that demand. If we were to say that every single child should be able to access school transport tomorrow, it simply would not be possible. We need to ensure it is planned, phased and done in the most appropriate way.

That phased implementation approach was adopted to manage increased demand in a planned and sustainable manner. This commenced with 14 pilot projects in the 2024-2025 school year, developed in partnership with the Department of Transport and Bus Éireann. These pilot projects are continuing for the 2025-2026 school year. They will be monitored during the year and evaluated in full at the end of the 2025-2026 school year. The school transport section of my Department actively engages with Bus Éireann, which is rolling this out, to assess and identify where more school transport pilot programmes can be successfully delivered. The Department has asked Bus Éireann to review where additional capacity can be made available for concessionary pupils who paid on time and would become eligible if the revised school transport scheme criteria was rolled out in full. The nearest school distance and wider criteria are currently still in place. The intention is absolutely to change those but we must do so on a phased basis. That is in order to pilot the revised scheme eligibility criteria in a small number of areas.

Sourcing additional capacity can take time where a procurement process is required and subsequent vehicle and driver safety compliance checks need to be completed. There were many challenges this year. Pupils had been given tickets. They were not concessionary and those pupils had valid tickets, but we could not find someone to apply for the tender and simply could not identify the drivers. We must ensure all of this is worked through. These pilots will provide valuable insights into the impact of increased demand on the scheme and the potential for integrating public transport with school transport services, particularly for older children. I am not saying that we will put younger students on public transport but we will do so for older

students, where possible. We will also look for more opportunities to promote more sustainable modes of transport. The findings from these evaluations will guide the planning and implementation needed for a national roll-out of a revised school transport scheme.

The priority is to provide transport to pupils who are eligible under the current terms and to ensure we expand and remove those terms to ensure as many students as possible can access transport as quickly as possible. While some pilot projects are already up and running, we want to work to ensure the availability of vehicles and drivers in the remaining pilot areas and to ensure that additional services can commence as the pilot proceeds. We continue to roll out enhancements to technology and customer service. Improvements have been made to enhance the customer experience, particularly during peak summer months. Bus Éireann has a dedicated call centre, with a call back and webchat facility available to families. The call centre operated with extending opening hours during the summer, when required. A considerable number of people in Bus Éireann and my Department did a huge amount of work over the summer to ensure that as many routes as possible were in place, as many tickets as possible were given out and the many issues were resolved as soon as possible. The biggest challenge and main frustration for parents is the fact that so much of this happens so close to when school is starting. That is the big change we need to make. Work is under way, through the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, with my support, to make those changes around the timeline. Where children are going to school is a factor. Once parents know where their children are going to school, we want to ensure they can apply for the bus route and pay. We must ensure that Bus Éireann or any private provider can start to map out the routes much earlier. That way, when problems arise, they do not arise the week before the students go back to school. That is the source of much of the frustration. A considerable amount of work is happening in the Department to ensure that can be the case.

Work is also under way in respect of smart ticketing, digital route planning and improvements to the SEN transport application process.

It is also intended to continue to pilot the use of LEAP cards and technology in existing pilot areas and introduce LEAP cards in some of the newer pilot areas for 2025–26. Therefore, a huge amount of work is happening to ensure we have a system that is efficient but that can be rolled out to more students as soon as possible.

With regard to capacity issues, which are the main problem, as with other transport sectors, the school transport scheme continues to experience driver and contractor availability challenges. As part of a national focus on driver requirements, the Department facilitated a working group involving my Department, the Department of Transport, Bus Éireann and Education and Training Boards Ireland to increase the availability of drivers, within the school transport scheme and other public transport areas nationally, through existing and potential training schemes. As a result of the work done by the group, a transport task force has been established. It is chaired by the Department of Transport and its aim is to work collaboratively to identify factors that contribute to recruitment issues and put forward recommendations and measures to create a pipeline of workers to address these issues. Of course, we know some of the challenges and the issues that are being discussed. In addition to considering the possibility for those who are over 70 to perhaps drive for longer, other issues are being considered in that context.

There is no doubt that school transport is such an important service for so many parents. We have just heard from Opposition parties on back-to-school issues and the stress they put on parents. Our objective is to ensure we provide services and transport for young people and do so in a timely manner. Transport-related stress is not the only stress parents face, and that is why the current and previous Governments have made huge strides to try to remove stresses at the time of going back to school. Every single child now gets free books when going to school. Some €200 million in ICT grants is being provided to schools. We have hot school meals for all primary school students. In this regard, the final phase is being rolled out. An increasing number of families are able to access the clothing and footwear allowance, which has been expanded again this year. Therefore, a huge amount of work is being done by the current Government and the previous one to ensure that where we can remove stresses for parents, bearing in mind that we are not going to eliminate every stress, we do so. My colleague and I know that school transport can play a huge role overall in this regard. We are absolutely committed to ensuring we expand the service to as many students as possible.

I stress again that the number of students availing of the service has increased from 120,000 in 2018 to 178,000. This equates to an increase of almost 50%. I hope that shows our commitment very clearly. What we want to do goes even further than that.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan):** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to address the House and provide an update on the provision of school transport. This is a hugely important issue, particularly for children and young people with additional needs and their families, many of whom require school transport provision to support children in attending school. I pay tribute to my colleague the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and thank her for her great support and co-operation, not just on this issue but also on others that arise right throughout the Department of Education.

Since taking up my position in January, I have met many families and visited many schools, which have shared their experiences in relation to school transport. The engagement we have had, particularly with families, has shown school transport to be a vital service to provide children and young people with access to education. I am pleased to see how much the scheme has grown over recent years and note there have been some reported challenges. We are not blind to these. We understand them and are committed to ensuring they are addressed.

The school transport scheme was established in 1967, when post-primary education was made free to all, to support children and young people in accessing education. This remains a core belief of the service. It is not just a logistical service involving buses and routes but also a lifeline for families across the island of Ireland. For decades, the scheme has helped to create opportunities and equality. It is about ensuring no child is left behind simply because they live beyond the reach of public transport.

In many parts of the country, especially rural and under-serviced areas, the school transport scheme is the only bridge between home and the classroom. The scale of what we are talking about here today is immense. Every single school day, over 178,000 children climb on board approximately 8,200 vehicles, which travel along 10,600 routes to primary and post-primary schools across the country. The service supports parents and guardians in accessing employment by easing one extra stress and their worry about how their children will get to

school. It continues to support pupils living in rural and remote areas and children and young people with additional needs, as well as the national sustainability and climate goals.

The scheme, which Bus Éireann operates on behalf of the Department, has expanded significantly over the past six years. In that time, the number of children and young people using the services has grown from 120,000 to 178,000, which is an increase of almost 50%. The services facilitates over 100,000 mainstream pupils who are eligible for transport as well as 49,000 with concessionary tickets. In addition, over 23,000 pupils travel on dedicated school transport services for children with additional needs. The growth has been exceptionally marked in the area of special education needing transport, which now represent almost 60% of the scheme's total cost, while serving around 13% of the pupils. This reflects the Department's and Government's continued commitment to inclusive access and tailored supports.

Between 2018 and 2024, investment in the scheme more than doubled, from €200 million to €512 million. This investment is extremely welcome as the scheme and associated costs continue to grow. This growth is driven by increased pupil numbers, the expansion of the scheme for children with additional needs and increased transport costs.

As already mentioned, there have been some challenges with the service. I wholeheartedly acknowledge the shortcomings and challenges we have. In our weekly meetings with senior officials from the Department and Bus Éireann, difficulties in sourcing contractors or vehicles in a small number of locations have also been highlighted. It is important to note that the services in question have not been cancelled and that the affected families have been contacted directly in relation to the challenges.

There can sometimes be accusations that the lack or late withdrawal of a service is due to poor planning. We all know that services should be sorted out on time before a school year starts. While I understand the frustration, it is important to highlight that the issues which arise are sometimes out of anyone's control. These can include contractors informing Bus Éireann they are withdrawing their services just days before the school term begins. This happens every year, with no clear reasons given. I have seen this year a couple of instances where major contractors withdrew their services well into August on health grounds. These are obviously very unfortunate circumstances, for both the contractors and the impacted families. They mean Bus Éireann has only limited time in which to secure new services.

Difficulties have also arisen in some cases due to the lack of driver or contractor availability or where zero bids were received for a particular service despite repeated efforts by both the Department and Bus Éireann to procure a contractor. I assure the House, however, that Bus Éireann's school transport team is working extensively to ensure transport arrangements are put in place as soon as possible. While the situation is dynamic, with solutions being found daily, those without transport currently represent a very small number of pupils by comparison with the number using school transport services nationally. Approximately 1% are affected. Where a service cannot be provided immediately, my Department will provide interim grants to eligible pupils who travel on mainstream services and services for children with additional needs towards the cost of private transportation until we have a service in place.

In an effort to meet these challenges, a wider task force has been established in the Department of Transport to action possible solutions to increase the availability of contractors and drivers. The Department of education has been working extensively with Bus Éireann to

streamline the procurement process for contractors. A national and local media campaign was launched earlier this year to attract new contractors and drivers to the scheme. Bus Éireann engaged with local operators to secure cover for services affected. The Department of Education and Bus Éireann continue to engage with the National Transport Authority, NTA, to identify transport solutions available on public transport. Bus Éireann advertises for contractors in the NTA bulletin, specifically targeting contractors of smaller vehicles.

On the matter of the driver age limit, the current retirement age, 70, remains in place across Bus Éireann services. A review commissioned by the Road Safety Authority on this issue was completed in August 2024. This review spoke to why the limit should remain. However, the Department of education continues to engage on the commitment in the programme for Government to assess the feasibility of removing the inclusion of drivers over 70. This is a work in progress and a matter on which I will be happy to update the House once further work has been advanced.

As outlined by the Minister, the school transport 2030 review has led to a welcome expansion of the scheme, which is growing year on year. The roll-out of the recommended changes to the scheme will provide 260,000 children and young people with transport to and from school daily. The expansion will have a very positive impact on working families and rural communities and will provide young people with self-confidence and independence. It will also reduce carbon emissions and traffic congestion. The recommendations are all to be pursued on a phased basis through pilots around the country. I hope to advance these further in the years ahead. Improvements has also been made to enhancing the customer experience, particularly during peak summer months. These include: a dedicated Bus Éireann call centre for school transport queries; a dedicated email address for Oireachtas Members; and a new case management system within the Department.

On the school transport appeals board, the Department ensures that all parents and children have access to an efficient and effective appeals process if their applications for eligibility for school transport are refused. This board is independent in the performance of its functions and works in accordance with the terms of its operating procedures. Parents and guardians of children or children who have reached the age of 18 may submit appeals.

I will touch on the important role of school bus escorts who can be hired in cases where there are care and safety needs for a child while on school transport, such as to require the support of a school bus escort. My Department provides grant funding directly to schools for the employment of school bus escorts and sets the rate of pay. The boards of management of ETBs are responsible for the employment of school bus escorts. In recognition of the fact that these escorts play a vital role in supporting children with additional needs to ensure they can get to and from school and as a recommended action arising from the recent school transport review, the commitment to review pay rates for school bus escorts has been completed and an information pack has been issued to schools. The rate of pay for escorts has increased from €13.40 an hour to €15.60 per hour as of 1 August 2025.

I travelled to primary and post-primary school on the school bus scheme. That scheme has been a major lifeline for people. In its inception, it was for people who did not have transport. Now it is very important for working families. We have met throughout the summer. There were closing dates in April and again in June. The Department and Bus Éireann worked continuously throughout the summer to ensure we had the best possible service in place through

mapping out where the demands were and what we needed to do. A number of schemes were very successfully piloted last year and again this year. A number of challenges remain right across the system, but we are very committed to working towards it because we fundamentally believe the school transport system is a fundamental piece of the infrastructure of the State, particularly in special education. Many students I know who require special education, whether it is special classes or special schools, simply would not be able to attend except for the school transport system.

I compliment the departmental officials and those from Bus Éireann who have been available day and night over the past number of weeks to try to find resolutions to issues that have arisen across the country. They have been able to find some resolutions. There are some issues we are still dealing with, but the fundamental point is this is a highly respected and integral part of our education system. We must continue to make sure of that. The Minister and I are very committed to a new system being developed over the coming years. We are also looking at the dates and at bringing it back in order that we will have clarity earlier on, rather than in the last week of August or the first week of September, and find resolutions. We need to bring back those dates. The Department and Bus Éireann are both looking at how that can be done to ensure we can have a better system into the future.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important subject. This year is not just another episode in a long-running saga of Government failure on school transport. This year represents a new low. In addition to the usual annual debacle, never before have we had the situation on such a scale where tickets were issued and routes confirmed but, at the eleventh hour, in some cases the day before school was due to start, services were cancelled. There was no bus, no driver, no nothing. It was and remains a shambles. Responsibility for this lies squarely at the feet of this dithering, inactive Government. It makes no sense, for example, that a bus driver can be aged over 70 and can drive kids to a GAA game at 9.30 a.m. but cannot be over 70 and drive them to school at 9.00 a.m. The Minister and Minister of State should do something about that.

The situation in my constituency of Meath East, which I share with the Minister, is a microcosm of a State-wide scandal. In August, scores of parents contacted my office in sheer desperation. Their children, some of whom had bus tickets for years, were left without seats on buses. Their plans for the new school term were thrown into utter disarray. Why? It was because of this Government's blatant failure to implement the very recommendations of a review it commissioned. That is incredible. The review of the school transport scheme took three long years to complete. It was finally published in February of last year, 19 months ago. One of its central headline recommendations was to reduce the arbitrary and outdated "near a school" distance criteria. It proposed that from September 2025, the distance would be reduced from 3.2 km to 1 km for primary school pupils and from 4.8 km to 2 km for secondary students. This single change would have been transformative. It would have shifted many children from the precarious concessionary category to secure eligible status. It would have opened the scheme up to additional pupils, finally acknowledging the reality of rural Ireland and modern commuting patterns. What happened? Absolutely nothing. The recommendation was shelved. Instead of a step change, we had a step backwards. We had a tiny number of pilot studies - just 14 on a network of over 10,600 routes. Consultants have been appointed and working groups

set up. The Government had a review. Now, it has set up groups to review that review instead of implementing it. You literally could not make it up.

The consequence of this inaction is children across Meath and the State are locked out of school transport yet again. The promise of the review has been broken. The failure to act by the Minister and her Department has directly resulted in children being denied a safe, reliable way to get to school. This is a conscious choice that has hurt families. To make matters worse, Bus Éireann outright refuses to answer basic questions. This is insult to injury and must be addressed. The impact of all of this is real and profound. It turns family life upside down. Parents are faced with impossible choices trying to co-ordinate school runs that add hours to their day or, in some cases, face the prospect of having to reduce hours or give up their jobs - typically mothers - to make the logistics work.

This is not just a transport issue. It is an issue of childcare, family income, gender equality and children's right to education. The Minister has failed to prepare or to act on and implement the review's key recommendations. This has to change.

**Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh:** The roll-out of the school transport scheme in Kildare this year was a complete shambles, as my colleague just said. On the first day of school, my phone and inbox were flooded with messages from parents who were informed at the very last minute that their child's bus route had been cancelled. We know that in some of these instances no bid was made on the route, yet parents were left completely in the dark. That kind of breakdown in co-ordination should never have happened. I hope the Department and Bus Éireann are taking measures to ensure that families are not left in the same position next year.

One family just outside Kildare town has two young girls attending Gaelscoil Mhic Aodha. A third is due to start there next year. They are concessionary ticket holders but were left without seats this year. Their only option is to walk to school. Their mother is a school principal who cannot step away from her own students to drive her children, while their father regularly works abroad. She is now considering a career break simply because there is no safe or reliable way to get her children to school. Tá pionós á chur ar na teaghlaigh seo de bharr go bhfuil siad ag seoladh a gcuid páistí chuig Gaelscoil.

Noelle, another mother, also contacted me. She sends her children to the same school and her family are in a similar predicament. Her eldest, who is aged ten, walks the poorly adapted road to school. Her youngest, who has just started i naíonáin bheaga, is taking a lift on a bus three days a week. Noelle and her husband are both engineers, but she is the one whose career has suffered in filling in the gaps, arriving late to work and having to hide the strain she is under in a male-dominated field.

4 o'clock

These stories are not isolated. Families describe years of chaos - tickets one year but gone the next, routes starting and then being abandoned. The uncertainty is crushing and the burden falls disproportionately on mothers. When the scheme works, it supports families and promotes gender equality but when it fails, it deepens inequality and puts children at risk. I ask the Minister to look urgently at the Rathangan to Kildare town route in particular, which is reportedly one of the busiest in the district. A second bus could be provided immediately if the Department gave the green light. Tá an t-éileamh ann.

Many parents have contacted me regarding the lack of routes serving the Gaelcholáiste in Nás na Ríogh. Children from Monasterevin, Kildare town and Newbridge are all travelling together to Naas. As a result, these children are arriving up to 40 minutes late every day. Again, families are being punished for availing of their right to education through meán na Gaeilge. This could be solved by adding additional routes.

The school transport scheme was designed to make family life manageable for ordinary working people. Right now, it is failing them. I recognise capacity challenges exist but it does not appear that the Government is exploring every possible solution.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** It is a pity the Minister could not stay for the debate. However, I have her script in front of me. It says "check against delivery". That is very good advice because the Government is generally very big on sound bites and woefully inadequate when it comes to actual delivery. In her script, the Minister tells us that solutions are being found every single day. Does this not tell us that every single day, issues are arising? The Government had years to plan for this. It has census data and data from the schools. The Minister has a massive Department and people who I am sure are working incredibly hard yet it seems that the Government still finds itself presiding over a shambles every year, with kids unable to get to school and parents getting in trouble at work for being late. Despite this, the Minister and Minister of State somehow managed to ramble into the Chamber and act surprised that the kids who needed a seat on the school bus last year also needed a seat on the school bus this year or, God forbid, there were more kids, different kids or kids living somewhere else who needed seats. The Minister of State has a very well-staffed Department.

People travel for plenty of reasons. Sometimes, they travel because they do not live near the school, and that is fair enough. They travel because they want to access education as Gaeilge or because they want to access non-denominational education or specific religious education. Kids with special needs are being specifically failed repeatedly. It is not appropriate for kids to have to take taxis. That should be a last resort. They should get a seat on the bus. They should not be forgotten by this Government. The Minister of State should give them a seat on the bus - he knows that - but they are left. Up until the last minute, the Government leaves parents waiting to find out how they will get their kids to school. Not everybody has a flexible job or an understanding boss but every parent wants to get his or her child to school safely. Parents simply want the Government to work with them to achieve that.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** We all know when our local school term begins. It is not a surprise. It is the most predictable event in our calendar yet despite all this notice, parents across Kilkenny and Carlow are left to face the same entirely preventable crisis in school transport. Year after year, the routes and student numbers remain largely consistent. This is not a complex, unforeseen challenge, but a basic function of the Department, yet the planning failures of the Department consistently become a crisis for parents to solve.

This is causing untold stress for parents. Parents are left scrambling the day before school starts looking for lifts. The lack of buses is making schools less safe, with children jumping out of cars left, right and centre. These schools just do not have the capacity for such traffic every morning. It creates the impression that the Department only begins to think about school transport when the summer holidays begin, which is the very definition of "lastminute.com".

This year was no different. There was chaos in my community because of promises made by the Minister of State's colleagues. Families were given tickets with promises of a seat for every child but the promise proved to be empty. Despite these children having a ticket, there was no bus for them - it was effectively a ghost bus - and then, suddenly, these tickets were revoked. I have to ask the Minister of State directly whether he believes it is acceptable to make such promises to families only for their children to be left with no bus despite having a ticket? Who is accountable for these failures? Was it the Minister of State who sanctioned the issuing of these tickets or was it Bus Éireann? When questioned, Bus Éireann seemed to have completely buried its head in the sand and we got radio silence. When we contact the Minister of State's office, all we get is an automatic reply about how busy he is and he never actually responds. Does the Minister of State think that this total absence of accountability on his watch is acceptable? These families deserve a clear answer. Who is responsible for these tickets and when will we see sufficient school transport for schoolchildren across Kilkenny? I will not let this lie. Like other parents, I want answers. I want to know what irresponsible amadán gave the go-head to issue almost 80 tickets for a 52-seater bus. Come on.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Up and down the country, but especially in rural areas, the inflexibility and lack of common sense of the Department and Bus Éireann constitute a real issue. I will ask the Minister of State two questions before I outline a case for him. Why is there separate vetting in every Bus Éireann office for drivers? I am thinking of where someone crosses over the Galway border from Mayo. Drivers often have to get up to ten separate Garda vettings. It does not make any sense when we have a shortage of drivers. I heard the Minister of State mention the fact that over-70s could only do short bus runs for Bus Éireann yet could drive hundreds of miles on private buses. This needs to be addressed quickly.

For over a year, I have been trying to resolve the dangerous situation on the Derryfadda and Boleyglass school route in Mayo. In 2021, a bus route that had serviced these areas for more than 40 years ceased operation due to the decline in student numbers. Since then, as in many rural areas, student numbers have risen and they meet the criteria to reinstate the route. However, Bus Éireann and the Department have failed to do so. Instead, parents and children are expected to travel to the nearest designated collection drop-off point, which happens to be located at the intersection of the R315 and the L1723, a busy commuter route with a significant blind spot on approach for other road users. This means that either children are expected to make their way there on foot along an already busy road with no cycle lanes or street lighting or their parents are expected to drive them down, pull in and wait to either drop off or collect them, further compromising road safety at this location. There has been a substantial back and forth between residents of this area and Bus Éireann, with Bus Éireann conceding the route meets the criteria to be reinstated, there being ten students along the road who would avail of the service. A bus is already in operation on this route for primary school pupils so why can the previously operated route at post-primary level not be reinstated? Some common sense needs to be applied to this situation, particularly now in the winter months where it can be dark and visibility on rural roads is significantly reduced, compromising safety. We are simply asking for the reinstatement of previously operated routes that served the students of Derryfadda and Boleyglass for 40 years. Why are we putting children in situations where their health and safety are compromised when it could be easily fixed? I have written to the Minister of State twice on this matter and would really appreciate a response.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** I want to talk about a worrying issue that affects parents and pupils in Shannon, Six-mile-bridge and Newmarket on Fergus in Clare when they are using school transport and the problems that come with the integration of our school transport system into the public service. Last year, the NTA made a significant investment in public transport in Shannon and the surrounding areas. This was very welcome and a step forward in resolving a lot of issues with the previous service. However, the integration of the long-established, reliable school transport service with this public service has raised alarm bells, especially for the parents who rely on it to get their children to school safely and on time. Parents like Aoife Keogh and Edel Rafferty have been tirelessly monitoring these issues day in and day out since last year and have seen first hand how the pilot scheme has failed to meet basic safety and logistical needs. One of the most pressing concerns is that drivers in the new transport pilot scheme are not Garda vetted. This is a clear and unacceptable discrepancy. All drivers in the dedicated school transport service are Garda vetted, as they should be, given that the majority of their passengers are minors. This issue was acknowledged by the authorities when Aoife and Edel raised it with them yet it remains unaddressed. There should be no difference in child safeguarding standards between the two services.

The logistics of these services are also unacceptable. Take the 316 route from Six-mile-bridge. Pupils on the first bus arrive almost an hour early for school while those on the second bus are arriving late. This means children are left hanging around or are forced to rush into school without enough time for the basic necessities like using their lockers, going to the bathroom or getting to breakfast club before class. This issue has also been raised several times. I have been sent several screenshots of the bus pick-up times being consistently late. On the Newmarket on Fergus service pupils are consistently forced to wait for up to an hour after school for a bus home. This is simply not good enough and we cannot continue to accept these inefficiencies and delays that put unnecessary pressure on our children. These services also do not have seatbelts, as city buses are being used in rural areas. There was also a promised bus stop outside the school that has not been delivered. Pupils are left on narrow footpaths and this lack of infrastructure and the failure to implement promised improvements has only added to the sense of frustration in this scheme. We are being told this pilot scheme could be rolled out as a national scheme, but how can we trust this when there are so many glaring issues with it that remain unresolved? The bottom line is our children should be able to access a transport system to and from school that is safe and reliable and so far that has not been the case here.

**Deputy Joanna Byrne:** I raised this issue directly with the Tánaiste last week and, due to the level of calls I have received from parents and guardians across Louth and east Meath, unfortunately I feel the need to speak on it again. Every year, the Government knows how many school buses are needed, how many seats are needed and what routes are required. Every year, we end up having the same discussion, highlighting the children in each of our constituencies, including those with special educational needs, let down by this Government. The Minister for education's party has been in power since 2011, which is 14 years, but still she has failed to prepare, failed to act and has unfortunately failed to deliver for these children. The Government has to recognise that, when parents and guardians receive the school bus tickets, it lifts a huge weight off their minds. They believe their child's place is secure on the school bus. The Government must then understand the anger when they receive emails giving very late notice that that place is no longer secure. In most cases, this happens on Friday afternoons with school due start on the Monday. Working parents have told me of the worry

they felt when they realised they did not have time to make alternative arrangements for their children to get them to school. Parents of children with autism have told me how they rehearsed and prepared the morning school routine with their children to get them as ready as best they could for new school year, only to have that routine dashed.

We need a complete overhaul of the school transport scheme. Pilot programmes are not enough. The recommendations from the school transport review must be implemented. We need to ensure the service is reliable and robust in order to expand and cater for more and more children over the coming years, as both the Minister of State and the Minister have referenced. We waited three years for the school transport 2030 report to be published. It has been published almost two years now and many of the key recommendations have not been implemented by this Government. It needs to implement the recommendations in the report and let this be the last year the school transport scheme is such a calamity. There should be no more task forces or working groups, but a focus on delivering procurement processes on time and in turn delivering security, reliability and equality for the children who are left behind by this Government.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** The Minister of State does not need me to tell him the school transport system is in chaos across this State, but I will do it anyway. Families in my constituency of Waterford are being failed. The system is broken. Parents are exhausted, angry and frustrated. Children are left without a safe and reliable way to get to school. I have been raising this for months. I have written to the Minister of State and his colleague. I have written to Bus Éireann and met parents from every corner of Waterford. The stories I heard again this week are appalling and are the direct result of Government neglect. I was on a Zoom call last night with up to 20 parents from west Waterford alone. In Ballymacarbry, 11 children have been refused tickets to get a school bus to Dungarvan. Parents found out just before term began and appeals were dismissed with copy-and-paste replies. In fact, two of the 11 belatedly got a school bus ticket a couple of weeks after school had started back, with absolutely no rationale for why they were selected, and the other nine were not. Children have been stranded even though there are seats on the bus. In Ardmore, Grange and Kinsalebeg in west Waterford, families were told at the very last minute that their children had no seat, even after using the service for years. Now, children are cycling dark country roads, walking and leaving class early to catch a Local Link bus because the Minister of State's Department will not implement its own review.

Families already struggling with the cost of living are in many cases forced to pay fees far in excess of a bus ticket for a private Bus Éireann service. In Lismore and the wider district around it, parents were issued tickets for stops miles away. I was at an event for Blackwater Community School last week with the Taoiseach where a fantastic new facility was opened, but the constant refrain from parents in attendance was that while it was fantastic, there were so many kids who could not get there in time to avail of the new facilities. In Grange and Pilltown, families were left in limbo until the day before schools reopened. They were scrambling to find out if their children had a seat. Others are still waiting. This is happening across the county, from Ballymacarbry to Dungarvan, in coastal villages and in the Comeraghs. It is the same dysfunction and distress, with poor or non-existent communication making matters worse. On top of that families of children with additional educational needs – the Minister of State will know this, as we raised it last week – who had to campaign to secure

school places have been left high and dry with no transport. It is happening in Waterford and right across the State.

As was mentioned earlier, the 2030 report gave clear solutions but it is gathering dust. This dysfunction cannot be allowed to continue. Families deserve certainty, not chaos. Children deserve a seat on the bus and not another year of neglect. I ask the Government to please take action now.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** The issue of school transport is an annual upheaval we have across the country. As long as I have been here, this problem has come up every September. There is a particular route somewhere that was perfect last year and now it has changed because there are two fewer children on it and the bus has been withdrawn completely, or there is some other place where people thought they had enough children to get on the bus and did not. We have situations where we have people who have concessionary tickets. I have a situation where there are three children on concessionary tickets. One of them got a ticket on the bus, but how are the other two going to get to school? There are all sorts of craziness surrounding all this.

In fairness, a review was done and there are recommendations. If those recommendations were implemented, we would go a considerable distance towards resolving many of these problems, yet the Government continues to sit on its hands and not implement the very recommendations of a report it commissioned. That is one of the key problems we have here.

We also have the serious issue of parents trying to get to special classes in schools. The Minister of State is well aware of it. They are crisscrossing the country, over and back. A child from one parish cannot get into the special class in his or her school because it is full and the child then has to go ten, 15, 20 or maybe 30 miles away to get a class. The following year, a child from the parish the first child is going to now has a space opened up in the other one. We have this thing of children being taxied all over the place at a very high cost to the State because the Government has not enough provision of classes for autism, particularly, in many of these schools. We also have a situation with special schools. There are special schools in many of our areas, but in County Leitrim we do not have one at all and that is a problem. Children are leaving the county to go to Roscommon, Cavan and Longford. That needs to be resolved.

The solutions are there for the problem with school transport, yet the Government, for whatever reason, seems to not want to implement its own report. We can come here and discuss all this annually and come back to the same problem, but we need action and that action will require a small piece of investment compared with the big problem we have got. I ask the Minister of State to ensure that report is implemented.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** The Minister of State is going to be well aware of some of the schools and areas I am going to raise, as we are both from in and around the same area.

As spokesperson on education for the party, I have heard from a significant number of people including teachers, parents, lobby groups within community areas and volunteers who have spoken to me about school transport or the lack of school transport. The difficulty that families are facing when it comes to trying to access a school transport is quite extraordinary.

The first school that I am going to mention is Rahan National School, which is just outside of my area of Mallow. I am very familiar with it. It is a rural small school that is continually

expanding. A total of 46 students applied for a school bus for Rahan National School but that school is yet to be sanctioned for a school bus. Last year when I was a councillor on Cork County Council, significant problems arose with safety measures on the road up to Rahan National School. Thankfully, the local area engineer along with Cork County Council implemented some traffic-calming measures and safety measures. However, we could alleviate all of those safety measures if a school bus were put in place for the school.

The school principal along with many parents of pupils in the school have written to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, as well as to Bus Éireann. While I know he will, I am asking the Minister of State again to speak to the principal in Rahan National School about facilitating a school bus for that school. The principal is now calling for it as a matter of safety as opposed to a matter of getting people onto a bus.

A lot of the focus is on rural schools and I am quite enough of a rural TD. However, I live in a town and in a housing estate of 500 houses with, give or take, about 1,000 cars. I am not saying there is a child in every house, but people face significant challenges in the morning when trying to access the town itself if they are trying to get out of the estate because we have a significant number of cars on the road. Last year, my colleague Councillor Peter Horgan, through the office of the former Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, asked for a pilot scheme to be introduced for Douglas and Blackrock to bring students from urban areas into school which he said would get 5,900 cars off the road in Douglas and Blackrock. This is similar to my town of Mallow where students who are living in urban areas would be given access to school transport.

I have discussed this with my colleagues. It establishes the groundwork for students to use public transport if we can get them into a school bus at five years of age no matter where they are living in the country. There is an impact on the use of public transport if a student is unaware of ever using it through his or her primary and post-primary years. I never used a school transport bus because I lived in the town. I do now use public transport, but there are reservations out there among young adults in particular about the use of public transport, be it a bus, a train, a Luas or whatever. If we normalised public transport at a very young age, that would continue up to their older years. This would alleviate traffic congestion in towns and cities. The Minister of State knows as well as I do the traffic congestion chaos on the main street of Mallow. I ask him to work with the Minister on the Mallow relief road if at all possible.

Coming into our office consistently over this summer have been surging complaints about the school transport system. That is not a new phenomenon. I previously worked with former Deputy Sean Sherlock in his office. It was a consistent problem that we faced every summer in his office and now in my office. I know my colleagues are facing that and I am sure they will speak to that. When as local representatives we contact the Minister of State, we hope he will be able to help with school transport issues. There is very little I can do as the local TD to help them.

When I was out doing some canvassing during this summer, I met many parents who previously had access to school transport but now do not. We have the regulations on the number of kilometres away from the school but in rural areas in particular, the reality on the ground does not focus on what the actual feeder school should be or what it is. For example, if the Patrician Academy is my feeder school, but I want to go to a different school that is not necessarily a feeder school, I should be given that opportunity. A barrier of school transport

should not be put before me to get to school. That barrier should not be there. We need to understand the reality on the ground when it comes to feeder schools. Bus Éireann does not take into account that reality, which is disappointing. If a brother or sister went to that school, parents are asking why they cannot get the other child into that school. That is the reality on the ground and Bus Éireann does not understand it. It is causing frustration within families.

This is something that in an ideal world we should consider appropriate and necessary for schoolchildren. The frustration among families with school transport was evident over the summer with the number of calls, emails and messages that we received. We often hear in the media that it is down to a lack of drivers or buses, but it is absolutely not, certainly in my experience. JD Express Coach Hire in Mallow bought a bus last year and sought a school transport contract from Bus Éireann, but was told because its bus had 29 seats it did not fit the criteria for school transport. I genuinely do not know why that was. I could not get through to anyone in Bus Éireann to give me an answer on that. I could not go back to the constituents who raised that with me to clarify the answer with them. They had gone out of their way, established a company, bought the bus, sought the contract from Bus Éireann but it was not possible for them.

Last week, Sinn Féin had a Private Members' motion on special education places. The people on the northside of Cork city in the likes of Mayfield and Knocknaheeny have expressed deep frustration. They have secured appropriate special educational needs places for their children and they are quite thankful for that, but they cannot get the necessary transport. Again, it places a barrier to education. We should not be placing barriers to education. A barrier should not be something as simple as a school bus. That should not be the barrier that is being placed before school children.

In my final few seconds, I will focus on the detrimental impact this is having on working families in particular. All over Ireland, but particularly in rural areas, including rural parts of Cork North-Central, those who are going out to work in the morning are relying on grandparents, neighbours, aunts and uncles to drop their children to school. That should not be the case. I am blue in the face from asking the Department and Bus Éireann to alleviate the pressure that families are facing with school transport but with no result. In his position as Minister of State with responsibility for special education and the school transport section, I ask him to try his best to overhaul the school transport system.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I thank Deputy Eoghan Kenny for affording me the opportunity to raise a number of matters. I welcome that the Minister of State is before us this evening. Like many Deputies here today, I have been inundated with queries from worried parents who are struggling to get answers from Bus Éireann on their children's school bus places. In many cases, parents were contacted a week or two before the start of the school term, and in a number of cases in my own county of Kildare two days before the school was due to start, and were informed that their school bus routes were not going ahead. This is despite the fact that many of these parents already had a school bus ticket in their possession. The question has already been posed, but I will pose it again. How can Bus Éireann issue a ticket for a bus that does not exist? Who is controlling the ghost buses? In many cases I have been told by Bus Éireann and the Minister of State's office that it came down to finding suitable contractors.

Yet, when I rang some of the contractors, whom I know and have worked with on many occasions, they told me they were actually waiting on Bus Éireann to sign the contract and not the other way around. That is the case for more than one route in Kildare. I am sure other colleagues in the House will have had the same experience.

While this is happening year in, year out, this year was particularly bad. Every year since I have been a public representative, school transport has been an issue. We have been promised reports and solutions but, unfortunately, this year has been the worst year I have ever had with school transport. I have been inundated with worried parents and, as has been continuously said here tonight, parents who have had to take time off work and unpaid holiday leave to get their children to school. It is simply not good enough.

I did not pick up at all the communications problems I and other public representatives have had with Bus Éireann in the Minister of State's speech. It is simply not good enough that I have been asked to submit emails, with consent from parents, and yet, as I stand in front of the Minister of State today, I still have not received those replies. We need a dedicated line for Oireachtas Members. We need to have a line that will provide us with answers straight away, such as the line we have in the Passport Office. I refer to a line we could ring to give the details and get an answer as to what is actually happening, rather than waiting three to four months for a reply. As I said, in some cases, a reply has still not been forthcoming.

The Minister of State will know I am going to raise the issue of the Curragh secondary school with him once again. I have raised this as a Topical Issue, as well as with the Minister of State on a number of occasions. Some 29 to 40 children are using their parents' cars, carpooling where they can, to get to a school on the Curragh. They are waiting for a new school to be built in Kildare town, but we still do not have a bus for them.

In the short time I have remaining, I wish to raise the issue of drivers over the age of 70 not being allowed to drive Bus Éireann buses. It seems madness that these same drivers can come in on a private bus and take those children to far-flung places, such as Donegal or Cork, without a problem yet they cannot drive 5 miles from their home into the school. What is wrong there?

Special schools have already been mentioned. I have raised this before and I will finish on this point. We have people in school buses and special taxis criss-crossing one another as they go from Athy, where I live, to Dublin and as people from Dublin bypass Athy on their way back to Kilkenny. It is about joined-up thinking. While I know the Minister of State is doing his best, we need more action. We need that joined-up thinking because too many families are suffering.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** Obviously, the Minister of State is hearing a lot of stories today about the failures within the school transport scheme. Every year at this time of the year, we sound like a broken record relaying these stories to the Minister of the day. As my colleague, Deputy Wall, relayed, it seems this year is the worst year we have seen in a long time.

I wish to relay the story of Jade Black and her son, Rocco, to the Minister of State. Rocco is 16 and attends St. Michael's House. They live in the north inner city in the middle of my constituency of Dublin Central. Four days before returning to school at the end of August, they were told the school transport provider was gone. There was no proper explanation. "Sorry for your inconvenience" was the phrasing in the email. The person driving the taxi for this

child had been there since 2018. Jade is able to drive her son every day to St. Michael's House. She also has to take another child with her, who lives close by. That child is reliant on a wheelchair, but the car cannot take a wheelchair, resulting in the child having to go through the indignity of getting into a car without her wheelchair. While she can walk a few steps, she has to go through that every day. We are into our fourth week and there are no notions as to when we are going to see any change. What I wish to convey to the Minister of State is that Jade, after 17 years out of the workforce, was due to start a job on 1 September. That mother has had to put off starting that job because of the failures of the State and the failure of the school transport scheme.

Last week, I brought it up with the Taoiseach and he was talking about work being the greatest way out of poverty, but this woman cannot work because of the failure of the State. We need to see real action and an explanation. We need that service reinstated as soon as possible for the children attending St. Michael's House, and indeed for all the other special schools around the country.

**Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere:** I welcome the statements today on school transport. As a rural TD, the challenges families across Carlow and Kilkenny experience with school transport come across my desk every day. I wish to make a couple of quick points. The first point relates to the importance of accessibility. Every single child in this State deserves access to safe and reliable transport to and from school. It is non-negotiable. Not only is it absolutely vital for the students, but it is also imperative for their parents who are sometimes under ferocious pressure to arrange their kids to be dropped to and from school while they are trying to go about their daily busy lives.

While urban areas might have more transport options, and more power to them, there are serious challenges that have to be addressed in rural communities regarding school transport. This year alone I have come across cases in Ballyragget, Lisdowney, Borris, St. Mullins, Mullinavat, Listerlin, Mooncoin, Dunnamaggin, Gowran, Dungarvan, The Rower, Graiguenamanagh, Castlecomer, Ballyhale and Knockmoylan, to mention just a few. The school transport scheme is a lifeline for many families in these areas but we have to do better and we have to do more.

It is a specific measure in the programme for Government to include an additional 100,000 students by 2030. I welcome this vision. While it would be fantastic to see, in order to achieve 100,000 more places, additional funding will be required. I note and acknowledge in the Minister of State's speech earlier that more than €500 million was allocated in 2024, which is a significant increase on previous years' funding. I appeal to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to fight as hard as possible to increase funding for rural Ireland and for rural families both across Carlow and Kilkenny and nationally.

I also acknowledge the significant increase in the numbers using the school transport scheme, rising from 120,000 a couple of years ago to 178,000 today. There is a reason the school transport system is so successful in terms of its use and numbers, but we have to ensure every child has access to it and there are no barriers.

My next point concerns drivers over the age of 70. I cannot understand how a driver over 70 years of age is ineligible to drive a school bus under the Bus Éireann rules, but the school can ring that same bus contractor and the same driver can bring those kids to swimming or a

GAA match without any problem at all. It beggars belief. While I know there is a specific measure in the programme for Government to carry out an independent assessment on the feasibility of removing the exclusion of drivers aged over 70 from the school transport scheme, this has to be done immediately. We want to get 100,000 additional places. The average bus size has capacity for 50 people, meaning an extra 2,000 buses and 2,000 drivers are needed. We are at full employment in this country. We need to give those people over the age of 70, who have something to offer and are happy to make a contribution and give back, the opportunity to do so. We need to fast-track that.

Sometimes, particularly in the context of rural school transport, it feels like we are being punished for living in a rural area. That is not right. In the little time I have left, I will speak about the bus in Ballyhale and Knockmoylan. I thank the Minister of State for his incredible hard work on this particular project and the fact that there is an additional bus on a pilot scheme. We know that the funding is there for it, which is brilliant, but the challenge is to get the actual bus, the service and the driver in place. I implore the Minister of State once again today to do everything he can with Bus Éireann to fast-track this for the families of Knockmoylan and for the kids attending the school in Ballyhale. My good friend and previous colleague, Bobby Aylward, campaigned for this for many years. It is high time that it is sorted. I thank the Minister of State for his hard work in that regard.

I wish to speak quickly on the ability to change a school bus route. I hear regularly from families and students that the bus route can be changed every now and again with no notice and that it is something that does not suit. There has to be a mechanism in that regard. It is frustrating and difficult getting answers from Bus Éireann when it comes to the changing of bus routes or slight changes that would be sustainable and good for the country.

Can the application process be looked at a little earlier? Waiting until the eleventh hour to get word two or three days before a child is going back to school is, to put it simply, not good enough. Is there a way that we could open and close the application process earlier so that parents know whether they are getting a ticket? If they knew in June or earlier in the year, it would give them the chance to put alternative arrangements in place or seek funding to get additional buses where required.

That is something that really needs to be looked at. If the process is started earlier, we could let the kids and their families know in plenty of time to make alternative arrangements or to arrange additional buses, if required.

I agree with Deputy Wall on the dedicated helpline. It is a fantastic idea because when we get in contact and get the consent forms, the speed at which we get replies from Bus Éireann is, at best, below average, and I am being kind saying that.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I know the Minister of State is personally invested in improving the school transport system. It should be acknowledged that we have seen a significant increase in the number of school transport places. I want to put on record my thanks to officials in the Department, to people in Bus Éireann and to the bus companies and drivers around the country who carry tens of thousands of children to school every day. The Minister of State will appreciate it is not from those that we are hearing the complaints. The issues coming up are from where we need to expand the service. The Minister of State will be familiar with this and I have raised a number of cases in the Wicklow-Wexford constituency with him.

I was happy when the Minister, Deputy Foley, carried out a review of the school transport system in the last Oireachtas. It was the first significant review since the 1960s, when the scheme came into being. A big element of that was to significantly expand the number of children able to avail of school transport. As my colleague and friend Deputy Cleere said, we want to see an additional 100,000 children on school buses by 2030. It will give ease to their families and is critical from an environmental point of view. Part of that was to introduce a range of pilot schemes. I was happy that one of the first 2024-25 pilot schemes was introduced in north Wexford to serve the Monamolin area coming into Gorey. I pay tribute to the work of parents there. Emma Johnston, Yvonne Dempsey, Michelle Kennedy and others came together to make sure that pilot bus scheme was up and running. I am disappointed that there may only be 14 more pilots this year. I was hoping we would hear more. The Minister of State might indicate that we will see more in the course of this school year.

In my area, there is demand for going from the Monamolin-Oulart area into Wexford town. We have an existing service going into Enniscorthy. All the parents are looking for is to extend that to Oulart to take children from there. There is huge demand because these are traditional school routes. Children from the Ferns area want to go to school in Bunclody. If they live a couple of kilometres away in Tombrack, they are able to get the bus. All we ask is to extend that service as a pilot into Ferns. There is a similar request for Ballindaggan-Kiltealy into Bunclody. The reason I talk about these is they are not new routes; they are traditional school routes that have been in operation. Kids in those areas have gone to those schools for a long period but, because it is not necessarily the nearest education centre, they have not been provided with the bus. We need more flexibility on that.

In parishes and communities like Castletown and Coolgreany in north Wexford, depending on where you live in the parish, you are closer to Gorey or Arklow. People are playing the postcode lottery and using other family members' postcodes to ensure they are closer to the school they want to attend. It is crazy that communities are divided in that way. We should have flexibility whereby, provided you want to attend a school within a reasonable radius - 20 or 25 km - you should be able to do that, particularly if there is a tradition in the community of going to that school.

A policy all of us here have been talking about for far too long is the one around over-70s. In no other EU jurisdiction, nor in the North or Britain, is there a provision whereby those aged over 70 are excluded from driving school buses. There are requirements to ensure they are competent. They have to pass tests every year and the drivers and bus companies do not have a problem with doing that. This is a case where the Minister of State should take control of the situation. We are tired of it being thrown between Bus Éireann, the contractors, the Road Safety Authority and everybody else. A decision needs to be made, not just for those recently turned 70 but because the age profile of bus drivers shows it is a big challenge attracting new drivers and this problem will only grow. I ask the Minister of State to finally take this decision and be the brave Minister to take leadership on it.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** I thank the Minister of State for being here. School transport problems, unfortunately, are an annual event and we can rely on them happening every year. I meet frustrated parents. We all get emails and phone calls about stranded children, no certainty and a remarkably unfair lottery system. The majority of children still do not get access to any bus route. The children of Louth and every county deserve a school transport system that works

and is reliable, fair and safe. We have heard many reports this evening, as well as in the media and in our inboxes, of routes not operating, children left stranded and families waiting for promised services. These are not minor glitches; they have a huge impact on families.

I thank the Minister of State for working on all our requests over the summer and in the past few weeks on school transport. It has made a difference but not every problem is fixed. In 2025-26, the scheme is projected to provide transport for more than 180,000 students. This is about 19% of all enrolments. Costs have doubled since 2019 from €219 million to €509 million. Obviously, there is demand. There are fee waivers and growing obligations for contributing but we still have the same percentage of students able to avail of school buses as in 2019. I really want to look at that. If we are spending double and it is still around 20% of students using school transport, we are not doing what we need to do.

There are high fees for families. Families are willing to pay them and I acknowledge some fees are paid but the eligibility criteria are very restrictive. The distance and nearest school criteria do not work for every family. I am particularly thinking of north Louth. Children in Omeath and Carlingford do not go to their nearest school, or to their second nearest school, which would be in Dundalk. Many go to Bush Post Primary School and there is chaos at that school every morning and evening. It is a nightmare. Most parents drive to collect their children because, number one, there are no buses and, number two, it is unsafe to allow a child to walk to the school. The safe routes to school programme works to a certain degree but for many families the car is the only option. It is the only option I have to send my children to secondary school and indeed primary school.

There are pilot projects going on around the country but I agree with Deputy Malcolm Byrne. We need to get rid of these pilots. We know the problems and have been dealing with them for years. We need to kick off the shackles and actually deal with the problems. In County Louth, we had cancellations of buses in Clogherhead and Collon days before schools started. Parents were getting the word that their children was not getting the lotto ticket for the buses. It leaves children stranded and parents unable to get to work. It puts worry and stress on families to not be able to get children to school. Even when parents have the ability and will to pay, they are not getting their children to school. We must get the reviews and recommendations processed and working straight away. The evidence supports lowering eligibility distances, removing the nearest school constraints and expanding the services. We need timelines. Pilots are grand but we must not be stuck in perpetual trial mode. Capacity is a huge problem in rural areas, as are availability of buses and driver shortages.

I think everybody in this room would agree that not allowing over-70s to drive a school bus is a ludicrous rule that needs to be changed. I have an awful lot more to say but my time is up.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** I disagree with Deputy Byrne. As far as I can see, school transport is getting worse every year. Every year I am contacted by parents whose children have been utterly failed by this Government. With little to no notice parents are left to shoulder the burden of attempting to reschedule work and other commitments to deal with the Government's failures while children see buses full of their schoolmates and classmates passing by their homes with no space for them. However, there are spaces. Tickets have been allocated to children who do not use the bus, so the spaces lie idle and other children who need the bus cannot avail of them. Families have endured three years of utter chaos while the Department has conducted a review

into the school transport scheme, which was eventually published 19 months ago. A key recommendation of that report was that from September of this year, the nearest school criteria would be reduced, but that has not happened yet. We have seen a handful of pilot studies with no meaningful change. As a result, children across this State have been denied places on their local school bus.

This is a mess of the Minister's making. She has implemented a review and her response to the shambles that she is overseeing amounts to an excuse that contracts were cancelled at the last minute and a sop of throwing money at parents, by the way of an apology, to make alternative arrangements.

Why was such a volume of contracts cancelled at the last minute? Why is the Minister signing contracts to facilitate chaos? One potential reason that I have been informed of is that workers on these routes do not have good working conditions. For example, workers will lose wages on the day of the Presidential election because no children are going to school. Truthfully, there seems to be an issue within the Department of contracting workers on poorer terms than might be expected. The Department fosters financial uncertainty among workers.

Parents do not want compensation to make alternative arrangements. They want their Government and Ministers to do their jobs to ensure that every child is allocated a school seat on the bus. Please get your act together as soon as possible, and definitely before next year or we will go through this chaos again.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The school transport system is simply not up to standard. As previous speakers said, every year in the first week or second week back after the summer recess we are dealing with the same issues. In fact, all of our constituency offices are inundated in the months of July and August, but particularly August, with parents who are frustrated with the eligibility criteria, the concessionary criteria, the fact their child has not got a place or the fact they have not got the ticket, or they are waiting for their ticket to come. It is frustration after frustration. It was interesting to hear some of the Government representatives. Deputy Cleere was one of them. He said the Minister was doing a great job, but then listed nearly every town and village in Kilkenny where there are problems. I am not sure what great job the Minister is doing. He said the Minister was doing a great job and that all we need is a bus and a driver. I would have thought it was fairly obvious that for children we need buses and drivers. If we do not have buses and drivers, then we do not have school places. Rather than giving the Minister a pat on the back on one hand and then saying there are problems in every part of his constituency, we need the Government to implement the recommendations in the report it commissioned, most of which have not been implemented.

In my constituency of Waterford, I was inundated with calls from the east of the county, from Dunmore East, to the west of the county, from families in Lismore where children did not have places, or whose tickets were late coming. In almost every part of rural Waterford there are problems every single year. It is very often the same families coming to us. One email I reviewed during the summer said that for three years in a row there have been problems. For three years in a row, we have been trying to help and assist through our offices, but it should not take people having to go to their local TD to try to raise issues with Bus Éireann or with the Department to get it sorted. It is not beyond us to have a properly functioning school transport system, but it seems to be beyond this Government.

I am afraid that I am not going to give the Minister a false pat on the back and say that the Government is doing a great job. It simply is not. The system is not up to standard. We need serious investment and reform of the system if we want to make it fit for purpose.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about school transport, but in particular the urgent issue of accessibility for children with special educational needs. The transport system we have was set up in 1967 to bring children to school safely and reliability. It is managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Youth. However, it is not working for every child. We see this every year and their families are let down at the last minute. As the Minister outlined, this scheme supports nearly one in five children. However, it is just not working for every single one of them. For children with special educational needs - and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, has a special responsibility in this area - school transport is not just about getting from A to B. It is their lifeline and allows them to attend the school that is equipped to meet their needs. This is often in schools that are not in their own community, so transport is so important. It gives parents the confidence that their child will get there and back safely and allows families to hold down jobs and manage their daily lives.

There are so many children using school transport. There are 17,500 children with additional needs at primary level and 3,200 at post-primary level. A huge number of people are using that service but, in many cases, these are provided by taxis rather than buses. In fact, we now have 2,700 taxis operating as part of the school transport fleet. Why are we relying on taxis to bring children to school? We are seeing yet another public service being funnelled into the private sector.

As Deputies outlined, every August things happens, in that contracts are not secured, drivers are not found and routes are cancelled. This is a failure of forward planning. In Dublin South-Central, there are a number of families who contacted me over the past number of weeks at their wits' end. There are children whose buses have been cancelled at the last minute leaving families in absolute upheaval. One child cannot get to a school outside of his community by way of school transport. The schools in the vicinity of where he lives are not suitable for his needs, so has to travel outside of it. However, given that school transport is not available means he cannot get there by such means and it puts a huge burden on his family with them having to juggle their already busy days to get him to school. As I said last week in the Dáil, there is a child who has missed so many days of schools that the Educational Welfare Service should have been involved. However, it was not because his parents were not bringing him or he was not bothered but it was because school transport let him down.

What is at stake when transport is withdrawn is not just a missed bus but it is the denial of an education, which children have a right to, and parents are forced to give up work. There is a trust being broken between the State and families. Let that not be forgotten.

The Department's review in 2024 recognised many of the problems, such as the removal of the nearest school rule for routes, reducing distance thresholds and expanding the scheme to tens of thousands of children. As Deputies already mentioned, there are a lot of pilots. We have said several times in this Chamber that we need to get over the use of pilots for everything in this country. Other countries do things very well. We do not have to reinvent the wheel and do a pilot. Let us look at what other countries do well and take that opportunity.

Regarding climate targets, there must be a 51% cut in emissions by 2030 and net zero by 2050. School transport has the potential to make a real contribution to this by reducing the number of children driven to school in private cars. Bus Éireann has committed to making half of its fleet zero emissions by 2030. However, with 94% of the school transport with private contractors, they do not have the same requirements and that will slow things up.

If the Government is serious about inclusion and if we are serious about equal access to education, then school transport cannot be treated as an afterthought. It must be seen as an essential infrastructure like classrooms, teachers and SNAs. It means that the routes are secured well in advance. It means dedicated provision for children with special educational needs. It means planning for sustainability, not simply reacting to problems.

Perhaps the question should be asked of the Department. The Department of Education and Youth's expertise is in education and youth work. Would school transport be a better fit under the Department of Transport as it is the expert for that? It seems that it is such a stretch for the Department of education and it is another layer of difficulty that perhaps that needs to be considered.

5 o'clock

I do not have all of the answers but I have plenty of questions. I know my colleagues also have the same.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** Enrolment in our school bus system has become an annual crisis, involving huge stress and uncertainty for many families. It is a stand-out example of the Government's inability or unwillingness to get the basics right for families. What should be a straightforward service has become an epic fiasco of poor, disjointed planning and crude restrictions, with so much unnecessary worry and hassle for those families caught up in it.

Across Cork East, the frustration is acute. From Youghal to Cobh to Mitchelstown, I have been inundated with calls and emails from families who are at the end of their tethers trying to access school bus places for their children. The system is both spectacularly haphazard and mercilessly rigid. No grace is shown to families who are unfamiliar with the system or who missed the deadline for applications and are now left stranded. This will disproportionately impact families in disadvantaged social circumstances. I am thinking in particular of two children I know of in Cloyne who were refused places due to late applications. Their parents have no access to a car. These children will now have to take the unreliable public bus home at 6.15 p.m., which will be particularly punitive during winter. Some other examples of the fallout from the system include a family based in Clonmult who were allocated a route that is too far from their home to be a feasible option. Yet, a school bus on a route that has not been offered to them passes directly by their home.

I am also advocating for an autistic, visually impaired child who has been offered a special school placement on the other side of Midleton from where they live but who has not been allocated transport to get to that school. I am representing two children in Leamlara who live closer to Carrigtwohill than Midleton. They have been assigned concessionary status for the school bus, which means have been put to the back of the queue and are not guaranteed places. This happened on the basis they live closer to Carrigtwohill and have chosen St. Colman's in

Midleton for their secondary education. However, St. Colman's is their nearest DEIS school, yet that has not being taken into account.

This is an absurd state of affairs. These children have been granted placement in a school on the basis of disadvantage yet are being excluded from accessing transport to that school. It is not rocket science to design a school bus system that is joined-up, meets the needs of all students within reason and has some degree of flexibility and humanity built into it for families who do not have their applications in on time because they are new to the system or find themselves in difficult social circumstances. The Department really needs to get a grip on this issue.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Year in, year out in Wicklow we have problems with the school bus service. It usually happens two or three days before school starts, when the emails start to arrive from Bus Éireann to tell parents - who have already paid for and secured tickets for their children and made plans on the basis that they will have a way to get to school - that, for whatever reason, there is no bus available. This is usually because there is no bus driver, the contractor has pulled the bus or that a bus could not be secured in the first place. It is always left until the very last minute and this leaves families absolutely reeling and trying to get on top of how they will get their children to school.

I have had constituents who could not go to work. Others had to leave work or could not take up job offers because the school bus service in Wicklow was so bad. It was March of last year before some of the routes were up and running. The school year was nearly over at that stage. This happens year in, year out; it is not a new problem.

When this issue was raised previously, we were told there was going to be a review of the school bus system and that all aspects of it would be looked at. I had a look at the review that was carried out. There are three phases in the report. It seems that phase three is the one that applies. In that context, the report states, "Phase 3 involves an examination of issues around eligibility criteria, scheme performance, scheme expenditure and the potential for scheme integration." Someone in the Department forgot to complete the report because there is no mention of scheme performance at any stage in the document. It is mentioned once in the introduction, on page 5, and is not mentioned anywhere ever again. In the context of a scheme with which there are so many problems, surely performance and how the scheme currently operates should have been the number one thing the Department looked at. The Department should surely have stated that if it wanted to make matters better, it needed to identify the problems and challenges that exist. It would appear that this was never done.

I am going to put my constituency hat on and say that Wicklow is one of those counties that is particularly impacted every year. Will the Minister of State-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy is over time

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** -----have the Department carry out a review analysis of the school transport system in Wicklow? If it does so, it will identify where all of the challenges and barriers are. I reckon that those challenges and barriers apply cross the country as well.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Rice is next.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I will go first if that is okay.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That is okay.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. There is probably very little I can say that is going to be news to the Minister of State at this point. Many Members have covered, quite comprehensively, the structural flaws facing the transport scheme as it stands. It is probably difficult to comprehend any sort of acknowledgement that the scheme is getting better when it is a problem that the Minister of State and the Minister have inherited. This is a problem of the previous Government's making. When the Government announced free school transport for all without having the ability to back that up with capacity or the infrastructure to deliver it, what happened was that demand was created. Other Members have spoken about the level of increase in the use of tickets over the past couple of years. That is simply because, overnight, an announcement was made that there would be free transport for everybody. That led to children who had been using the system day in and day out for years lost their tickets to those who successfully applied for tickets and who have not used them. I cannot understate the frustration of people whose children do not get tickets and who, when they go to collect them from school, see ghost buses that are either half or one third empty driving by because other students are not using their bus tickets to the extent that their children would.

If there is a possibility of carrying out some form of check of the scheme, I implore the Minister of State to do that. If people are not using their tickets, there are many others who will use them. We must do better. The Minister of State knows that. The Government knows that the system is deeply flawed. This is the manifestation of making announcements without the ability to back them up.

Other speakers listed town after town. It is safe to assume that every school community in Kildare has been affected by this issue. We have communities right throughout the county that are impacted. I am not going to list them off.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You should conclude, Deputy

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** There are some children who have tickets for buses while their siblings do not. There is a real issue with school places. If children cannot get into their closest schools, they might have to travel 10 km, 15 km or 20 km to get a place in another school. However, they are not eligible for school transport. If we can join matters up, the scheme has the potential to work. Right now, however, it is quite dysfunctional.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** The problems with school transport are not new. If anything, this has become an annual fiasco. My colleagues Deputies Whitmore and Cummins have been raising this matter and calling for a restructuring of the scheme for a long period. In the time afforded to me, I want to refer to the consequences for some of the families in my constituency of Cork South-Central. Several families in Cork have contacted me and described their real frustration about the fact that they are continuously being advised to contact the local Cork office using an online web form. These are families who are desperately in need of answers, who want to

speak to somebody and who are being expected to wait for responses through the website. They have urgent queries and the least they deserve is to be able to talk to somebody directly to try to resolve some of the problems. I would like that to be looked at.

The failure of the scheme is having real consequences for families. There is a parent of a child with additional needs who has been back in school for over a month without the transport they were approved for in June. These parents are alternating taking time off work in order that they can get their child to school. These are families who are missing out on time at work in order to get their children to school. They are already under severe financial pressure because they are paying privately for therapies and services for their children that the State is refusing to provide. Time and time again, the State is failing children with additional needs and their families. They deserve better and need better supports. The lack of school transport available to children with additional needs is just an example of this.

I would like the Minister of State to intervene and urgently respond to the issues outlined in the debate this evening. I would also like to see a full review into the ongoing issues with the scheme in order that they will not continue to be repeated year after year and that we can resolve this and have a better system in place for children and families right across the country.

It is really important that we get to the bottom of this and find solutions for families.

**Deputy Keira Keogh:** I thank the Minister of State for being here. I welcome the fact that now over 170,000 children are availing of the school transport system, which is a huge increase on the 120,000 who previously availed of it. I also welcome that in the programme for Government we have committed to having another 100,000 avail of it by 2030. I understand the difficulty we have in recruiting bus drivers. At the same time, however, we have to acknowledge that the system is just too rigid. Probably only 2% of those who use the system are experiencing challenges with it. However, that 2% includes parents are stressed out of their minds, who are dealing with uncertainty and who are extremely anxious, from both a practical and a financial perspective. This affects rural families in particular. We need to start dealing with the system earlier in the summer in order that we avoid panic later in the summer and in order to help parents who are struggling to budget and who find out late in August whether they have to pay or not.

We need more funding and better communication. When people are contacting their TDs, it is because the system is not working for them and they are struggling. Better communication would really ease the situation, as would more transparency around who is getting concessionary tickets and more flexibility, especially by means of the use of local knowledge. We can look at this in the context of the nearest and second-nearest school rule. The system is too rigid and does not take into account local knowledge and feeder schools. I think of students in Glenhest outside Newport who were advised by the system that St. Gerald's is their nearest school. Nobody in Glenhest goes to St. Gerald's in Castlebar because the Sacred Heart School in Westport, Sancta Maria College in Louisburgh and Rice College in Westport are the feeder schools for Glenhest. I will be selfish and take this opportunity to congratulate my school, the Sacred Heart School, on its centenary this week.

Another challenge of the nearest school rule is not taking into account that we live in a modern Ireland and that parents are working in different towns. School preferences and subject interests need to be taken into account. For example, some schools do not teach music. A

gifted student who loves music may want to go to a school where it is taught. We have to keep siblings together. Some secondary schools do not offer autism classrooms. I know of a set of twins, one of whom will miss out on school transport if he goes to the same school as his twin. We need to respect tradition and keep flexibility in mind.

One mum who reached out to me said, "not knowing until the beginning of August just weeks before the school year starts whether you will need €75 or €800 to cover transport costs is so nerve-wracking". This comes into play when we look at Sancta Maria College. We have three buses leaving Westport to go out to that school. There is a huge tradition of children attending Sancta Maria College in Louisburg. For one child, attending Sancta Maria College costs €850 per year. For two children, the cost is €1,450. If you have three children, it will cost €1,800. Again, flexibility and local knowledge could be applied in this instance. If three buses are going from one town to another, even if it is not the nearest or second-nearest school, surely we should try to support people in the relevant communities.

I spoke about transparency. In the context of concessionary tickets, I am aware of an instance where ten people were on a waiting list for concessionary tickets. There were nine tickets available. Those responsible for making the decision in respect of allocating those tickets said that in the interests of fairness they would pull the names out of a hat. That did not take into account the fact that some families do not have cars or that there might not be safe footpaths or drop-off points in some areas. I heard another Deputy refer to disadvantaged families in this regard. Pulling names out of a hat may seem fair but that is not really the case when you take people's circumstances into account.

The final point I was to make relates to children with additional needs or those who are disabled who avail of bus transport. We really need to look at clear guidelines around simple things like food. If you have autistic children, a lot of the time their condition can often be accompanied by restrictive eating. Making sure a child is fed going out the door might mean sending them to school with a slice of toast. In that context, we sometimes hear that there is no eating or drinking allowed on buses. I reiterate what I said last week about providing further training and support for bus escorts who often have to deal with distressed behaviours. Let us put families and rural Ireland first and let us move away from the rigid rules.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** I will add to what Deputy Keogh and many others have said about school transport in rural areas. The same thing seems to happen every year. I commend the Minister of State on the work he has done. The additional 8,000 bus seats that have been delivered this year are very welcome. Many of the difficulties I have dealt with across Carlow and Kilkenny relate to the allocation of concessionary tickets. There is a requirement to have a bit more transparency as to how the allocation of these tickets is decided upon. Many distraught parents came to me in the week school was returning because they discovered that their child who had a ticket all their school life is starting leaving certificate year and no longer has one. This causes stress and turmoil within a household. I know parents who had to take annual leave in order to get their children to school. The Minister of State has mentioned this matter, and I applaud his ambition. However, I would love if we could ensure that, from next year and going forward, there would be more of an alignment when it comes to students being informed about their school places and about whether they have places on school transport. That is going to be really important.

Deputy Keogh mentioned is the over-70s rule that exists in Bus Éireann regarding drivers. As a former SNA, I found out to my surprise this year that this rule also applies to people driving cars or taxis who bring children with special educational needs to school. A 71-year-old cannot drive a taxi on behalf of Bus Éireann to school but he or she can drive a particular child to swimming from his or her school later the same day. I would like that rule to be changed by Bus Éireann and the rule that prevents over-70s driving buses.

It would be good if we could get a quicker response in the context of the allocation of additional seats. Let us look at it, if we can, on a multi-annual basis, even though I appreciate that is not all down to the Department of education or, indeed, Bus Éireann. We need engagement with the schools. We also need parents to decide quicker which school they would like their child to go to, particularly when it comes to secondary school, in order that we have a lengthier timeline when it comes to arranging the provision of school buses and bus tickets.

Children and families in rural areas are further disadvantaged because we do not have the option of a public transport system. However, I wish to recognise what the State does provide. It provides, on the whole, a seat for every child on a bus to their nearest secondary school. That is to be applauded, but it does not reflect what modern school-going patterns are like. There needs to be an evolution in this regard. Having said that, I recognise what the Department of education and the State provide.

I know parents who have been trying to get buses for the routes between Ballon and Bunclody, Rathvilly and Tullow and Grange and Knockbeg. We have been asking for additional capacity. I am glad to say that additional capacity was provided on the route from Grange, or Killerrig Cross, to Knockbeg, but parents did not know about that until the bus and the second bus departed on Monday last. They were still driving their children to school. The bus tickets were issued after the bus had already come into service. I am very grateful to the Department and to the Minister of State, with whom I engaged several times regarding that bus route. I am thankful for that additional capacity, as are the parents. They no longer need to take annual leave in order to bring their children to school.

To sum up, I would like to see a follow-through. I once again applaud the Minister of State's ambition to ensure that, subject to resources, a much closer alignment between students securing school places and the decisions on their applications for school transport. I would love to see the over-70s rule being looked at by Bus Éireann. I would also like to see the deadlines for applications and payment happening earlier in the school year. If the latter happens, families would not be faced with the avoidable stress and uncertainty about how their children are going to get to school and how hard-pressed working parents are going to facilitate dropping their children off and collecting them from school.

I thank the Minister of State for all the work he is doing. Please continue with the ambition and particularly with a further focus on rural school transport.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister of State and the Department for the work they are doing in this area. The numbers availing of school transport have increased to 172,000 this year from 149,000 in 2022-2023. The number for people with special educational needs has gone from 18,000 to 21,500. It is not easy to increase services like that because, as a lot of

speakers mentioned, there is demand for the vehicles and for the drivers. That is a challenge and how we deal with it into future is something we need to look at very carefully.

It is important we acknowledge the work done by the Department, school management, Bus Éireann, the contractors employed, the drivers and the parents who all co-operate in delivering this service. The Minister was talking about the roll out of the pilot scheme. My colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, referred to Rahan. Very much so over the last two years parents there have been looking for school transport because it is a difficult road to travel. There is a large number of cars and it is a difficult area to manoeuvre. I am delighted to hear progress is being made on this. I know the Minister is doing everything possible in dealing with that issue in relation to Rahan. It is a good pilot project to take on. There are huge benefits if it is put into place. Bus Éireann has been working with the school, the board of management and with the Department on bringing Rahan in as a pilot project.

In the constituency I serve, we have major challenges at times - for instance, getting bus services in the upper Glanmire area, and to Carrignavar. There are a lot of people in the Glenville area who want to go to Fermoy and people in the Whitechurch area who want to go to Blarney. There are all sorts of challenges in different areas. In fairness, in dealing with those, it is difficult to meet all the needs and the challenges, but I do think every effort is being made to do that. The only way of really dealing with it is to try to increase the level of transport available, and that we work that much harder over the next two to three years to try to make sure we meet the targets we have set.

One of the problems is discretionary seats, in particular where families have them for two years and then find in year three, four or five the seat is no longer available. I know one family where one of the parents was going through cancer treatment and three of their children who had concessionary seats for the last number of years suddenly lost them. This posed huge challenges for the family. One member of the family was trying to hold down a job while another family member was in healthcare. At times no allowance is made for that. One is going into a lottery system. We need to look at that more carefully. Where a concessionary ticket is granted, we must do everything possible to ensure it is continued because families work around that. They believe it will continue for the number of years the child is going to that school.

Another big issue is around the time decisions are made. If that could be brought forward to an earlier date, it would be extremely beneficial to families as it would allow them to plan. If they had concessionary tickets and for some reason were no longer able to get them, they could plan for it. Now families are finding out at a very late stage and they are having to make alternative plans.

It is important we progress the pilot schemes but also make sure the reports are available at an early stage to see how they can be further expanded. We have made a lot of progress over the past number of years. It is important we continue with that, that we continue to make sure our children get to school safely, that we reduce the number of motor vehicles and that we use buses rather having than a huge number of cars arriving outside the school at the one time.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy to conclude.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister for the work being done. Hopefully, we will see success in the pilot projects that have been started.

**Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin:** In my 34 years as a primary school teacher, and having been on three secondary school boards, this is probably the worst year I can recall in terms of school transport chaos. My office is inundated with messages and calls, mostly in relation to transport for children with special needs. I could give numerous examples such as the 15 children who are today without a school bus place for Castletown National School near the Wicklow-Wexford border. Most of the children had a bus seat for years but now have none. This makes no sense. We have provided help to a bus operator who submitted a tender over six months ago but had not been contacted by Bus Éireann until we intervened. Now he has a tender but there is currently no route for him to bid on. The provider is close to the Castletown area and he would be able to cover the 15 children I mentioned in a 25-minute route if he was given approval. We have so many empty buses and children with no bus seats.

We are also dealing with another case, which is in the Killealy to Ballindaggan and Bunclody area. There are ten children with no bus seats. Parents from Ferns to Bunclody are paying up to €1,300 per year to a private company. There are others in the Ballygarrett and Monamolin areas of Wexford. I have contacted the Minister's office about the issue and we provided names and contact details so they would be investigated. The Minister has committed this, which is very welcome. With Bus Éireann where is the joined-up thinking? Does anyone from Bus Éireann actually drive these routes or do they use artificial intelligence or online maps for the mapping system? Something must change.

Another parent contacted us from the Arklow area. They have three children all travelling into a school in Arklow. One is in the CBS and two are in St. Mary's. One child gets a ticket but the other two have been taken off the route they have always used and put on to another route that has no bus. The parent now has to follow the school bus with her two children in the car. You could not make this stuff up.

Private bus companies are pulling out at the last minute as they feel it is not worth their while dealing with Bus Éireann due to costs. We know most companies lost one or maybe two drivers due to Bus Éireann's illogical regulation on people over the age of 70, which is age discrimination really. If a person qualifies medically, then he or she should be allowed to drive. Such drivers, for example, can come in later in the year and bring the children on a school tour as long as it is on a private bus. We can all see this is a kind of nonsense. Once they have passed the medical test that should be sufficient. It needs to change. We just need to return to having a bit of common sense in this country. It seems to be not so common these days.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** The school transport scheme is an annual crisis for families, students and bus drivers who are left in the dark at a time when they should be focused on the return to school. One case that really highlights the chaos of this scheme is that of a man living near Loughrea whose two children attend a school in Ballinasloe. They have been left without school transport since the school year started. They attend the school in question to access speech and language supports. While a school bus has been sanctioned, delays in procuring this bus means the father has had to be out of work for the past number of weeks to bring them to and from school. There is already a school bus that travels from Loughrea to Ballinasloe and passes the school the children attend but we are still waiting to be told whether another

stop at this school can be added so the children can avail of the existing bus route. The communication to date it has been abysmal, as it is in almost every case. That man may be forced to take his children out of the school if this drags on for any longer. I ask that the Department sees sense and ensures a proper solution to this particular case as soon as possible.

There have been many other examples recently of children with additional needs locally being left without school transport. St. Teresa's in Ballinasloe was one such example. Parents felt they had to highlight their cases publicly to get a resolution. That is not acceptable. The Minister's Department should be moving heaven and earth to ensure children with additional needs have school transport services from the very beginning of the school year.

On the school transport scheme more broadly, I have submitted questions to the Minister of State regarding the development of a digital school bus pass. I have made many queries about bus tickets not being posted or being posted to the wrong address. Surely a digital pass is something that can be put in place in 2025. The school transport 2030 review has not been fully implemented. There has been no change to the nearest school distance criteria. Children who are being excluded from the scheme are being forced to walk dangerous roads to their pick-up points and there have not been serious efforts to bring more drivers into the system.

I appreciate that the school transport scheme is an incredibly complex undertaking but I ask that Government prioritise reforming the scheme so it can adapt to local needs and be fit for the 21st century.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I raised a number of local school transport issues in the Dublin West constituency on Tuesday. They were Gaelscoil Thulach na nÓg, Catherine McAuley National School and St. Peter's College, Dunboyne. I acknowledge that the Gaelscoil Thulach na nÓg issue has been resolved and the bus has been put in place. I appreciate that. On St. Peter's College, Dunboyne, we do not have a resolution there yet. We have children travelling from the Hollystown area to that school. It is in a different county and there is an issue because the children there attend a primary school that is also in a different county. It is in County Meath but it is the one closest to them and that is the only school they are in a catchment area for to get into secondary school. Then there is an issue of a bus crossing a boundary.

On the Catherine McAuley National School, it is a reading school. It is beside the Minister of State's own Department and I am sure he knows it. I am sorry - it is not, it is beside the Department of disability. That is a school that children travel towards from all over Dublin and there has been a major issue this week. There was no bus on Monday. On Tuesday, a bus was provided but there was quite a serious incident on that bus. This morning, children were travelling for about two or two and a quarter hours on that bus. These are primary school children. Traffic is bad in Dublin in the morning but it does not take two and a quarter hours to get from Dublin 15 to Baggot Street. This is a situation where we are trying to get 11 kids, all from different houses, onto the one route and it is just not sustainable. Could we please look at halving that into two smaller buses and not have kids on buses for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening? It is just not sustainable. These are young kids. Some of them need movement breaks or the toilet. It is a long time to make any young kid wait to go across the city. I ask that the Minister of State look at the situation with the Catherine McAuley National School.

I want to flag two other situations where there is no prospect of a bus this year, the first relating to children from the Ashtown-Pelletstown area. That is a relatively new development in between Dublin's Fingal area and the Dublin City Council area along the Royal Canal. Many of the kids there cannot get a local school and are now attending Coolmine Community School in Blanchardstown. There is no provision for a bus there. The parents and teachers asked for it. There will be more children next year and the following year having to make that journey. I again ask that we look at that situation with children travelling from Pelletstown to Coolmine Community School.

I raise the issue of children who are living in the Tyrrelstown and Hollystown areas but having to travel to Ériu Community College. The reason they have to travel is that Ériu Community College is to be moved to their area. It is being moved right across my constituency from its current temporary location to a new permanent location. It is a mad idea. I think it is a bad idea. I have campaigned against it locally but nevertheless it is going ahead. Its new geographic location has now become its catchment area and kids are expected to travel right across Dublin 15 to achieve that. That might not seem like a big deal but there are no public transport links that go across that particular direction from the Ongar area to the Tyrrelstown area. There are no public transport links at all. The kids live here, the school is over here, and there are absolutely no links and again, a bus has not been put in place. This would not need to be there forever; it would just need to be there while we are in this transitional phase and I ask that the Minister of State look at the situation with Ériu Community College.

There are a lot of issues in Dublin 15. I know one often comes across these issues in rural constituencies but there has been a very significant number of issues in areas in my constituency this year and I ask the Minister of State to address the schools in question.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** A fit-for-purpose school transport service is absolutely essential. The current system operates about 8,200 vehicles on 10,600 routes. This year, it distributed 142,000 tickets and aims to cater for another 100,000 students by 2030. However, there are recurring difficulties with the scheme every year. This year, some parents were told at the last minute that no service was in place even though they had got tickets already. With reference to an example from my own constituency, children with disabilities obviously have a right to education and they face a lot of hurdles in achieving that right - assessment delays, delays in getting a special unit or special school place, and transport difficulties in accessing the school. At the start of this school year, there was no school bus service for students from the Ardfinnan-Newcastle area of south Tipperary travelling to special schools in Cashel. Year after year, Bus Éireann blames the lack of drivers and contractors for these problems. These are problems that should have been anticipated and contingency plans should have been put in place.

One simple thing that would help is the employment of drivers over 70 years of age. This is an issue that many Members have raised, and I have raised and pursued it myself in the past as well. Bus Éireann refuses to employ drivers over 70. These drivers are fully licensed and, provided they are in good health and certified as such, they should be able to drive. The very same drivers can drive to a school, pick up students and take them to a football or soccer match, to swimming lessons or on school outings, yet they cannot actually drive children to school. The policy makes absolutely no sense. Age is no barrier to employment, whether it be a bus driver or a TD. I am 75 years of age. My colleague across on the Government benches, Deputy

Pat The Cope Gallagher, is two years my senior. I hope nobody would suggest we are not able to do the job.

We have been promised a result out of this for quite some time now and I wonder when we are going to get a decision on it from the Minister of State's Department and Bus Éireann. The sooner the better. Of course, we need a much more ambitious scheme. We need a major expansion of the scheme, which would also give us an opportunity to help meet climate targets and take more motor vehicles off the road. To this end, we need the scheme to be universal. We need to reduce the eligible distances. We need to integrate the scheme with the public transport network. The school transport scheme needs to be free and it needs to be transferred from the Department of education to the Department of Transport. It would also, of course, facilitate the building up of a culture of public transport use by young people with a view to continuing that culture of transport use into adulthood.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** It is a cyclical problem at this time of year. From about July onwards, TDs' offices are bombarded with problems regarding school transport. I am sure my situation is no different from the situations of the rest of the Members in this House.

There are a number of problems arising with the schemes. One of the main problems is that you cannot get talking to a human being in Bus Éireann. There is an automated system and that is fine. When that works, it generally works well. The problem is that, when there is an issue that arises, the computer cannot make a change and sometimes you need to talk to a person. While it may be an Oireachtas email, that does not do it; the same reply keeps bouncing back the whole time. Some of the problems that arise regard routes being changed, and people having to go two miles before they actually get to the pick-up point. We had this in the Jamestown-Ballybrittas area. There needs to be human contact.

Other problems that arise with the scheme are in relation to the catchment areas.

I understand there has to be a catchment area. However, the village of Borris-in-Ossory is split into two halves. It is a small village of 500 or 600 people. The main street is split in half. There is a gap of 50 yards where the children in one household go to St. Fergal's in Rathdowney while the children in a house 50 yards up the road go to Roscrea, despite the fact that they originally went to the same school. There is no logic to that. There needs to be a level of flexibility. I understand that there can only be so much flexibility - I am not arguing for absolute flexibility - but this needs to be addressed.

The other issue I want to raise is in the context of the programme for Government. I read the review and it shows there will be an expansion of about 100,000 pupils. I welcome that but there will not be the drivers. I have raised this over and over again. There are over-70s who are sitting at home today but who could be driving buses. It is generally not economically viable for under-65s to do it because it is a three-hour a day job. However, it suits somebody on a pension. We cannot have people driving buses who have a dickey heart or dodgy eyesight. I understand all of that; that is no problem. I have a HGV licence and I must have a medical test every so many years for that. It is right that I should do that in order to keep the HGV licence. We have a situation where over-70s cannot drive a child in a taxi as part of the scheme for Bus Éireann or have ten children in a minibus, yet many of them are driving coaches. I know them. Friends of mine are driving coaches with 50, 60 or 70 passengers on board during the day but they cannot drive the school bus. They are 71 or 72 years of age. The limit needs

to be extended to 75. I would make that proposal to the Minister of State. I have raised this with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Transport and now I am raising it with the Minister of State. They all seem to agree that this needs to change. I spoke to the Minister of State, Seán Canney, about it outside the Dáil just before recess. I do not want to misrepresent him, but he indicated to me that there was a problem with Bus Éireann. Bus Éireann is putting the brakes on this. This needs to be resolved. This is a State contractor getting taxpayers' money. I know it needs safe drivers, but we do not have the drivers to cover the scheme. Bus operators are telling me - I am sure it is happening across the country - that they cannot get the drivers. We need to sort this out and have a strict medical test for over-70s. If they pass the test, they are fit to drive. We cannot continue to ignore this problem. I implore the Minister of State, as someone in the Department of education, and the officials here today to come back with an answer on this. This cannot be put off on the never-never. The Government can put it on paper that it will expand the scheme, but it will never be able to because it will not have the operators and drivers. I am saying this to be helpful.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** I commend the Minister of State on the amount of work he carried out over the summer, particularly in relation to school transport and special education. There was a marked improvement this year in comparison to previous years. It is important to acknowledge that. However, there continue to be serious issues with school transport. The programme for Government commits to ensuring better management of the application system and timely communication to parents and families. While that has been the case for the majority - we have to be honest about this - it has not been so for a lot of families. It is important we recognise that.

Some key issues have been identified by my office over the past month and a half. One is the refusal or withdrawal of bus places. Previously eligible students are being denied transport without a clear reason. One example concerns a family with a student with ASD in Maynooth Community College who, despite having additional needs, was refused a ticket after years of receiving one and with another child in primary school with ASD. The family cannot afford private transport.

A second issue is last-minute notification and payment issues. Families were notified days before term started in some cases that there were no seats available despite timely application and the fact they had paid early in July. One example of this concerns the Kilcock to Maynooth route where a student who used the service last year and paid in April was told in late August there was no seat. There is no viable public transport alternative for this particular student. Another example is Enfield to Maynooth. A student's confirmed ticket was cancelled the next day after being approved, leaving the family stranded, having cancelled private transport they had arranged previously.

A third issue is disruption and uncertainty on rural routes. Services are disrupted or cancelled with little notice. In regard to the Tirmoghan-Hortland-Knockanally route to Scoil Dara in Kilcock, for example, one parent was left without a service despite reassurances from Bus Éireann. A local driver with a bus offered to help but has been ignored by Bus Éireann.

Fourth, it has been encapsulated by many people that there is poor communication and lack of transparency from Bus Éireann. Families report repeated unanswered calls and emails, unclear timelines and no guidance on alternative arrangements or grants. One student in Scoil

Uí Riada in Kilcock was unable to get replacement tickets despite multiple requests and follow-ups.

Fifth, there is inappropriate allocation and route management. Concession tickets are being issued on routes where school finishing times differ significantly, leaving children waiting in unsafe conditions. That could be a child in senior infants and a child in sixth class, for example, and the collection times do not match up. In Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Nuad, for example, students were left waiting for 40 minutes after school due to sharing a bus with other schools, namely, Maynooth post-primary and Maynooth Community College. These students are left waiting around.

The impact on families and on students is severe, particularly on children with additional needs. The Minister of State has a particular focus on children with additional and special educational needs. These are the students who need particular focus. Also, it is discriminatory against rural families with a lack of alternatives.

I would like to bring some recommendations to the table. One is to review Bus Éireann allocations to prioritise continuity for returning students. It should not be the case that a person gets a school ticket one year but not the following year, especially those with additional needs. Second, improve communication. We have heard repeatedly how difficult communication is with Bus Éireann, not just for ourselves as Members of the Oireachtas, but particularly for members of the public. If there are queries or issues, communication needs to be set up in a way that is easily accessible for families. The third recommendation is to utilise available local resources and engage local drivers and buses willing to provide a service, particularly on disrupted routes. We have heard from Members about the over-70s. I recommend that there be an annual doctor's certificate or type of medical assessment that would allow drivers aged over 70 years to help with those demands. We also need to expand the capacity on oversubscribed routes, especially to the large secondary schools where we have repeatedly seen students being denied tickets. We also need to streamline the grant process, clarify the eligibility criteria, ensure timely payments, review route allocations, ensure concession tickets are fairly issued and route timings match school schedules. The difficulty with schedules is trying to cater for children with different finishing times in the one family.

I implore the Minister of State to put as much pressure on Bus Éireann as possible. Communication is the key element to ensure families and, in particular, students are looked after properly.

**Deputy Joe Neville:** It was not solely my office that was inundated. I am sure the Minister of State's own office and, indeed, all constituency offices across the country were inundated with similar issues.

Having listened to other Deputies on this topic, I am left wondering how it is such a big problem every year. It seems to catch us almost by surprise. Here we are, school buses are needed and people need places. Unfortunately, it repeats itself all the time. We get the same calls. We know we should have bus drivers over 70. Everybody seems to say that, yet nobody seems able to put it in place and we are here facing the same questions.

Some of the biggest issues we have are, as people near the start of the school year, they have their uniforms bought, their schoolbooks ready and their bus tickets ready to go. Unfortunately,

they are then told - many were told only a week or two before school returned - that there will be no buses available. This causes huge difficulty for families. It has huge implications. People were ready to travel to work sure that their kids would be brought to school by a bus. In my constituency, they might have been commuting to Dublin and elsewhere and believed they would be able to drop their kids off at a spot at, for example, Johnstown Bridge at 7.30 a.m. or Clane at 7.15 a.m. However, they were then told at the last minute that they would not be able to do so and that different plans would have to be made. This is not good enough.

Multiple families have reached out to me to say they were told in early August that their children had received tickets servicing areas between Maynooth and Kilcock, areas outside Naas, only to be told the week after the children returned to school that the bus service would not be running. When questioned on this, Bus Éireann told one constituent that it had trouble setting up transport on some routes, including that of the constituent. It stated that a number of difficulties had arisen in some localities with a small number of contracted services, including the service intended for the children of my constituent. It stated that in some cases, those difficulties had arisen due to a lack of driver or contractor availability. That is not good enough, considering that people had sought those routes multiple months earlier. Another constituent received a response outlining that if a family was advised, through direct contact or displayed on their online account, that there was no capacity to issue tickets for their children, they could be assured that Bus Éireann had exhausted all avenues to accommodate pupils. It went on to state that it was not open to Bus Éireann to create additional capacity or engage additional vehicles.

I have a major question arising from the responses received. Bus Éireann knew in early June the exact number of pupils who would need school bus tickets for the following year. If it is not up to Bus Éireann, who can create additional capacity or engage additional vehicles? Is it up to the parents themselves? Is it up to us, because we are the ones who are asked questions? It is not. It is up to Bus Éireann. For next year, I ask that Bus Éireann engage continually with those contractors over the summer. New schools are not built in that timeframe. Kids are not going to school in hugely different numbers in different areas. Surely there can be a mechanism whereby when the leaving certificate examinations and primary school years have finished towards the end of June, we can be ready to start again at the end of August. Perhaps through more communication, we could bring things to a better space.

I know the Minister of State has been listening. I am sure he has been hearing these sorts of comments in his office. I thank him for the time to allow my voice and the voices of the constituents who put the matter to me in recent weeks to be heard.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I do not now how many phone calls I had with the Minister of State during the summer and in previous years about school transport, particularly in rural areas. To be fair, whether due to his good work or by coincidence, many of the problematic routes I referenced in recent years resolved themselves this year. Pending the implementation of the review commissioned by the then Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, my concern is that I will be revisited by the ghosts of yesteryear next summer. The one time of year that I, as a public representative, dread is coming into the school transport season. I have that fear because we have a geographical enigma on the northside of Cork city. Many rural villages are quite close to the environs of the city but have no history or tradition of attending those schools. They normally attend secondary schools in Carrignavar, Fermoy or Middleton in east Cork.

Those are the large towns that have the rural hinterland and attract those students. My concern is that along that geographical enigma, which includes villages such as Whitechurch, Carrignavar, Glenville, Bottlehill and Watergrasshill, people often have no choice but to go to their second, third or fourth closest school. That is primarily because of tradition, history and that rural connection. In that vein, I ask for the review that was conducted to be implemented as quickly as possible. We need a demand-led model as soon as possible. In villages such as Watergrasshill, there might be 50 or 60 students awaiting a school bus seat because those villages are growing quickly. Those students must be prioritised in any system we have because of the numbers involved. That is not to say that we will forget people in rural areas because of course we should not. Where it makes business or commercial sense to operate bus routes, we need to put on additional routes to service the demand.

It would be remiss of me, particularly considering the Minister of State's remit, not to raise the issue of school transport for students with special needs. It is probably the one area that was problematic this summer. I know the Minister of State is working away on the issue and I have talked to his staff. I know the difficulties around drivers, securing routes and so on. The issue is particularly acute in Cork at the moment. Many students who are attending either special schools or ASD classes in mainstream schools are struggling. We need to put impetus behind that now to try to secure taxis and buses for as many of those children as we can.

Every second TD has raised the issue of drivers and extending the age limit for drivers. I taught in a school for 15 years and, thankfully, our caretaker drove the bus to matches, events or things in UCC or wherever else. We always had a driver at hand. That man, when he retired, went over the permitted age to drive a bus. He is now driving part time in his mid-70s. He would not be allowed to drive a Bus Éireann school bus. That needs to be reviewed. We have been talking about the issue in this House for long enough. We have talked about engaging with the RSA. One way or another, the issue needs to be put to bed. If there is some medical reason or another reason people who are elderly cannot drive a bus, I would like to know what it is once and for all. It gets peddled around here every couple of years when we are having these debates.

My final point is probably my most contentious. I do not mean it to be. I mean it in the right way. When the cost of a ticket was initially reduced to €50, it was done during the cost-of-living crisis. I understood why it was done. It was done with helping families who were hard-pressed in mind. The knock-on consequence is that it has created higher demand for seats and we have not been able to meet the demand. In an ideal world, I would love to see free school transport or to see it cost €50. That is fine, once we can accommodate the demand. If we do not have the resources to accommodate all those people, we need to put a value on those tickets. I have anecdotal information about situations where people avail of the ticket because it is so cheap and then do not use it. In some of those cases, people are occupying seats but not using them. That needs to be looked at. There should be a use it or lose it policy and somebody's seat should be forfeited if it is not used within a certain period. I am not trying to take away willy-nilly things that have been given to people. I am on about maximising the capacity we have in the system and using it in the best way. That needs to be looked at, at least in the short term.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** My colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, put it well when he said we had this every year. The debate about school transport is a matter of rinse and repeat. I think

the Deputy used the term "a new low". That was the idea. We have all spoken about families who had bus routes confirmed and tickets issued only to get a refusal at the last minute. In my constituency, there were issues in Blackrock and Haggardstown, heading to Dundalk, and the Tullyallen to Drogheda route. I dealt with a number of our councillors, including Councillor Eric Donovan, in that regard, as has my colleague, Deputy Joanna Byrne. Some of the issues took a number of weeks to rectify. That is not taking away from the considerable amount of work that has been done. As was said earlier, we need to consider the need that is out there. We must plan properly to ensure we have the resources. I do not know for how long we are going to be talking about drivers who are over the age of 70 and who can drive in other circumstances. They can drive the same kids whether to a school tour or wherever else in any other circumstances. We have been talking about this for years and the situation has not moved on. I ask that somebody grip the issue and get it to the place it needs to be. That may alleviate some of the issue. We must ensure we have the resources to deliver.

I am told there will be a computerisation, for want of a better term, that will allow us to know how many are using the system and whatever else. That is all fine. However, we do not need to be dealing with parents who send emails stating that they paid for and received two tickets for a route that does not have a bus. Some parents received an email yesterday from Bus Éireann to state that no service was available. One correspondent of mine is a lady with a husband, both of whom work. They have a number of other children who attend a local primary school so they cannot take their two girls to a secondary school in Dundalk. We cannot have circumstances such as those. It is not good enough.

We know we need to address the issue of the thresholds relating to distances. That would deal with a significant amount.

I will finish on an issue I have previously brought up with the Minister of State. We know there is an issue in respect of transport for children with special educational needs, but I will speak about kids who are using the system as it exists.

6 o'clock

I spoke about a Down's syndrome child who used the services for two years on a concessionary basis. I am saying he should not be concessionary; he should just get the service as a right. He and his brothers travelled and they are the only people who did not get it. I know the Minister of State is working on this. I will leave it at that.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Last week, I stood here and outlined cases of children who cannot get buses. Children with additional needs cannot get transport to special schools. There were places made available but, once again, these children are being let down. Just to let the Minister of State know, in the past week only one family has got school transport. Do you know how it got it? It went to a solicitor. Are we now in a situation in this country where children with additional needs and children with disabilities must go to solicitors to get what is their constitutional right? Is that the kind of country we are running at the moment?

As I was coming into the Chamber, I was on the phone and heard that not one of those children under discussion has had transport. I spoke to a lady whose son Cillian is on a bus with six other children, none of whom has got school transport down to Carrigaline. Other families have children going up to St. Paul's, St. Bernadette's and Scoil Éanna in Montenotte

but they have no transport. Those in Carrignavar go to Fermoy because the Carrignavar school is not built yet. They have no school transport.

A guy from Youghal who supplies buses contacted me today. He has four specialised buses that can take six children or three children in wheelchairs. He is ready to go. He has the buses and drivers but cannot get an answer from Bus Éireann. What kind of a show is the Government running? What kind of a show is it when there is a man with four specialised buses and children screaming and crying for school transport but no one to give an answer?

I am a TD for Cork North-Central and cannot receive correspondence – emails or phone calls – from Bus Éireann on any of my questions. I am a TD representing my community, including children with additional needs, but I cannot get an answer. It is not good enough. It is not good enough that the Department is refusing. It will not answer to parents, schools or TDs. Who is responsible? Who is going to fix it? Is the Minister of State going to fix it? I am asking the question and will be back here again next week to ask it. Will the Minister of State give a commitment here today that all those children will have school transport put in place? Will he give a commitment that Bus Éireann will contact all of them with a timeline? The way they are being treated is not good enough.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** To follow up on my colleague's comments, there is an issue about accountability and responsibility. It is not the NTA that deals with the school buses; it is Bus Éireann that has been given that job. If Bus Éireann is not doing the job, representatives here would like to know why, who is accountable and who is going to be fired from their job for being incompetent. If it is an issue of supply, the competence issue goes back to the Government. As others have said, we should be able to make decisions on 80% to 90% of bus provision in July, or even in May because the offers of places will often have gone out by that stage. In built-up urban areas like my constituency, there are parents who must wait until the second week of September before their children are offered a place. Dublin, north Kildare, Wicklow, Cork and Galway are the crunch points for the special educational needs students. On areas around the rest of the country, my colleagues will be more articulate and knowledgeable about what needs to be done. I definitely think there needs to be accountability and better planning.

While we have a resources issue, there is also that of the drivers over 70. I am going to drone on about this because this has been raised over multiple years and raised today by multiple elected representatives. A taxi driver can drive up to the age of 75 but is not allowed, under contract, to drop kids to a school. As others have mentioned, someone with a private coach-hire service can bring a bunch of kids somewhere but not under the contracted service. That does not make sense at all. We have heard before that this may be reviewed by the Government under the programme for Government, but the question is one of how long it takes to review whether someone medically fit and competent to drive and carry people of all ages should be able to do so. It should just direct Bus Éireann to make it so.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** As sure as every summer holiday finishes and as sure as the kids go back to school, there is a school bus crisis. It is incredible that there is a crisis every single year. Every TD in this House has been chasing their tail and chasing around the country to find solutions in individual cases.

Let me outline the issue that really frustrates me. The Government's stated objective is to get people into public transport and it is using a stick to do so. In this regard, there was €4.1 billion charged in fuel taxes last year and €1 billion in carbon tax. It is not that people do not want to use public transport. People are dying to or crying out to use it. Every single parent in the country who lives outside the core of a town wants to get it, but while the Government is using the stick to get them into public transport it is actually denying them the public transport they are crying out for. There is a major contradiction in the Government's plans in relation to this. Right now, pools of families in certain areas all want to get to particular schools. They have the critical mass for buses but the Government is actually refusing them those buses.

This year, for the first time I have seen, we had a case in which the service for children whose parents had the tickets and the right was cancelled a week before school starting. I know of at least ten services in Meath that were cancelled just in the week in advance of school opening. Parents were scrambling around trying to find solutions to get their kids to school, with many parents having to take time off work just to be able to do that, and obviously getting into big difficulties with their employers. Thankfully, a lot of these cases have been solved. I thank the Bus Éireann staff in Meath who have been able to resolve them.

This chaos is not by accident. One of the reasons it is happening is the lack of capacity. One of the reasons we have a lack of capacity is that drivers and mechanics are not being offered the proper pay, terms and conditions necessary to get them into the sector. If you want to employ people, you have to compete in the marketplace for them and ensure you can provide them with the proper pay, terms and conditions.

The second issue in relation to this, which really frustrates me, is that although there are many private bus providers with the capacity, buses and drivers, they cannot get their buses into the system. This is because the tendering by Bus Éireann can often be very difficult. It can often require a scale that makes it difficult for smaller providers to get their buses into the system. Moreover, the fact that we have increased energy costs makes it more difficult for smaller providers to tender. This is because their margins are squeezed by those higher energy costs.

I wanted to talk about common sense on the matter of drivers over 70. I heard the Minister being asked why the rule has not been changed. The Minister said it was not the Department's fault but that of Bus Éireann, and that it is its regulation that requires a ban on over-70s driving school buses. Who is in charge here? The Minister is ultimately responsible. The Minister needs to sit down with Bus Éireann and direct it to change its direction in relation to this.

There is an issue over schools. Many areas have traditional and historic links to particular schools. School choice should be real for families. Right now, we have different ethos among schools, yet parents are being forced to go in certain directions they do not want to go. Parents from the area of Rathmolyon–Baconstown have a natural relationship with Trim, yet their children are being pushed elsewhere. This is especially the case with children with additional needs. There is a family in Bohermeen with a child with additional needs who is being forced into a school that does not have the necessary support for them. The parents are missing out on the supports that would help that child to get the education they need.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I pleaded at a meeting of the Business Committee recently, maybe two weeks ago, for this debate to take place. I thank the Chief Whip for accommodating it and the Minister of State for attending today.

Deputy Gogarty asked who is going to be fired. There has to be significant movement from the Minister of State's end on resolving the crisis. I plead with him in this regard. He is not long in his position, so he can take only take a very small fraction of the blame here – let us be honest – but unfortunately I have been nine years asking the same questions. Others who are here longer are not getting answers. It is time for clear answers to come into play here.

Everybody is pointing the finger when it comes to the over-70s. I will touch on that in a minute. Once again, we are back here discussing the ongoing circus that is the school bus system. Year after year, we are promised change, especially regarding the closest-school rule, yet here we are facing the same issues.

In Ballinadee, 20 to 30 children who are eligible - not concessionary - have been left without school transport. These families were told at the start of the school year that a bus would be provided. Days before school began, they were informed that there would be no bus and they would have to make their own arrangements. Last week, Bus Éireann did a U-turn on this. Last Thursday or Friday, it communicated to parents that the service would resume. They received that confirmation, but yesterday morning no bus arrived. It is an absolute farce. You could not believe it. I have seen it. I was sent the messages from Bus Éireann.

Of course, when we contact Bus Éireann, as Deputy Gould and others said, it is hidden behind a shield because the Government is sparing its blushes. The Government is backing it, as is the Minister of State, if he will not stand up here tonight to say they will make it answerable. Once the Minister of State does that, things will move. If he fails to do that, he is failing in his duty, as his predecessors have failed. This is a scandalous situation. A proper message was not even sent out to these parents until yesterday afternoon. Imagine having your children at the side of the road waiting for a bus they were promised that never turned up. I was promised it as a public representative. I cannot deal with anybody any more. The Minister of State is only acknowledging a bare message. Bus Éireann could not bother its arse acknowledging any message. It is above us as public representatives, and above parents and everybody. Everybody is above everyone here but no one is taking accountability for what is going on.

The bottom line is this is a scandalous situation that the Government is standing over year after year. Throughout this debacle, I have made repeated representations to Bus Éireann, to the Oireachtas team, to the Cork contact and to the Minister of State's office. All I have received in return are acknowledgements. It is an absolute disgrace that in 2025 we have to come to the Dáil to demand basic school transport for eligible children. Will the Minister of State rectify this situation immediately and ensure these families get the service they were promised?

This is not an isolated case. We also have a case at Kilcoe, Skibbereen, where 12 students in my constituency were told days before school started that they would not receive tickets, despite a 45-seater bus running with only 20 seats filled. Again, I have made numerous representations and received only acknowledgements. I am told there is a guarantee these students will not be left behind as happened in Ballinadee.

While we at it, the situation with drivers aged over 70 is ludicrous. These drivers can pick up students and take them to swimming classes or school tours, etc., but Bus Éireann will not allow them take students to school. I am not blaming Bus Éireann. In the audiovisual room today, I asked whether the Minister has any responsibility. The drivers told me that yes, she does. The Government is pointing the finger at Bus Éireann, Bus Éireann is pointing the finger back at the Government and, nine years later, we have no answers. It has gone beyond a farcical joke. We need answers from the Minister of State. I look forward to answers from him to see whether there is a way forward. Will he stand up for healthy bus drivers over 70 who have a medical certificate and say, "Yes, you can drive with a medical certificate"?

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Last Saturday, we were at the Holy Family school in Charleville for a fundraiser where up to 100 motorbikes came out. They do so year after year to raise funds for additional resources for the school. There is a shortfall year on year and resources are raised. Money from last year went in for part of a playground for the children in that school. Looking around the country, vintage clubs and different people from various sectors come out to raise funds. We were at the Rathkeale men's shed on Sunday. There is not a weekend when I am not at two or three different events trying to raise funds for special needs schools, and local schools, for services we should be able to provide through the Government, yet these are not being provided.

We have asked the Government to do a couple of simple things from the point of view of bus transport, one of which is to move the age so we can have bus drivers over 70 years of age. Yet, it has not been done. Surely today it should be based on health. You could have a healthy 70-year-old and a 55-year-old who is not healthy. It should surely be based on a medical examination of whether someone is capable of doing a job. Even the Taoiseach has said that eligibility to do a job should be based on health and capability, so why is it taking so long for us to get a response so we can have people brought to schools and different sectors? Time after time, we have to wait for this Department and that Department and we have to look at regulation after regulation, but during Covid we could click our fingers and it was done. We could solve anything during Covid that could never be done, but now we are back into the old ways of doing things and it taking six months, 12 months or two years. We need to move on this.

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** There has been a lot of criticism today of the school transport scheme but it has to be acknowledged that in recent times the scale of the scheme has ramped up significantly. Over 180,000 children are transported through the school transport scheme every day. It is a huge number. The programme for Government sets out far more ambition in terms of an additional 100,000. That is very welcome. We all know the obvious benefits, including the social and environmental benefits and so on, of having an effective school transport system in place. It is something we have to aspire to continually improve. Obviously, there are difficulties, including one particular case on which I have engaged with the Minister of State and his staff. I appreciate all the efforts that are being made to try to resolve that case. More generally, the review that was carried out last year brought forward significant recommendations. It is important, as I said, that we continue to scale up the school transport scheme as a whole.

One specific issue that has come to my attention, and it is an easy fix, relates to the distance requirement, which is 3.2 km for a primary school and 4.8 km for a post-primary school. I

raise the case of siblings from a family who are travelling from the same area to the same village or town. Let us say I have two children in primary school but the next year one of them goes into post-primary school and no longer qualifies for the scheme. That presents significant logistical issues. That is something we have to be prepared to look at. There are obvious practical difficulties when one member of a family qualifies and another does not. It is effectively useless having one family member qualify when the other does not.

The Government is trying to encourage as many people as possible back into employment and the workforce, regardless of whether they are men and women. Many households are now two-income households. Childcare is obviously a huge barrier to people getting back into the workforce. The simple practical issue of getting children to school is also a significant barrier. If we had an effective school transport scheme, it would be a significant help for parents as they could ensure their children get to school safely through that scheme. Again, that is another benefit and another reason we have to deliver on it.

I heard many speakers raise the over-70s issue. I will add my voice to that. Any approach in respect of age should be evidentially based. It should be based on medical assessment. There should not be a blanket ban on someone because he or she reaches a certain age. We all know people's health differs significantly no matter what age they are. Some people have good health; other people have health issues. We should base it on an evidential approach in a medical assessment. I ask the Minister of State to redouble his efforts there because driver availability is a significant issue in scaling up the school transport scheme.

Specifically in my constituency, one particular route causing difficulty is that from Minane Bridge to Crosshaven. A large number of families are still in contact with me in relation to not having a place on the bus. That particular route serves areas such as Fountainstown and Hoddersfield *en route* to Crosshaven. The Minister of State's staff have been working on it for me. As I said, I appreciate that, but it is causing significant difficulty. We are a number of weeks into the new school term. These families have still not got traction with Bus Éireann. I have to say, and Bus Éireann was mentioned, that unfortunately I cannot give it a gold star for its communication to us as public representatives. It needs to engage better with us. We are only highlighting the issues and glitches that are there. It would be served better if its staff engaged and communicated in a better way with us as public representatives.

Overall, I appreciate the efforts that are made. We have to put this in perspective in terms of the scale of the school transport scheme. Of course, there will always be difficulties in each of our constituencies that we have to try to work through, which is something the Minister of State is doing. It is about the benefits and importance of the scheme, but also the real difficulties it is causing families. I ask that in the coming week or so we make every effort possible to iron out the remaining difficulties. I thank the Minister of State for facilitating the debate. Many speakers have spoken on it. It is an important issue for us as public representatives.

**Deputy Peter Roche:** I, too, have been listening to this debate for a number of hours. I will acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, have only been in office since last January. From engaging with both of them on these issues, I know of the gallant efforts being made to resolve them.

As I said, I listened to the debate. Like most others, the problems are repeated in every constituency.

My real concern is people being denied tickets sometimes without a clear explanation. Some children are forced to walk over 4 km per day to reach a pick-up point even where a safer closer collection point is available. In some cases, students with disabilities are not allocated buses with proper accessibility, which is a real concern, leaving families in impossible situations. We have heard from families in our constituencies who have a Bus Éireann stop near them but because it falls outside the catchment, they are forced to drive to a different point in another town. This is not their system. It is just the system that is designed and this system is failing them. In light of the fact these issues affect children and young families, a prompt and co-ordinated response is required - I know this is something the Minister promised - from the Government and the tender services.

As legislators, we need to ensure school transport is fair, safe and sustainable. The current system needs overhaul. I and others acknowledge that there has been a change in demographics, which adds its own pressures because it is very difficult to predict what is coming down the tracks year on year with certainty. We need to look at continued reform and investment and accountability. This must include revisiting the age guidelines. I would add my voice to that. Older drivers can drive around Europe yet they are forbidden to drive for Bus Éireann. We need to look at the routes in every constituency. I am parochial. I represent Galway East. In situations where schools are over capacity, students who would normally choose that school are being pushed to go to other locations that are not within that catchment and therein lies another anomaly. A child may have to move to a new location thus pressurising him or her into finding a new bus route. A young lady from my parish applied for a bus ticket for a different school and was refused notwithstanding the fact that they had a ticket already. If we are down to refusing one child on a route like, it really calls this into question, so I am looking for more flexibility and more availability.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I acknowledge the Minister of State's exceptional commitment to his brief since he was appointed and his approachability at all times to help us solve problems in our constituencies. School transport is not a luxury. It is a necessity for thousands of families, including many in my constituency. Every school day, 180,000 children rely on the service, which is one of the largest logistical operations managed by the State. However, the system as it stands is too rigid and inflexible. When a child's nearest school is full, parents are often left with no choice but to enrol their child in another school in a different locality and yet they are not guaranteed a seat on the bus because of the nearest school rule. This leaves families in an impossible position. They have secured a school place for their child but they cannot get them there. This problem is especially evident in Ballinasloe. The presence of Portiuncula Hospital means there is a constant turnover of medical staff - registrars, consultants and essential workers who move to the town with their families. These families are essential to the running of the hospital and the provision of healthcare in the region and yet too often they find that no school transport is available for their children at primary or post-primary levels. This creates serious logistical pressures for parents who are working long hours, on-call rosters and shift work in a busy regional hospital.

The review of the school transport scheme highlighted many of these issues and made welcome recommendations. These include reducing the distance criteria and removing the

strict requirement to attend the nearest school in situations where existing bus routes already serve the area or where there is sufficient parental demand. These are sensible and pragmatic proposals but they must be implemented carefully and effectively. Capacity remains the central challenge. We need enough buses, enough drivers and proper planning to ensure every eligible child who applies on time is guaranteed a seat. Part of the solution must involve making bus driving a much more attractive career with secure hours, fair pay and a pipeline of trained drivers so we can meet growing demand. Parents are willing to pay the modest fees of €50 for a primary pupil and €75 for a post-primary pupil with a family cap of €125 but what they really need is certainty that transport will be available. I believe there is a real opportunity to get this right. If we follow through on the recommendations of the review and invest in the necessary capacity, we can deliver a scheme that is fair, reliable and sustainable and that meets the needs of families into the future.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** This is my first contribution since the Dáil returned. I look forward to the next number of months. I thank the Minister of State for his ongoing engagement regarding school transport. I will address the pilot scheme for the Kilcredan school area. When this was brought forward, a lot of us were thrilled because we felt it would bring about a permanent solution. It has been very difficult dealing with school bus issues in this area because, unfortunately, the traditional parish dynamic of rural communities, which is extremely important to people in rural Ireland, is being affected by distance-based judgements about who is and is not eligible for school transport. About six families are still affected despite the pilot scheme. Given that this is a pilot scheme with the ambition of tackling this issue, could this finally be put to rest? We need a slight solution with regard to a larger-scale bus. I have been in contact with the Minister of State, who works exceptionally hard. Nobody would doubt that but we would like to see a solution for the parents and children in the Kilcredan catchment covering Ballymacoda, Ladysbridge and Garryvoe. It has been a long-standing problem over a long number of years. I add my voice to those of so many other Deputies here and ask that the over-70s limit on bus drivers for school transport be dealt with. I understand it is with the board of Bus Éireann but it is desperately needed if people are medically fit to operate school bus services

**Deputy Emer Currie:** I know the Minister of State wants to hear about issues our constituents are facing so he can fix them and I appreciate that. I also appreciate that there has been an increase in the number of students accessing the service and most families have a positive experience but too many do not and for those households, it is causing havoc. A total of 11 students are travelling 10 km from Tyrrelstown, Hollywoodrath to Ériu Community College in Hantsfield. The local secondary school is full. In two years' time, Ériu Community College under the direction of the Department will move to Hollywoodrath but there is no bus to accommodate those students for whom this will become their local school and there is no commitment to accommodate the parents in Hantsfield who in good faith sent their children to a local school that is now being moved from one catchment area to an entirely different one. It seems to have fallen into bureaucratic purgatory. Can we please sort it out?

The system works on the basis of the first available school but ethos and whether it is co-educational must also be taken into consideration in modern Ireland. We cannot say on one hand that we recognise the importance of diversity when it comes to school ethos and then limit that choice because of bureaucratic sticking points.

Children attending Catherine McAuley National School are already travelling outside their area to attend the school because we do not have reading classes in Dublin West. They have missed four weeks of school because the service was pulled at the last minute. Parents have been told that their bus will collect their children at 6.45 a.m. As a parent, I am saying that this is not on. That is not a solution for these families. The Minister of State's office is extremely helpful for which I thank it but I ask his intervention in finding workable solutions. This system is built to provide 175,000 tickets, which is to be commended, but it is a black-and-white system that needs to recalibrate to work for families and modern Ireland.

At the centre of that, to provide that service we need to rectify the driver's licences for the over-70s so we can increase the number of buses available.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. We have a new school year and a new Minister in place, but we have had the same old school transport chaos. In my constituency office, it is just part of what we do in the latter part of every August and in September. We deal with families who are absolutely distraught because their entire back to school plans have been thrown up in the air because of a last-minute email from Bus Éireann telling them the school bus place that was paid for and booked back in April in most instances is not actually in place. It is not good enough and the Minister of State's Department needs to be much firmer with Bus Éireann on the service and planning that goes into providing this transport. Whoever secures such an important contract as our school bus routes has a responsibility to ensure the requisite number of buses, the right sizes of buses and the right number of drivers are in place long before the school year commences.

There is a number of distinct issues in terms of the dysfunction that affects these services. It is a minority of them but when it affects your family it is all that is important. The first is obviously the students who are eligible for school transport, have applied on time and paid on time only to find the bus is not in place. There should be a zero tolerance approach to situations like that. I would be saying to Bus Éireann and operators if they secure the contract that they just have to do that and we should be really robust. Then there is the issue of so-called concessionary tickets. Let us call a spade a spade; concessionary ticket holders are students who need a school bus place and whether they get it is a matter, essentially, of somebody's generosity. This is despite the fact the school transport review, which was delayed for virtually two years, set very clear recommendations on reducing the distance for which students would be eligible. Some little bit of flexibility on the nearest school principle would ensure people are able to secure transport for their children. It should be an absolute principle and a goal of this House that every child who needs a school bus should get a seat on that bus.

The irony is not lost on people in rural constituencies like my own that we spend so much time lecturing – I will use that term – people about using their car that we have families in counties like Monaghan who are forced to put their children into their car every morning and drive behind the school bus to the exact same place because they have been denied a place on that bus. The other issue that needs to be addressed is the length of time and the bureaucracy when it comes to school bus routes that need to be changed due primarily to demographic changes like new children in areas or for road safety reasons. I am dealing with a number of cases in parishes neighbouring my own where children from one road, which is a very rural, local road, all have to track down to a much busier regional road in the dark hours of the morning. We are engaging with Bus Éireann to try to get that rerouted or at least to get some

mechanism to accommodate those children. The fear I have is we might ultimately be successful but it might be next year. As elected representatives, there is always a fear when somebody brings road safety concerns to our attention. We should have a mechanism through which those concerns can be addressed as quickly as possible. The difficulties are compounded by the fact it is often very difficult for us as elected representatives, never mind the families concerned, to get responses from Bus Éireann. It is quite clear there are not enough support staff in the company to respond to queries from the public and elected representatives. I am sure it is a very stressful job for those individuals who have to deal with it.

In my last five seconds I make an appeal that has been made several times today, which is that we deal with the issue of drivers over the age of 70 who are medically fit to drive buses. They want to drive school buses and they should be permitted to do so.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** Many parents across the country are struggling with the current school transport system. This is particularly acute in rural communities. I have been inundated with irate and anxious parents, especially from the north Kilkenny area of my constituency. A multitude of problems arose within Johnstown, Galmoy, Freshford and Tullaroan. The issues arise where families are on the border or close to the boundaries of school catchment areas. Some of these children wish to attend schools in Kilkenny and Thurles, but are disqualified because of catchment area regulations. Failures, inconsistencies and anomalies cause parents and students distress, aggravation, inconvenience and in many cases a financial burden. A child may get a place in one school, but the bus serving that area may not align with the catchment, leaving parents with no viable alternative option. We regularly have parents denied the opportunity to select their preferred school. St. Joseph's College, Borrisoleigh is a typical example of a progressive school that is losing students seeking to enrol. The school is at a disadvantage because of the existing configuration of school transport. The current system is outdated, unmanageable and unfit for purpose. Families are often caught between two schools and two different bus routes, yet neither may work for them under the current regulations. This creates a huge dilemma for parents who want their children to attend a preferred school, but find the transport rules and catchments do not allow them freedom of choice.

The situation is made worse by the reliance on the concessionary ticket system. Parents often do not find out until very close to the start of the school year whether their child has secured a seat. When they are not successful it leaves them scrambling at the last minute with no transport options. This is simply unsustainable and must change.

I also ask that the Minister of State play a role in ensuring that over-70s are allowed to continue to drive on school bus routes. It is an absolute nonsense to disqualify people from driving a school bus because they have reached the age of 70. The current work permit system is too rigid and does not allow for international recruitment.

When will we see the commitment in the programme for Government to commence a review of the school transport system? This review should look at integrating with Local Link services, which already operate in many areas, to create more flexible solutions for families. The review should also consider moving the allocation of bus tickets to an earlier point in the year so Bus Éireann and parents have more certainty and more time to plan ahead. The school transport issue is a recurring one that must be dealt with in an expeditious and fair manner. I

hope the review will be conducted in a timely manner and make recommendations to make this system fair, equal and accessible.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** Education is a freedom and enabling children and teenagers to participate and achieve their own personal goals is of paramount importance. School transport is a significant part of that enablement. The Government has made great strides in the area of special education and the improvements include working with the NCSE to bring forward timelines, so I am wondering why in this area we still have the annual anxiety, chaos and disappointment for children and parents. Apply in April, pay in June and maybe have a ticket in August. I suppose this is not something that came upon us suddenly. In 2015 we had the Paris accord and in 2018 we had the UNCRPD, so there was plenty of flagging there. Using data to plan ahead does not seem to be happening, but given the mark the Minister of State is making by working with the NCSE and getting organised earlier, can school transport planning begin earlier as well, based perhaps on existing school enrolment numbers, the new NCSE forward planning with early booking and inviting parents to apply earlier for school transport? This could be in January or February each year rather than in April.

An example of multifunctionality that I give would be a Local Link service in Meath that could do the commuter run early in the morning to the train station, the school routes at 8 a.m. and then, perhaps, at 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. bring older people to their services, with the reverse being done in the evening beginning, maybe at 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. up to 6 p.m. or 7 p.m.

I will give a final example of where an anomaly exists in Carlanstown, County Meath, in the context of bringing young children to the ASD unit at O'Carolan College in Nobber. As it stands, for those who were lucky enough to receive tickets, their parents still have to drive them 4 km to the bus. The response from the parents is that if they are on the road anyway, they might as well keep on going to the school. I have every faith that the situation will improve.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get opportunity to talk about this matter. I will start with drivers who are over 70. I have been looking for this for many years. I am a contractor, and my father was at it from 1956. We have a long record of service of taking children to school in Kilgarvan and Kenmare. I understand the plight of drivers when they reach 70. I had the finest drivers who had to park up and forget about it when they turned 70. I have asked for them to be tested medically, independently or whatever, to ensure that they are perfect in every way, because the safety of children is a priority. I am not trying to put them in any danger by asking for it. I know the drivers I let go are driving other vehicles for other people, doing other things rather than transporting schoolchildren, and they are still driving perfectly. Drivers in the USA and the UK operate beyond 70 years of age. I have seen it and inquired into it. The Minister of State needs to look at that.

The other thing relates to 20-year-old buses. The minute buses reach 20 years of age here, even though they are mechanically sound and pass the test, they are put off the road and are no longer suitable for Bus Éireann. More often than not, those buses are being bought, taken to the North of Ireland and used to provide the same service up there. That is absolutely scandalous.

There is another real problem that contractors face. If a driver gets sick tomorrow morning, I could get a loan of a driver no problem from Teddy McCarthy below in Sneem or from

O'Callaghan Coaches in Killarney. However, I cannot do that because they have been vetted by those people, but they need to be Garda vetted by me as well in the space of maybe 12 hours, which is ridiculous. If they are Garda vetted and on Bus Éireann's list, surely that should do. What is the difference of driving in Kilgarvan, Sneem or Killarney? They have to be Garda vetted separately if they come to me.

We have problems in Cronin's Wood in Killarney where 250 houses are being built. They are having difficulty getting down into the Monastery, the Presentation Convent and those places. They are looking for transport and they are entitled it.

We were trying to get a bus service in the Headford area to take people to the school in Barraduff. That matter is with the Minister of State. I hope he can do something about it. They found a tenth child late in the day, and we have been told that we have to wait until next year. That is not fair on the parents and children involved. I ask the Minister of State to do what he can about this matter.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan):** I thank all those who contributed to the debate. Somebody said to me anecdotally that the school bus service was quiet this year and that there were not so many issues with it. After the past three and a half hours, I can see the issues quite clearly. The genuine commitment shown by Members on all sides in respect of school transport issues this afternoon is heartening. Everybody, whether in the opposition or in government, including non-party Members, has a huge commitment to school buses. That reflects on the value that parents and children throughout the country place on school buses. I know that very personally myself. It is heartening that this House has spent over three and a half hours debating it today and Deputies have brought issues from the length and breadth of the country. In the months since coming into this role, not only have I got to know the towns and villages, I have also got to know the crossroads where the challenges lie.

A number of issues were raised in respect of specific schools. We will reflect on them and try to get back to Members.

In excess of ten Members raised the issue of bus drivers aged over 70. As I said at the outset, a report was compiled in August 2024. The programme for Government contains a commitment to having an interdepartmental review of this. That is being done by the Department of Transport. A report is due in the next number of weeks. We are looking forward to that. When the report is submitted, we will certainly bring it to the attention of Members and will reflect on it accordingly. Many people understand that a huge volume of work has been done to increase the capacity of the school bus services across the country.

A number of issues relating to special education were raised. I am quite aware of the challenges with special education in Dublin, Cork and right across the country. The Department and Bus Éireann are working closely to try to find resolutions in this regard. We all came in for criticism in the debate, but we all - me, as Minister of State, the team in the Department of education and the team in Bus Éireann - take our role very seriously. Realistically, we are rolling out a massive service. The support staff are working extremely hard to find solutions. I am always amazed when I go back to either the departmental or Bus Éireann officials and mention a route, a road or an issue, and without even having to go through their system, I discover that they have the necessary knowledge themselves. I pay tribute to

the work they have done. They set up the call centres during the summer to try to make sure that adequate information is given to parents. I take on board the concerns and criticisms as well, and I certainly will be reflecting on them.

The other issue that came across was timing. We are looking at that very seriously. We had a number of meetings during the summer months to improve matters in that regard. We were very successful, and I thank the NCSE and others who brought back the date relating to special needs education to 1 October from 1 February. We hope that will have a meaningful role in having a properly planned out system but we need to look at it as well. I understand the frustration.

At my first meeting with departmental officials in Tullamore, I said that the period from 15 August to 1 October is the prime school transport period, but this year it happened earlier. A greater number of tickets were issued in July this year. We did an awful lot of extra work on it. We did a huge amount of planning and work. We also did a huge amount on the pilot schemes, some of which still have to be bedded in. We have given commitments on pilot schemes. The Department and Bus Éireann are working extremely hard to make sure we have those in place.

Another issue relates to drivers and operators. I will not refer to some individual instances that were raised because I do not want those involved to be identifiable. Some of the contractors, for very legitimate reasons, had to bow out, sometimes owing to extremely challenging health issues. We have to respect those who had to bow out. We wish them well, particularly as they had given long service to the Department of education and Bus Éireann over the years. We have to try to find alternatives. A number of routes have been funded and put in place. We are working very closely with local people to try to find operators that can take up the routes. There are many issues in relation to that.

On the taxi system that has been developed in the context of special education, some children need individual transport. We have to be mindful of that. I pay tribute to the taxi companies that provide services for these children for the work they do and for the commitment they give.

The Government is very much committed to the review that was carried out. I understand the issues relating to taking cars off the roads, climate change and everything else, but we have to ensure that we expand the scheme as best we can across the country because it is highly valued, both at primary and post-primary level. We will reflect very carefully on the issues that were raised.

One or two Deputies referred to contractors they knew who would be willing to go into the system. I am only too happy to take any information in that regard, because it is vitally important. The more information we have, the better. We will follow up on any leads that we have regarding contractors or individuals who may be able to help in the context of the challenges we face. It must be reiterated that, in the context of the school transport system and what we are endeavouring to do, the challenges are only in 1% of it.

Members mentioned issues regarding developing a new transport system for different schools. There is a criterion in that regard, but we are looking at where we can help in it. We are mindful that we will deal with the many legitimate challenges put on the record today in a meaningful way.

I assure Members that the Minister and I fully understand the value of the school transport system. We want to expand it in the way outlined in the report in order to facilitate of maybe another 100,000 in the system over the coming years. We will do that. My team in the Department and I and the team in Bus Éireann will work extremely hard to try to find solutions to the challenges Members have raised. I look forward to working with every one of them. If Deputies across the House have specific information, please share it with me or the team and we will follow up on it to see whether it can benefit not just the transport system but, more importantly, the families who rely on, believe in and appreciate the school transport system, both in mainstream education and special education.

I thank all Members for their contributions. We look forward to further discussion on this matter.

### **Energy Costs: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- Irish energy prices are amongst the highest in Europe leading to an extra €500 on household bills and is a leading factor in Ireland's cost-of-living crisis;
- the number of households in arrears are at their highest level since records began with 300,000 households in arrears on their electricity bills and 185,000 households in arrears on their gas bills, while many more are just about able to keep up with their bills but are under real pressure;
- electricity prices are the highest in Europe and gas prices are the 5th highest;
- wholesale electricity prices have fallen 75 per cent since their 2022 peak yet retail prices remain 70 per cent above 2022 levels;
- household bills have fallen much slower in Ireland than other European Union (EU) countries following decreases in wholesale prices;
- many energy suppliers have recently increased energy prices despite the sector boasting substantial operating profits;
- the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) has warned that without energy credits and Government action to lower people's bills there will be a spike in the number of people pushed into arrears;
- the Government is committed to five regressive carbon tax increases that will hike more cost on people that need to heat their homes with oil and gas; and
- energy poverty is at record levels with one in three struggling to access this basic necessity;

further notes that:

- the CRU does not have the mandate or powers to regulate the hedging strategies of energy companies or the standing charges they place on household bills;
- data centres consume around 25 per cent of Ireland's electricity, and this is expected to rise to 30 per cent by 2030 consuming the equivalent of over two million homes;
- according to senior Government officials' data centre energy demand is leading to higher energy bills for households and could jeopardise our ability to deliver new homes;
- network costs in Ireland are the highest in Europe with a disproportionate burden placed on households, especially lower income households;
- the draft decision for Price Review Six (PR6) proposes to increase network costs on households and to decrease them for data centres;
- the Public Service Obligation (PSO) levy which is used to fund the renewable transition is also structured and distributed regressively; and
- Ireland imports 80 per cent of the energy we consume leaving energy bills excessively exposed to market fluctuations and geopolitical matters, often placing upward pressure on household bills;

regrets:

- the Government's continued position that they will not continue electricity credits this winter despite the fact that prices have failed to fall to levels in advance of when they were first introduced in 2022; and
- the excessive liberalisation of the Irish energy market whereby our State-owned energy producer and supplier went from owning 96 per cent of capacity in 2001 to 27 per cent in 2024, which coincided with Irish electricity prices going from the lowest in the EU to the highest; and

calls on the Government to:

- introduce three electricity credits valued at €150 each, totalling €450 to ease the enormous burden on households;
- reverse the carbon tax increase introduced by the Government in 2025, and ensure no further increase to the carbon tax next year, including gas and home heating oil;
- strengthen the mandate and powers of the CRU to hold energy companies to account, prioritise energy affordability and enhance transparency in the energy market;
- ensure oversight of hedging practices to protect against price gouging and profiteering;
- regulate standing charges to keep locked in prices lower;
- sanction anti-competitive behaviour to ensure the proper functioning of the market;
- mandate profit reporting to the CRU on operations in the State by all large energy companies;

- reduce the cost on households from the regressive PSO levy and network charges by making sure large companies pay their fair share by implementing a fair funding model;
- ensure that the draft decision of PR6 is not implemented in its current form;
- end Ireland's over-dependence on energy imports and deliver Irish energy independence; and
- increase public ownership of Ireland's energy supply and operation in order to ensure natural resources are directed toward the generation of national wealth rather than private gain.

Ireland's cost-of-living crisis is causing workers and families the length and breadth of the country to be hammered by soaring prices. If it is not rents, student fees or voluntary contributions, it is energy bills. Households are bracing for a round of energy price hikes just as the Government is choosing to withdraw energy credits. Energia, Flogas, Bord Gáis Energy, Pinergy and SSE Airtricity have recently announced double-digit increases at a time when many of them are posting huge profits. Some 750,000 households will be forced to pay hundreds more euro, money which they simply do not have. The level of arrears is at record levels. Some 300,000 people are in debt on their electricity bills, while the number of people who cannot pay gas bills has soared to 183,000. That is even with electricity credits in place. The energy regulator has warned that eliminating them is likely to lead to even further spikes and more people in debt, at risk of poverty and in a state of continual anxiety.

Ireland already has the highest electricity prices in Europe. Ordinary people are being absolutely fleeced by energy companies. Are things not bad enough? It is unbelievable that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Healy-Raes and the Lowry-led regional Independents would chose this moment to make the situation even worse. This is another example of a Government that is completely out of touch.

Ireland's crippling energy prices are not inevitable. The Government does not have to turn a blind eye to the rampant profiteering and price-gouging by energy companies. It does not have to further entrench the deep unfairness at the heart of Ireland's energy market. These are political choices to prioritise the profit of energy companies and the energy demand of data centres over the needs of ordinary people who are just trying to keep the lights on and stay warm. It is the Government's inaction, its paralysis in the face of rampant profiteering, which is to blame. The latest task force is nothing more than a smokescreen for the fact that the Government is determined to continue with more of the same.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have repeatedly ignored, push backed against or rejected Sinn Féin's proposals to get prices under control. They disregarded our measures to strengthen the power of the regulator to rein in the energy companies, which have been running roughshod over ordinary people for far too long. They dismissed our calls to overhaul the Government's regressive approach to network charges and the public service obligation, PSO, levy in order that data centres would pay a fair share. Not only have they totally failed to accelerate the renewable transition at the pace required and they continue to prioritise the private interests of corporate developers overseas over the interests of people on the island. It does not have to be this way. The Government has shown whose needs it is going to prioritise and who it will protect. It is not ordinary people. Enough is enough. The Government must adopt Sinn Féin's proposals in order that energy companies are held to account.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Tá oibrithe agus teaghlaigh á lomadh ag praghsanna leictreachais atá ródhaoir. Tá na praghsanna is airde againn san Aontas Eorpach. Níl a dhath feicthe againn ón Rialtas. Níl sé ag gníomhú ar chor ar bith le dul i ngleic leis na rudaí is cúis leis seo. Anois agus an méid is mó tithe riamh ar chúl lena gcuid billí fuinnimh, tá an Rialtas ag baint tacaíochtaí uathu. Impím ar an Rialtas an rud ceart a dhéanamh agus na creidmheasanna fuinnimh a thabhairt chun tosaigh sa bhuiséad i mbliana seo agus an deis seo a thapú chun na leasuithe molta, atá curtha chun tosaigh ag Sinn Féin, a chur i bhfeidhm.

Workers and families are being absolutely fleeced when it comes to the rip-off electricity prices. We have got the highest electricity prices in the European Union. Despite that, the Government has done nothing - not one thing - to address the underlying causes. This inaction is a betrayal of people who are struggling to pay their bills. Three quarters of a million people are to be hit with double-digit electricity increases in the next number of weeks, starting the day after the budget. Arís is arís eile, Sinn Féin has given the Government solutions, such as power for the energy regulator to hold energy companies to account, oversight of hedging practices to protect against price gouging and profiteering, the regulation of standing charges and making the PSO levy and network charges fair. These could all make a meaningful difference to how much people have to pay, but the Government has chosen to do nothing. The strategy has been to just wait it out and hope the problem goes away. While this Government sits on its hands, more and more people are falling behind on their bills.

What do we have today? We have a record number of households that cannot pay their electricity bills. More than 300,000 households across this State cannot pay their electricity bills. That is before these companies jack up the prices and the Government withdraws the energy credits they are relying on. It does not even scratch the surface of how many people are just managing to keep up. That is why the regulator is warning that those numbers are going to spike this winter. We have record numbers and the regulator is telling the Government that it is going to get even worse this winter if the Government does not change course. People are facing into this winter seeing report after report of prices being increased, dreading getting that next bill through the door.

Government policy has made things actively worse for them. The Government rolled out the red carpet for data centres. Government officials admitted that these centres are driving up prices, making bills more expensive for workers and families. On top of that, we have carbon tax hikes on gas and home heating oil, which is the first of five increases planned by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents over the coming years.

There are people in my constituency who are facing into another winter with defective concrete blocks because the Government refused to put in place a fit-for-purpose scheme.

7 o'clock

Now there are people in my constituency who have cracks in their houses. You can see through the cracks and put your hand through the cracks. They are trying to keep their homes warm and spending a fortune, and the Government's answer is to jack up the cost of gas and home heating oil and to take away the energy credits. Energy credits were never the solution. They are one-off measures that are supposed to buy time but the Government did not use that time. It did not make any meaningful reforms and is now pulling the only supports that are there when people need them most. We have a record number of people behind in their bills,

while 750,000 households will in the coming weeks get double-digit increases and in the same two weeks the Government will withdraw the supports that are required.

People are under immense pressure. Government Members need to get their heads out of the sand. They need to stop this nonsense of a do-nothing Government. After 250 days we still have no action from this Government to get prices under control or to put manners on in relation to the price-gouging and the extortionate prices electricity companies are charging. It is time for the Government to do the right thing and make sure the energy credits Sinn Féin is calling for - €450 to be paid to households this winter - are central to the budget. If it does not, it will guarantee that more and more households - more than the current 300,000 - will not be able to pay their electricity bills this winter.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Sometimes we need to be really honest with ourselves. At this moment in time, we know one in five children is living in poverty, 300,000 households are in debt on their electricity bills and nearly 200,000 others are in debt on their gas bills. We need to look at that and make decisions that impact people's lives and help them. We are bringing forward this constructive motion to try to assist in that sense.

The Government countermotion mentions retrofitting. The Minister of State will know well that retrofitting is difficult for many people to access. I am dealing with a man in his 80s who has been waiting nine months to get his house retrofitted. He lives on his own and every day he has to put down a fire and put the coal on the fire. It is incredibly difficult for him, so difficult that he had to contact my office to see if there was any way to get a retrofit done more quickly.

There are countless people with serious issues when it comes to their roofs. Tá fadhbanna le díonta ar fud Conamara, áit nach bhfuil siad in ann retrofitting a fháil i gcomhar an dín sin. Níl an cúnamh ann. Yet their bills increase and many of these people are still waiting to get money back from their electricity providers, having been forced to pay electricity bills during Storm Éowyn when they literally did not have electricity for weeks. These are the big issues facing people and they will only cause more debt as people head into winter. It is a real concern and it is high time the Government took a look at this and ensured a fair distribution of network costs so we can invest for people like those who have lost electricity for weeks on end across Connemara. After every storm that blows a little bit of wind, they lose their electricity because there is not investment in basic infrastructure to ensure they do not lose it again and again for weeks on end.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Where did it all go wrong? We built up a publicly owned electricity service that was the pride of our people. We built up electrification when we were a poor country and we had some of the cheapest electricity in Europe. Thanks to the policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, that all now lies in ruins. Those parties embraced the privatisation agenda from Europe with glee. They sold the family jewels and today we have the most expensive electricity in all of Europe. That happened not by accident but by design.

When it came to wind energy, it was all about the profits of the few, the insiders. Communities saw turbines popping up around them. These turbines should ensure electricity is cheaper but I will tell the Minister of State a story. In recent weeks, I went to a hill above my home town. There are over 20 turbines on that hill; half of them are switched off during

the day because we do not have the electricity infrastructure to avail of wind energy. What was it about? It was about making profits for the people who developed those wind farms, not about reducing costs for our people. The potential of wind energy is huge. If Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had worked in partnership with communities and ensured ownership stayed as much as possible within communities, we would be benefitting hugely from that today. Those are the facts. Again and again, those parties' intentional policies have put huge profits in the pockets of the few and caused huge difficulties for the rest of us.

Our homeowners and small businesses are paying for what data centres should be fairly contributing towards. The policy approach is always about who is inside the tent and has the resources to influence policy, and we pay the price. I say again we had publicly owned electricity infrastructure which was our pride as a people. It was given away, put in the hands of the wealthy few and this is where we are today. None of this is by accident. It is on the Government to resolve this. It must bring in electricity credits in the budget and, once and for all, get a grip on the energy companies and the handfuls of people making huge profits at the expense of our people and leaving 300,000 families unable to pay their bills. A very high percentage of those have now gone over nine months without being able to pay their bills. That is the outworking of failed policies. The Government needs to own them, take responsibility and sort it out.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** In the past few weeks, we have all heard the crushing news that electricity providers are increasing prices by significant amounts this year, but there has been no intervention by the Government to protect those forced to pay the highest prices in Europe. SSE Airtricity will increase bills by 9.5%, Energia by as much as 12% and Bord Gáis by a whopping 13.5%. Hundreds of thousands of people across the State are already in arrears on their bills. Now energy customers face even bigger bills. We are facing into another winter. We can all feel the cold and are putting the heat on these past few nights, but some people will have to choose between eating and heating. All the while the energy companies are raking in profits.

Not only has the Government done nothing to intervene but it has also ignored the pushback and Sinn Féin's proposals to get prices under control. Sinn Féin wants an end to the rip-off once and for all. We want the Government to empower the regulator to rein in the energy companies and their profiteering and to change its approach to network charges and PSO levies. We have asked it to reduce the unfair burden placed on households and ensure data centres pay their fair share. All of this, the Government has ignored.

Data centres are putting a strain on the grid with their massive energy consumption - now increased with AI - and increasing demand, causing increased energy bills for households.

The quality of the service is also deteriorating. In Straffan in my constituency of Kildare North, they have been dealing with near monthly power outages for the past two years. Last month in Kilcock, people were left without electricity intermittently for a couple of days, with no warning. Only last week, my home town of Maynooth had similar. How can the Government expect people to pay more to energy providers when the providers cannot even keep the lights on for them?

We in Sinn Féin want to end the rip-off once and for all, tackle profiteering and bring prices down. I urge the Government to reinstate the electricity credits in the budget and help alleviate fuel poverty for hundreds of thousands of households this year.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** Electricity and energy costs are crippling families across the country. We have seen almost all energy companies announce price increases in recent weeks and we know these companies are amassing massive profits year on year. There are already thousands of families behind on their electricity and energy bills. I know this debt will grow in my constituency for these families while the Government turns its back on them to protect the profits of the massive energy companies.

We saw the devastation caused to the electricity network last January when Storm Éowyn hit the country. My constituency of Sligo, Leitrim and south Donegal was particularly badly hit. We know people and families who went without heat for weeks on end, some for 13 and 14 weeks. When the repairs were carried out, it was only on a temporary basis. The permanent fixes have not been done. People who work in the ESB tell me it is only a matter of time before the next storm comes and there are more outages because only temporary fixes were put in place.

The Government has failed to invest in the network to be resilient from storms. Families are paying exorbitant amounts for electricity, and particularly in rural areas, they are going for extended periods without service, as they did during Storm Éowyn, and receive no compensation for the lack of service.

The Government has ruled out energy credits which will cause energy and fuel poverty for many households. We need to see an increase in the fuel allowance and household benefits packages to take into account these increases in energy costs. Many working families earn a decent wage but are struggling to pay energy bills. That is why we need an energy credit for all households in the upcoming budget. This country is still in a cost-of-living crisis and providing an energy credit will go some way at least to alleviating many of these costs for households, and indeed for many businesses out there that are also crippled by the high energy costs.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** It is beyond time that we end the rip-off of energy bills facing every household and business up and down the country already on their knees with the cost-of-living crisis. More energy increases come at a time when we are already paying the highest levels of energy prices in Europe. That is a badge of dishonour for this Government. How many homes are going to be cold tonight as people try to hold out and not turn on the heat until next month? This staggering cost of energy in the State is a direct result of political choices by this Government. We know 300,000 and 175,000 customers are in arrears in their electricity and gas bills, respectively. If the Government follows through on withdrawing energy credits this winter, the energy regulator has warned that the number of households in arrears could spike dramatically. When is the Government going to wake up on this?

Let me be clear on the actions Sinn Féin wants the Government to take. It is asking the Government to support struggling households. Allocate a €450 energy credit, a real and sizeable measure that would be felt immediately. Hold energy companies to account over the extortionate rates charged to consumers. The wholesale prices are 75% less than they were in

their peak in 2022. Why are these savings not being passed on to customers? Take action to reduce the unjust network charges. The CRU draft decision published in July revealed that the cost for data centres will decrease, but cost for households and SMEs will increase. Stop keeping carbon taxes on families who are already struggling to heat their homes, keep their cars on the roads and have no alternative. Can the Minister of State imagine what it is like for a single mother to have to buy a few gallons of home heating oil at a time, then to have to drag that drum through the house, climb up to the oil tank and pour in enough oil for a couple of days for heating? That is the reality for too many people I know who are living in fuel poverty. In the rip-off, get prices under control and support struggling families. That is what the Government needs to do.

I know we are over-reliant on international markets for our energy and there is no hiding of that. We import 80% of our energy, leaving us almost entirely exposed to the markets. Now is the time to diversify our supply, to invest in renewable energy infrastructure and to grow our indigenous energy sector and create Irish jobs. I urge the Government to consider the proposals in this motion to finally end the rip-off of Irish households and to hold the energy companies to account for their extortionate prices.

The Government cannot leave families in the situation they are in going through this winter like this. The energy credits have to be restored as an immediate measure. The Government can have all the plans it wants, and I see in its ridiculous amendment all the backslapping and the good intentions, but there are people tonight who cannot afford to turn their heat on. There are people who cannot afford their electricity bills. The Government has to do something about it.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I move:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

— the Government is acutely aware of the recent energy price increases and the impact it has on households and businesses;

— the Government acknowledges the latest data for June shows that 13 per cent of households are in arrears on their electricity bills and 25 per cent on their gas bills, and supporting these households must remain a priority;

— the previous Government introduced a suite of measures over recent years to help households and businesses deal with the rising cost of energy at a time of very high inflation, including €1,500 in electricity credits to all households through four Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Schemes, at a cost of €3.3 billion, this is in addition to one-off payments to support certain social protection payment recipients;

— the Government provides support for households through schemes, including the Fuel Allowance, Household Benefits Package (HBP) and Additional Needs Payment;

— Irish electricity and gas prices have historically been higher than other European Union (EU) countries due to long standing drivers, such as geographical isolation, dispersed population, fossil fuel dependency and small market scale;

— the electricity and gas markets in Ireland are commercial, liberalised, and competitive, and competitive energy markets result in greater choice for consumers and businesses, in terms of suppliers, products and prices, price setting by electricity suppliers is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned; and

— the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) published a report on retail energy markets in September 2023 in relation to competition and supplier pricing in the energy market, based on a review of supplier prices and wholesale market costs, the CRU considers that retail prices broadly continue to reflect underlying cost drivers, such as wholesale gas and electricity prices, but with a lag period due to supplier hedging strategies; and

affirms that:

— the Government has approved an extension of the 9 per cent Value Added Tax rate currently applied to gas and electricity to end in October 2025 at an estimated cost of €85 million with the net benefit to households from 1st May to 31st October being approximately €26.60 with respect to electricity and €20.28 with respect to gas;

— a range of social welfare measures are available to assist households with energy costs;

— the first winter Fuel Allowance payment of €33 per week starts this week and will continue for 28 weeks, totalling €924 each year, this payment supports over 410,000 households with their energy costs;

— the HBP supports over 540,000 households with their gas and electricity bills and is paid at a rate of €35 per month, 12 months of the year;

— the Additional Needs Payment scheme is available in cases where a person genuinely cannot meet this cost from their own resources and provides a discretionary exceptional needs payment to help meet essential costs, such as a fuel bill;

— following a review of the effectiveness of consumer protection measures over the past winter, the CRU announced some key consumer protection measures will stay in place, including a moratorium on disconnection for vulnerable customers from 1st November, 2025, until 31st March, 2026; and

— the Government has established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (the Taskforce) to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

— the Taskforce:

— will ensure that energy affordability is incorporated into the review of CRU and the regulatory framework;

— is chaired by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, and its membership includes, representatives of various Government Departments and crucial energy

sector stakeholders, the work will include, the preparation and implementation of an energy affordability action plan, which will include recommendations for structural reforms to benefit consumers in the medium- and long-term;

— their work will include, a full review of cost drivers within the energy sector, and consideration of how the EU Action Plan for Affordable Energy: Unlocking the true value of our Energy Union to secure affordable, efficient and clean energy for all Europeans and associated guidance can be implemented in an Irish context; and

— their first item of work is the development of an interim plan, including measures for consideration to support customers in Winter 2025/26, in order to inform Budget 2026 discussions;

— the wider package of energy efficiency supports, available from Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, make it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades, for warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes, with lower energy bills, and this year, a record annual capital budget of more than €550 million has been allocated for these schemes, including the Solar Photovoltaic Scheme, meaning more funding than ever is available to make buildings warmer, healthier, more comfortable and less expensive to heat;

— a record €280 million has been allocated to the Warmer Homes Scheme to provide fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty, representing an 11-fold increase over the spend on the scheme in 2020 and underlines the Government's commitment to supporting households with their energy costs;

— the Government is committed to continuing with the planned carbon tax increases, aligning with recommendations from the Climate Change Advisory Council and scientific experts, and to continue to use the additional revenues to fund social welfare measures, agri-environmental schemes and retrofitting;

— the National Development Plan will provide for the provision of up to €3.5 billion in additional equity for Electricity Supply Board Networks and EirGrid to support an unprecedented investment in electricity grid infrastructure over 2026 – 2030, this equity will enable the companies to raise finance for the planned investment of up to €18.08 billion;

— this investment will support the delivery of the electricity grid for 2026 – 2030 in line with the CRU Price Review Six (PR6) draft determination published in July, and represents a step change in investment in our electricity grid infrastructure;

— while it is regrettable that Electricity Network tariffs will increase to support this investment under PR6, the investments in vital infrastructure are necessary to transform our electricity system to support a growing population, new housing and expanding businesses;

— the Programme for Government reaffirms Ireland's ambitious targets of 9 gigawatts (GW) of onshore wind capacity, 8 GW of solar capacity and at least 5 GW of offshore wind capacity connected to the grid in order to meet the requirement of 80 per cent of electricity demand supplied by renewables;

— the Public Services Obligation (PSO) levy funds Ireland's renewable electricity support schemes, the Renewable Energy Feed-in Tariff and the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme,

and is a key enabler of investment needed to meet national targets for renewable generation and carbon emissions reduction;

— the PSO levy has a reduction of about 40 per cent on 2024/25 to €2 a month or circa €24 in the year;

— the Programme for Government sets out a clear policy direction that balances energy, housing, climate and economic development, recognising that increased and unprecedented investment in our electricity grid and generation capacity is essential to meet future demand, not just for data centres but for housing, electric vehicles, heat pumps and a growing population;

— the best long-term approach for Ireland to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets is to invest in energy efficiency and renewable energy, cutting our dependence on fossil fuels and generating power from our own renewable sources ensuring a cleaner, cheaper energy future; and

— the Government will continue to engage with a range of stakeholders through the pre-budget process and in advance of forming measures for inclusion in Budget 2026."

Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí i bPáirtí Shinn Féin ós rud é gur thug siad an díospóireacht seo os comhair na Dála. Tugann sé deis dom é seo a phlé anocht. In the past year, there has been a certain level of stability with regard to energy prices, but a number of suppliers have announced price increases in the coming weeks. Domestic energy prices and cost-of-living pressures are matters of serious concern. The Government is acutely aware - we are all TDs in our constituencies - of the challenges households in meeting these costs and we want to support those most at risk. I would like to take the opportunity to reaffirm to the House that the Government has made a number of important commitments in respect of addressing the continued high cost of energy. The programme for Government acknowledges the increased energy cost pressures on households and businesses and commits to bringing forward taxation measures to help contain energy costs.

The electricity and gas retail markets operate within a European Union regulatory regime wherein electricity and gas markets are commercial and liberalised. That is not the same as saying it is privatised. Competition has been brought into the market. However, the idea that the family silver was sold off - in the words of Deputy Mac Lochlainn - is not accurate. Competition is not the same thing as privatisation. Price setting by electricity suppliers, including standing charges, is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned. Each company has its own approach to pricing decisions over time. Within a competitive environment, providers also have costs they always have. The CRU ended its regulation of retail prices in the electricity market in 2011 and in the gas market in 2014. The CRU carried out a review of the pricing and hedging strategies of energy suppliers in 2023. Following this review the regulator published a report outlining that it saw no evidence of failure in the retail market, but it would continue to monitor this.

Network tariffs, which are a significant component of a customer's bill, are used to finance the maintenance and expansion of our grid. These are necessary tasks to ensure our journey to net zero and that we can actually generate and distribute electricity produced on this island. This will have long run benefits for electricity users throughout Ireland. Delivering investment in our grid, including the full price review 6, PR6, programme, offers one of the fastest means

by which to impact upon overall electricity costs to consumers. PR6 will deliver the programme for Government priority to ensure that the necessary investment is made in our grid. The CRU as the independent economic regulator of EirGrid and ESB Networks is responsible for PR6. The CRU public consultation on PR6 has recently closed and now the CRU will independently consider submissions received before publishing a final decision. The Government fully supports the full implementation of the associated programme of works.

To support the investment, the Government is investing €3.5 billion in equity in EirGrid and ESB Networks - State companies - to ensure that the PR6 infrastructure programme can be delivered. This will reduce borrowing costs for the system operator companies and help keep consumer costs down. In relation to data centres, while already contracted data centres will be accommodated in the near term, the Government has committed to developing a plan-led approach for future large energy users to accelerate energy generation, connectivity and planning processes. This will align with our decarbonisation objectives, supporting Ireland's knowledge-led economy and providing certainty for the sector. Ireland has attracted the best data centre and tech companies in the world. This is a really important relationship, and the Government continues to work with the sector towards a secure and decarbonised energy future. The Government supports the work of the CRU in developing an updated large energy users, LEU, connection policy, which will consider the impact of future LEU connections on the capacity of our energy and grid infrastructure.

The Government is aware that energy customers in Ireland still pay significantly more on their energy bills than they did in 2020. The Government has taken action to ensure households are supported to meet these costs. It has introduced measures over recent years to help households and businesses deal with the rising cost of energy, including electricity credits to all households through four electricity costs emergency benefit schemes at a cost of €3.3 billion. This is in addition to one-off payments to support certain social protection payment recipients. The Government is committed to addressing high energy costs experienced by consumers. The programme for Government acknowledges this and commits to bringing forward measures to help maintain the costs. The Government recently approved an extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity by a further six months to October 2025 at an estimated cost of €85 million.

Historically, a VAT rate of 13% has been applied to gas and electricity, but this has been reduced to 9% since 2022, and it does cost taxation money to maintain that.

The regulator recently published enhanced customer protection measures for the upcoming winter period. A key measure includes a disconnection moratorium. This will remain in place from 1 November 2025 to the end of March 2026 for vulnerable customers, while the moratorium for priority services registered customers will remain in place all year. The winter disconnection moratorium for all other domestic customers will be in place from 8 December until 16 January. It is important that anybody who is struggling with bills is strongly encouraged to engage with his or her supplier. Under the energy engage code, suppliers will not disconnect customers who engage with them.

The Government is working at speed to roll out more renewable energy infrastructure. This is already helping to bring down the cost of electricity and is the long-term solution to high energy bills. The programme for Government reaffirms Ireland's ambitious renewable targets to meet the requirement of 80% of electricity demand supplied by renewables by 2030. The

PSO levy is a crucial policy instrument to achieving these targets by funding Ireland's renewable electricity support schemes, REFIT and RESS. The PSO levy is a key enabler of investment needed to meet our targets for renewable generation, carbon emission reductions and lower costs. It represents a modest element of customer bills and will reduce in the coming tariff year by 40% to €24 in the year. In addition, the Government is making it easier for people to improve their energy efficiency and produce their own energy through a range of grants to install solar PV on homes, businesses and farms. Yes, we would like for all of this to be rolled out more quickly but it is rolling out and lots of people are benefiting from this. The previous budget included record funding of €469 million from the carbon tax for residential and community energy upgrades. That was an increase in funding and meant more money was available to make buildings warmer, healthier, more comfortable and less expensive to heat, and that is having an impact around the country.

In June of this year, a cross-Government national energy affordability task force, chaired by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, was established to identify, assess and implement measures that would enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply for economic stability. Further measures to support Irish consumers, including targeted schemes, will be considered as part of the work programme of the national energy affordability task force. A key output of this task force will be to develop an energy affordability action plan that will identify a comprehensive range of solutions, including demand-side solutions for households to allow them to adjust their energy demand and avail of low cost renewable energy.

Task force members are currently finalising the preparation of an interim report, which will set out measures for consideration as part of the budget process next month. I understand that the Minister, Darragh O'Brien, has engaged with all energy suppliers to gain an understanding of support measures they may introduce for households this winter. A number of meetings have also been scheduled for the coming weeks for the Minister to discuss these matters directly with energy supply companies.

The Government will continue to make the critical investments necessary to achieve a just energy and climate transition, as affirmed in the programme for Government. However, we are also acutely aware of the impact high energy costs have on Irish households and the Government is committed to providing effective and practical supports for those struggling with these costs. Supporting the most vulnerable in society must remain a priority and the Government is committed to doing so in budget 2026 and beyond.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** There are 300,000 people in energy debt. The Minister for Finance will stand in this Chamber on this day two weeks and talk about how well we are doing in managing the economy when people in my constituency will be going to bed early because they cannot afford to turn the heating on. If the Minister of State goes to any of the shopping centres out my way, he will meet a lot of people who are sitting around. Many of them are elderly. When they are asked why they are there, they say they are there to meet friends but they are also there because they cannot afford to turn on the heating at home. That is the reason they are there and their friends will tell you that is why Mary or Johnny is there every day.

That is the reality for many people in my constituency. The Minister of State said there was a retrofit scheme. If those elderly people are living in council housing, there is a difficulty. We

know that, in my local authority area, the funding the local authority gets will take possibly another 30 years to get around the council housing stock and then we are back to square one. There is a big challenge for those people. For people who own their own homes, the challenge in relation to retrofitting is getting the funding for it. There are huge challenges there as well.

There is also the cost of wholesale electricity. It has actually fallen since 2022 yet bills for householders continue to rise, as we have heard. The question people are asking has to do with why Irish people are paying the highest prices for electricity in Europe. I do not hear any answers from the Minister of State. Far from holding the energy companies to account, the Government wants to strip away the one relief workers and families had in the energy credit. The Government has also committed to hiking the carbon tax over the next five budgets, making homes even more expensive to heat and denying people any chance of retrofitting their homes. The Government has rejected all calls to strengthen the regulator so it can finally hold the energy companies to account.

Surely we have to reduce the cost to households of progressive PSO levies and network charges by making sure large companies pay their fair share by implementing a fairer model. That would be Sinn Féin's approach. We have heard the Government's approach. It is not working for a lot of people who are out there, the people who are sitting in those shopping centres. They are elderly, but not exclusively so, and it impacts on families as well. We are asking that the Government take notice of this and start to act.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** Families across the country are at breaking point and people are being hammered with sky-high costs every which way they turn, from rent, to food, to fuel and to insurance, and now they will be forced to pay hundreds of euro more on energy bills. We already have the highest energy prices in Europe and families are paying on average €500 more than households anywhere else - money they simply do not have. Tonight, in homes across this country, there are people who are asking themselves how they will keep the lights on and how they will heat their homes this winter, while big energy companies have announced fresh price hikes on top of already punishing bills. No amount of task forces or plans will be of any comfort to a family wondering where they will get 20 quid to put in the electricity meter. They will be of zero comfort.

Let us be clear: this was not and is not inevitable. This is a political choice. The Government has chosen to protect the profits of energy companies and data centres instead of protecting ordinary people. The Government is withdrawing energy credits at a time people need them most. The Government is allowing rampant profiteering to go unchecked all while it ignores Sinn Féin's proposals to strengthen the regulator, cut unfair charges and make sure data centres, not households, pay their fair share. Over 475,000 households are in electricity and gas arrears. Families owe hundreds of euro in arrears that they simply cannot pay. The rate of disconnections is rising sharply. People are being pushed into making impossible choices. Do they heat their homes or do they put food on their tables? The truth is, wholesale prices have fallen, companies continue to gouge, the Government shrugs and families suffer. Sinn Féin would end this rip-off once and for all by providing energy credits of €450 to ease the burden in the interim. We would give the regulator real teeth in order to hold companies to account, ban profiteering and regulate standing charges. We would make those data centres pay their fair share and bring down network costs for families. It is time to stop choosing

energy companies over families. It is time to end the rip-off, hold these corporations to account and bring down prices for good.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** During the past few weeks, we have seen the main electricity companies announce more price hikes. These same companies have had record profits during the past few years. We are now facing into a very long and cold winter. I have constituents who are already behind in their bills. These are people who never had an issue in paying their bills before. Now, they are looking at another hike in electricity costs on the bill they are already struggling to pay. My colleagues have already said this but I will say it again: we have the highest energy costs across Europe. How much more does the Minister of State expect our people to take? The Government needs to wake up. People are struggling and have been for a long time.

It is fine for the Government to come in here and talk about previous supports but the people want to know what it is going to do in the here and now. A lot of people across Dublin Bay North are already struggling. They are struggling to buy their groceries, to pay their already rip-off rents and to get their kids to college, and that is without landing these energy hikes on top of them. I want people to realise that this is a political choice by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry group. How many times has Sinn Féin come in to this House and given the Minister of State a roadmap out of this crisis? Yet again, here we are, giving him another plan to support the people who will need it. What will he do? He will probably do nothing. He will probably continue to allow people to struggle and be crippled by debt just to keep their children warm this winter. Let me lay it out clearly for him. Give people the energy credits. They are crying out for them. Give them that €450 credit to help them keep the lights and the heat on this winter.

**Deputy Ann Graves:** Energy companies are putting their hands into the pockets of working families and helping themselves to their hard-earned cash. This is happening because the Government is not holding these greedy companies to account. Its policy of appeasing these energy companies is causing huge hardship for people. People in Ireland are already paying the highest electricity prices in Europe and the fifth-highest price when it comes to gas. This is having a very real and negative impact on the lives of ordinary people in my constituency. I was with the Swords women's shed this morning and the topic of conversation across the board was the impact of the cost of living on everybody. People come into my office with stories of how they are pressed to the pin of their collar simply to cover the basics. Food, rent and heating bills are causing stress, particularly for those who should be at a stage in their lives where they are enjoying themselves after a life of working hard and paying their taxes. That is without looking at back-to-school costs or anything else. I am talking about the basics.

One woman told me about how she has to watch every single penny of her pension. She goes to bed at 6 o'clock every evening as she can no longer afford to turn on her heating in her home. It is a choice of eat or heat. What type of life is that for a pensioner? A volunteer with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul told me how the demand for its service and assistance has risen dramatically. This is due to the spiralling energy costs. Energy companies have to be held to account. The forthcoming budget is an opportunity to address this. Sinn Féin wants energy credits to be included in the budget because this Government has made the political choice of putting the profits of energy companies ahead of the needs of our people. Our

proposals are focused on bringing relief to hard-pressed families. We are proposing the introduction of three electricity credits valued at €150 each to a total value of €450 to ease the enormous burden that is on families and older people. We would strengthen the mandate and powers of the energy regulator to hold energy companies to account and prioritise energy affordability. We are committed to holding the energy companies to account. The Minister of State said he was acutely aware of the situation people are living in. What is he going to do to end this energy rip-off?

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. I admit I am uncomfortable with the element of it concerning the carbon tax from a climate perspective. The Labour Party believes that it is an important tax and that the polluter-pays principle is an important one in terms of our response to the climate crisis. I completely accept that there are people in homes who may have no other option right now than to remain on oil and gas heating but carve-outs in the carbon tax system that would protect the most financially vulnerable are possible. We in the Labour Party have proposed a refundable carbon tax credit to encourage those who can reduce their emissions while protecting those in low-income households and still ensure big polluters pay their fair share. Notwithstanding that, we will be supporting this otherwise excellent motion and again I thank Sinn Féin for bringing it before the House.

For the past number of years under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, we have been in what feels like a permanent cost-of-living crisis. People are being squeezed from every angle, be it grocery inflation, the cost of renting and buying a home, and childcare costs, something this Government has been conspicuously silent on since its pre-election commitment to reduce fees to €200 a month. We know student fees will be going up by at least €500 this year. Compounding it all we have the matter at hand, namely, energy bills. Barnardos recently reported that 40% of parents have been forced into borrowing money to help to pay for essentials for their children, while lone parents are disproportionately more likely to cut back on those essentials. We are literally seeing parents going hungry so that their children are fed. Others are going without heating in their homes or are taking on debt just to keep the lights on.

When we hear from the Government that budget 2026 will not be a cost-of-living budget, I am struck by the cynicism of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. For a couple of years in the lead-up to last year's general election, we had "The Late Late Show"-style one-for-everyone-in-the-audience giveaway budgets to buy votes. Now that they have got themselves back into government, they have decided it is time to tighten the purse strings. It is utterly cynical. This year, we need a cost-of-living budget that targets and supports the most vulnerable households, takes real and meaningful measures to help parents who are struggling, and lifts low-income households and children out of poverty. Indeed, the Labour Party will be bringing forward a motion on these very issues tomorrow.

I find it particularly galling that we are hearing from the Government that we cannot afford a cost-of-living budget but we can afford to hand more than €630 million in VAT cuts to the hospitality sector this year. This sector is currently experiencing record levels of employment - for every closure, 11 new businesses open - and is no stranger to price-gouging, particularly in accommodation. It already enjoys a reduced VAT rate. Some €630 million is a huge sum of money and how it is deployed is a political choice. Giving it over to VAT cuts for the hospitality sector leaves less space for supports for working and vulnerable people. If it is a choice

between supporting people through this cost-of-living crisis or supporting the bottom line of McDonald's or the Merrion Hotel, I know where the Labour Party stands.

We need to see targeted energy credits in the coming budget. As the motion notes, there are 300,000 people in arrears on their electricity bills and 185,000 people in arrears on gas bills. Those are the people we need to be supporting with meaningful and targeted measures. We are approaching three years since the first universal energy credits were paid out. Surely that has been enough time for the Government to have devised a way to target those credits more effectively.

We need to talk about the energy companies as well. They are running rings around us. Flogas has hiked its prices by 7% after its parent company, DCC, recorded operating profits of €820 million in its most recent accounts. Energia is increasing electricity prices by more than 12% after making a very healthy €154 million in profits last year. SSE Airtricity has announced a 9.5% increase in electricity rates, its second hike this year after a 10.5% increase in electricity in April alongside an 8.4% increase in gas prices. Its most recent accounts show a €111 million operating profit. Bord Gáis Energy and Pinergy are also hiking their prices as they trade profitably. There is a word for this and it is "profiteering". It is blatant greed. Ordinary families, many of whom are already struggling, are paying for this. How are they supposed to cope? As imperfect as they were, the energy credits were a lifeline for so many people and people have become reliant on them. The Government is now going cold turkey on them. The result is that some people will simply go cold.

The bigger picture here is that these energy companies need to be reined in. This gross profiteering in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis needs to be stamped out. This oligarchical-like behaviour needs to be stamped out. The energy market is supposed to be competitive but the companies are carrying on more like cartels. The Minister of State needs to start looking seriously at ways we could reintroduce some level of regulation on energy prices beyond network tariffs. I know it is not easy. The markets are governed by a hodgepodge of different EU-level rules but there are carve-outs that allow for price regulation in order to protect customers and we should be looking to exploit these. As the Minister of State will be aware, under EU energy market rules our electricity and gas markets have been fully liberalised. The CRU judged competition to be effective in the electricity market in 2011 and in the gas market in 2014. The ESB, via Electric Ireland, still holds a large market share by virtue of its once monopolised position but competition had developed at the time to the point that the CRU judged that it was effective enough to protect consumers and keep prices down.

Once that happened EU rules meant that they could no longer justify blanket price regulation and so regulations were lifted. If we look to the North, Power NI is a former monopoly provider similar to how the ESB once was here in the South. Because Power NI still holds a very large share of the domestic market, its tariffs are regulated by the Utility Regulator to ensure that customers are protected and that prices remain fair. This was the case even prior to Brexit when EU competition law applied in the North because the European Commission accepted the case that there were less competitive dynamics in the North and regulation of Power NI's tariffs was continued as a public service measure. I think we are approaching a point where those competitive dynamics that enabled the liberalisation of our energy markets back in the 2010s have failed. Competition has not delivered better and fairer prices for consumers. Instead, it seems that energy companies have given up on the idea of competing with each other

and a price hike by one gives an excuse for a price hike by the rest. Are vulnerable customers protected by this approach? Is this a sign of a functioning market? Under EU electricity and gas directives, price regulation is allowed in exceptional circumstances such as when competition is not working, or in order to protect those vulnerable customers. I believe that we are very much approaching the point, if we are not already there, where we can justifiably claim that competition in the Irish energy markets has failed and that the Minister should be looking to exploit those exceptional circumstances provisions in EU rules in order to rein in the energy companies. At the very least he should be making the case to the European Commission.

Another avenue that I think might be worth exploring, one closer to home, is the powers conferred on the Minister under section 10 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999, which allows a Minister to issue policy directions to the regulator, the CRU, provided the Minister does not instruct on any individual case. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, may be aware that this was utilised by one of his predecessors to introduce what became known as the large energy user rebalancing subvention. It was intended to achieve a permanent rebalancing of network tariffs by shifting part of the transmission and distribution network costs away from large industrial users and onto domestic customers. It reduced costs for around 1,500 corporate energy users and was ended in 2022. Perhaps the Minister could consider using some similar mechanism, but in the inverse, to reduce costs for households by increasing the network costs burden on the large energy users. There is a case to be made, particularly in the context of data centres and the effect they are having on our energy costs. It is beyond baffling that, as the motion puts it, the draft price review, PR6, proposes to increase costs on households while giving a discount to data centres. These are the same data centres that are putting our energy system under enormous pressure with a 412% increase in electricity usage in the past decade leading to increased costs for ordinary households. The Government knows this. The Secretary General in the Department of public expenditure has said himself that soaring electricity demand is largely attributable to data centres. This follows the Secretary General in the Minister's own Department of energy saying that we are getting to the point where the Government must choose between the power demands of data centres and building homes. Ordinary working families are paying for this and, quite simply, it is wrong. Do we want to be a country that looks after its citizens, one that ensures they can afford to keep their homes warm and their lights on, or are we more interested in protecting big businesses like tech companies? Of course there is also the climate element and the impact data centres are having on our water usage and our emissions. The massive energy demands from these data centres means they guzzle through fossil fuels and are taking basically all of the relatively small amount of new renewable energy we are currently producing. This renewable energy could be used to decarbonise our homes, reduce our bills or electrify our public transport, but instead it is being gobbled by data centres.

It is notable that the Government has scrapped its own energy poverty action plan in favour of advancing an energy affordability action plan. This seems to be a ruse to shift the focus away from energy poverty among struggling households and towards businesses impacted by high energy costs. This is all about political choices and priorities. It is a political choice to give a massive tax cut to the hospitality sector while denying vulnerable households desperately needed supports. It is a political choice to allow energy companies to run riot rather than even make an attempt at reining them in. It is a political choice to put the needs of tech companies

and data centres over the needs of ordinary households. It seems to me that this Government is making all the wrong choices. We will see whose side they are on come budget day.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan):** I thank the Deputy. Before we move on I want to welcome the IFA future leaders group to the Public Gallery. They are here with Deputy William Aird.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I too welcome our guests in the Gallery. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward the motion tonight. It is timely. Many households will be looking in on this debate with eagerness because winter is approaching. We broadly agree with most aspects of the motion before us this evening. We live in a country where energy prices are among the highest in Europe. That reality is hitting households hard, with hundreds of thousands of families in arrears and many more just keeping their heads above water. The truth is that energy poverty is now a daily reality for far too many people and it very clearly demands urgent and serious attention.

Where we do disagree with the motion is on the proposal to roll out universal energy credits. Not everybody in the country needs them. Clearly we are a country of haves and have-nots and there are very many people who are cutting their cloth close to the bone. Lots of people can pay their energy bills but many more are really struggling. We believe the measures should be targeted. What resources we have should be spent on those who really need support, such as low-income households, people who are already in arrears, families, and schools who are being pushed quite close to the brink. This is where targeted action is most effective, otherwise we are spreading the money too thinly and it becomes more about the optics than the outcomes.

In our constituencies schools are feeling the crisis in a particularly acute way. Rutland Street school is one school I have spoken about in this Chamber on more than one occasion. Their electricity costs are among their biggest annual expenses, like so many other schools. They have now reached the point where they are relying on the so-called advance funding. This is not extra money or new investment; it is just borrowing from their own future budgets. This does not solve anything, or lessen the anxiety that comes with knowing how they are going to keep the lights on come January, rather than simply keeping the heating on come October. It is a sign of the reality that schools across the country are in financially precarious positions and it punishes children in the process. If we are serious about tackling the cost-of-living crisis, and particularly targeted energy costs, then schools such as Rutland Street have to be part of the conversation.

There is a wider point here too. A transition that leaves behind our most vulnerable is not a just transition. We need a people-first approach where nobody is left behind. Right now too many households are being asked to shoulder costs when large corporations continue to consume vast amounts of electricity at a fraction of the budget. It is quite clearly not fair. It is very obviously not sustainable. The failures are clear also when we are looking at housing. My colleague, Deputy Whitmore, recently pointed out the Dublin City Council figures that just 17% of apartments under the council's remit have been retrofitted. This is shocking. It is not a Dublin-only issue. The same story is playing out in towns and cities right across the country. If we are not retrofitting our public housing stock, we are condemning thousands of families to remain in energy poverty indefinitely.

Yes we agree with much of the motion. We need emergency measures and we need stronger oversight of energy companies. We need to ensure that the profits of the few do not come at the expense of so many, including our schools. We do, however, also need to be clear about what must be targeted directly to those in arrears, to those in our school communities, and to those who are on the brink. That is the only way we can alleviate the current crisis and build a fairer, people-first energy future.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I thank Sinn Féin for bringing the motion forward. It is absolutely essential that we keep the focus on the cost-of-living crisis. It is incredible, when we think about it, that we are calling it the cost-of-living crisis. It is too expensive to get the basic things that are required to live your life. It is truly shocking the extent to which profits are being made by companies, by grocery stores, by food outlets, by gas and electricity companies, and by our own State company, the ESB. Profit gouging is happening in so many areas. Who is paying for it? It is ordinary households. This is why we have seen child poverty rates double when we have never been as wealthy. There have never been such levels of economic growth. There is something fundamentally wrong in the way in which our economy and society is operating.

We are seeing already that it is an early winter. People feel it. Temperatures are dropping already and many people are already facing the choice between eating or turning on their heating. In many situations in families it is parents who are deciding to forgo their own meals. The figures from Barnardo's have shown this.

Parents in this country are forgoing eating a meal so their children can have a meal. This is 2025; it is not 1905. What is going on here? If we look, for example, at SSE Airtricity customers, from 20 October a typical customer's annual bill will increase by about €150. This is a massive increase for families who are facing back-to-school costs, massive food inflation and skyrocketing rents. Where does it end? One in five children are at risk of poverty after their families pay the housing costs, be it rent or a mortgage. This will be compounded. We will see the number of children in poverty increase when these energy costs are added in. It is not just inflation and we should call it out for what it is. It is greedflation. We should name it and the Government itself should not be afraid to name it. It is greedflation. Companies are making massive profits off the backs of people being pushed into poverty and not being able to afford the basic cost of living.

We know that incomes cannot keep pace with this. The energy poverty crisis that is ongoing is going to continue for people. Energia generated a profit after tax of €135 million in 2024. Bord Gáis Energy also made hundreds of millions of euro in profit in 2024 and 2025. Who is seeing the benefits of these profits? It is not the families who are scraping by and who are unsure whether they can continue to do so. We have allowed a society and culture to develop where families and children go cold and hungry in order that the profits of big companies are sated and fulfilled. I ask the question again. This is 2025 in Ireland, in an economy that is supposed to be a social-market economy and a balanced economy that is about feeding, supporting and nurturing a society, not just profit at all costs, yet it feels we are back in the *laissez-faire* early Dickensian capitalist days where people go hungry while other people amass wealth and money.

The social contract has been broken, and for what? For these companies to make more profits. The Government has to start prioritising the families who are stretched. There are two

Irelands, and indeed there are many Irelands today. There is a small number who are doing okay but there is a majority that, at some level, is struggling in one way or another to cover the basic costs of living. Luxuries used to be a holiday, nice clothes, a meal out - things people saw as treating themselves. Today, a luxury and a treat, for some people, is actually turning the heat on. This is outrageous in a country that is one of the wealthiest in the world. The Government promised an energy poverty action plan. It has not been implemented and it is very clear that the Government's priority is not implementing measures that will actually alleviate this real poverty. Instead, it is too busy and unwilling to challenge the massive greedflation we are seeing.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** As a chemical engineer and a former climate technologist I am gravely concerned by the problem of accelerating energy costs and energy poverty facing our people. In my constituency, the most pervasive reports of energy poverty come from disadvantaged communities in the south inner city, Ringsend and Irishtown. There is also the renter in Sandymount who correctly pointed out to me that he is powerless to improve the energy efficiency of his home, as the SEAI grants do not extend to him, and they cover less than 20% of the cost. Two restaurant owners I met with in Rathmines recounted to me the huge impact of rising energy costs on their ability to run their kitchens or afford their ingredients, and an elderly constituent in Ballsbridge, who rightly said that not everyone in Dublin 2, 4 or 6 is posh and well off, is very concerned that the fuel allowance will not keep up with the inflation of the highest energy prices in the EU.

The overture from the Government often is - I am sure it will be today - that there is a significant energy security problem in Ireland. I could not agree more but that was a problem 20 years ago, when the Taoiseach was first at Cabinet and the State owned 96% of the capacity in this country, as the motion details. It is still a problem today, where the private market owns 73% of the capacity. Where is the urgency to introduce the major structural changes required to tap renewable energy in one of the countries most rich in it? Not only do we have offshore wind energy farms lying vacant all along our coast, but we also have ones like the foreknown Sceirde Rocks project in Connemara being cancelled earlier this year, with no replacement.

As an island nation, we have huge opportunities in tidal energy and minuscule funding to pursue it. A constituent asked me recently why there is not a solar farm on the top of every Government and public building, as the EU promised to fund and complete by the end of this year. Another asked me why we do not have 100%-funded retrofitting schemes like they have in Italy.

There is a better way. The Social Democrats, in the general election, proposed the most significant climate fund of nearly any other party, one that would cover the country in 500,000 solar panels, bringing down energy prices by an estimated 40%. My deputy party leader revealed at the weekend that the €3.3 billion in one-off energy payments over the last number of years could have supplied electricity to 1 million homes if it had been used to build renewable energy projects instead. We would still have had money left over to fund supports for the most vulnerable.

This discussion on energy credits and emergency supports is welcome but until we have a Government that is serious about creating structural changes in our climate and economic

systems, we will have more motions and debates like this one, and the Irish people will still be left in the cold wind that was never harnessed.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** I welcome this motion being brought forward by Sinn Féin. It is a timely motion due to the time of the year and the upcoming budget. It is important to continue to focus on the cost-of-living crisis, a crisis that is pushing more and more families towards poverty.

I want to share with the Minister of State a very sad and disturbing story of a family in particular difficulty relating to energy costs. The family, who are in my constituency, contacted me recently and asked that I come to visit them as they were not in a position to come to see me. I called yesterday and met a lovely couple under severe mental and financial pressure. They have three dependent children. Two are twin boys, both with additional needs. They are aged 14 years and were born after 28 weeks' gestation. One boy attends secondary school and with support is doing well. The other boy, Alex, is profoundly affected and has complex needs. His conditions include spastic quadriplegia, cerebral palsy, uncontrolled epilepsy, obstructive sleep apnoea, tracheostomy, dystonia, autonomic dysfunction, urinary retention and catheterisation. Alex became quite unwell in March 2023 and had a prolonged admission to intensive care in Temple Street hospital here in Dublin. He spent nine months there. Thankfully, he came home in 2023. He has been home now for two years in his bedroom, which for all intents and purposes is an intensive care unit. Alex needs full-time nursing care and requires two trained personnel with him at all times. His parents are trained in his care needs. He has two support nurses, and LauraLynn has provided two trained staff to support him. The couple is very appreciative of the nursing and LauraLynn support, and without that support, Alex would not be able to stay at home. He is reliant on medical equipment at all times, and the following list of equipment must be plugged in at all times: an electric bed; a ventilator, with 24-hour operation; a suction machine; a cough assist machine; a feeding machine; an oxygen saturation monitor; and a fan, hoist, shower trolley, oxygen concentrator and nebuliser.

The family is heartbroken now. Alex is in respiratory failure and palliative care is required and has commenced. As the Minister of State can appreciate, there are significant costs involved in looking after Alex, not least the cost of electricity. That cost, for Alex alone, is €200 per month. The husband has had to leave his job to look after Alex, and even with a payment plan with the electricity supplier, the family are in arrears through no fault of their own. In recent times, they were threatened with disconnection. The Minister of State can imagine the pressure this family is under.

8 o'clock

They feel that their plight and the plight of other families like theirs is not understood by politicians like us. They have said they would welcome a visit from the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Health to acquaint them with the various difficulties they face on a daily basis. A funding scheme needs to be put in place to cover energy costs - electricity and gas - for this family and for families in similar circumstances. I ask the Minister of State to consider this suggestion favourably and as a matter of urgency.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. We are facing into the dark, cold months of winter in circumstances where families, households and workers are going to be hit with increases in the local property tax, fuel costs for transport, student fees, insurance, rent and food. The list goes on. In the past week, four energy companies announced that they are hiking their prices. Energy prices used to go up by 1%, 2% or 3%. Most of us remember that. Now it is 9%, 11%, 12%, 13% and so on. That is the way it goes. Energia is going to increase its prices by 12%, Bord Gais's prices will go up by 13% and Pinergy is putting up its prices by 9%. We have some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. More than 500,000 customers are going to be hit with these increases in the next couple of weeks. Many of them do not have the additional money needed to meet these increases. We already have a record number of people in arrears. It is only in September, and they are still getting bills for the summer months. This is the important issue.

The Government has decided to withdraw energy credits and supports in the upcoming budget, yet it had no problem giving these last year. Millionaires got them. All of us in this House got them. That was absolute insanity. I cannot but reach the conclusion that the Government was trying to buy the election. Helicopter money was falling out of the sky and into households. This year, however, families like that mentioned by my colleague Deputy Healy, disabled people, the elderly and low-paid workers who do not have access to the free fuel scheme or whatever need help. It is the Government's job to try to protect people. Energy companies are price gouging. We know that because of the huge profits they are making. We have among the highest electricity prices in the European Union. Wholesale prices for electricity have dropped by over 70% in the past three years, but costs continue to increase. It is pure profiteering. Over 300,000 households are unable to pay their bills. The Government has also committed to increasing carbon tax, thereby heaping more costs on people.

The PSO levy must be restructured. At the moment, the public are subsidising large companies and data centres when it comes to energy costs. Data centres must start paying their fair share and carry the burden for their responsibilities, rather than having domestic customers do it for them. The PSO levy, at €3.23 per month plus VAT, needs to be restructured. It will change again at the end of September, and it is time for it to be reformed.

I am a supporter of wind energy and of solar, biogas, hydrogen and hydro energy. We need to use all the renewable sources we have. According to the answer to a parliamentary question I tabled received, over the past five years €549 million has been given to private companies developing wind farms. In some years, there was a negative. However, the balance works out at a positive of €549 million. The companies involved are highly profitable. We were told that when we had wind energy and renewable energy, particularly wind energy, it would be a lot cheaper. That has not turned out to be the case. It has turned out to be very expensive. Those companies are being allowed to price gouge. The Government is also providing them with support to set up their operations. In the meantime, the cost of energy, which we were promised would go down with the advent of wind energy, is skyrocketing. The Government needs to explain that.

A previous speaker referred to a very important matter in the context of to who owns this energy. If I heard the previous speaker correctly, he quoted that over 90% used to be owned by the public. That has been flipped on its head, and 75% is owned by large corporations over which we have no control. The Government has no control over them and has allowed this to

happen deliberately on foot of *laissez-faire* policies and liberal economics. It is real Trumpian stuff. The Government might give out about Trump, but it is copying what he is doing economically and handing over key industries to large companies that are leading us on a merry dance and absolutely ripping off the taxpayer.

A number of decades ago, people were reasonably well-off if they had a car and could afford to take one holiday a year. People now cannot put bread on the table. I outlined seven or eight increases that are being introduced. The fuel allowance kicks in this week, and I welcome that. However, it needs to be expanded and targeted better. We must make sure that we help those who most need it in the upcoming budget. There must be an energy credit of at least €400 this year to assist people. If energy prices are allowed to continue to rise before the budget, what will it be like after the budget when the Government heaps on its extra costs? People tell me they are really struggling with supermarket prices and all of the other matters I outlined. The Government is leading people into debt and leaving it to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army and other charities to sort the matter out. The Government is loading it onto the charities and thanking them for their work. That is not good enough. We need a more sustainable way of dealing with this.

I welcome the fact that retrofitting is happening, but it needs to happen quicker. Some of the schemes need to be changed because the upfront costs for people are just too high. Most middle- and low-income workers cannot come up with €25,000, €30,000 or €35,000 to pay for their part of the work. They cannot take out an extra loan on top of their mortgage because it is just not possible for them to do so. We need to examine that matter. I would appeal to the Minister of State to do something about it in the budget. We also need to ensure that windows and doors are included in the retrofitting programme. A great deal of heat is being lost through windows and doors and is not being contained within houses. Many low-income households that are not in the social housing category, namely people who live in private houses but who are cash poor, may own their houses but they do not have the money to retrofit them.

We are facing into the dark, cold winter evenings. Householders, particularly the lower paid, the disabled and other groups, need help. I appeal to the Minister of State not to pass over them in the budget. The Government does not have to buy an election this year. I ask that it not forget those people.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I would like the Minister of State's full attention for this. This is not a laughing matter, I am afraid. Crecora Mills installed a 400 kW solar farm in July 2023. It produces 20% of the power to run the mill. The company applied to the ESB to sell the excess power to the grid at that time. It took the ESB two years to process the application and it is looking for €3.8 million from Crecora Mills to upgrade the substation in west Limerick in order to allow the company to sell its clean energy to the grid. We are talking about an energy crisis, and the ESB is looking for €3.8 million. During the first part of the meeting on the matter, the ESB looked for €1 million. Ten minutes later, it was seeking €1.5 million. When Crecora Mills asked for that in writing, the ESB went up to €2 million. Now it is asking for €3.8 million. How can the Minister of State sit over there knowing that this is happening in respect of solar farms throughout the country?

I am in favour of wind energy in circumstances where the health implications are taken into account. I am for solar energy because it can have a dual use. In fact, it can have a triple use.

If solar farms are located a certain distance apart, sheep can graze underneath them and you can get the fodder from between them, such as round bale silage that can be used for fodder. There is a triple use. ESB Networks is charging €3.8 million to a company to supply green energy in order to bring down electricity costs and nothing is being done about it.

Representatives of Crecora Mills met two representatives, one from Fine Gael and the other from Fianna Fáil, in County Limerick and they have done nothing. What is the Minister of State going to do about it? The Government is roaring about green energy. When is it going to take the ESB to task? It costs €50 per MWh to produce power. The Government capped costs at €120. The ESB is making money hand over fist from electricity. Why is that the case? It is because the Government imposed the cap of €120 per MWh, which has allowed the ESB to make such profits.

If electricity is produced through the use fossil fuels, higher tariffs are charged. The ESB includes a reference stating that 70% of your bill is from green energy but it charges the tariffs relating to fossil fuels. Now we have the likes of Crecora Mills. Not only that, there was a place in Ballyhea that did the same thing two years ago and the ESB looked for €1 million to provide clean energy. We need something done about this quickly.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Once again, I speak on the behalf of people who are being crushed under the weight of soaring energy costs. Once again, I am forced to say that the Government is asleep at the wheel. There will be no energy credits this year. Why is that the case? It is because there is no election. That is the reality. The Government conned the electorate last year. That was how it bought votes. There is now no election. When votes are needed, credits appear. When they are not, families are left to fend for themselves. That is not leadership; it is political convenience.

Energy costs affect every single person in this country, including children in cold classrooms, working families who are choosing between heating and paying for groceries, sick people who need warmth, elderly citizens on fixed incomes and small businesses that are trying to survive. While they struggle, energy companies are posting massive profits. What is the Government doing? Nothing. There has been no accountability, pressure or reform. I have repeatedly called for action. I have asked for transparency. I demanded that these companies be held to account. All I have received are vague statements and empty acknowledgements. People deserve better.

I will share some of the figures relating to the profits of energy companies. Bord Gáis Energy had an operating profit of €75 million in 2024. The ESB's after-tax profit for 2024 was €706 million. Energia's pre-tax profit for 2024 was €154 million. Those are astonishing figures. Nobody is willing to say they will stand by the people and businesses that are going under as the result of increasing and massive pressure. The Minister of State's job is to represent the public; it is not to defend the profit margins of energy providers. He must act now by capping prices, reforming the market and delivering real support. If he will not stand up for the people, he is not fit to sit in his seat. That is the bottom line.

We met representatives of the Irish Hairdressers Federation today. They are under immense pressure. The same is true of cafes around the country. We spoke about households. People who own restaurants, cafes and businesses like that are telling me they are going out of business. If they get a reduction in the rate of from 13% to 9%, it will be soaked up. The

savings will not go back to the customer or come off prices because of the energy costs that people are paying.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** Over the summer, my colleagues and I met with people, including, as Deputy Collins mentioned, hairdressers, cafe owners, takeaway operators, vintners, restaurateurs, proprietors of hardware shops and other mom and pop businesses. These are homegrown businesses, some of which have been in operation for 80 or 90 years. These are generational family businesses. Many people involved in such businesses are telling us they may not last until Christmas or may not get over Christmas. They are hoping for a bumper December, almost a Christmas miracle, to stay in business.

We spoke to hairdressers today who cannot cut their energy costs because they must have hot water and electricity to turn the lights on and operate their appliances. On the other hand, they cannot move their prices to reflect the extra cost because they will price themselves out of the market. That is particular true when you consider the black-market economy when it comes to hairdressing. That must be addressed. The Government is not listening to people. It needs to move to the 9% VAT rate from 1 January to help those types of businesses.

There are people in this country, as colleagues have said, who are faced with the choice between eating and heating. Did we ever think we would see a day again when the choice between eating and heating was faced by people in this country? It is going back to the 1930s and 1940s of starving Ireland. It is ridiculous. The Government comes out to say it will put a plan in place and that we are one of the wealthiest countries in Europe. It tells us how well the economy is going. For many people, that may be true. For most of the people I meet in Cork North-Central, it is not true. It is tough for people at the moment. It is tough to select what to cut and what to pay for today. People must ask which bill to ignore until next month. The biggest fear of the Irish people is often the should of the postman's knock and the bill that will arrive through the door. Many families are telling me in my constituency office that if something goes wrong, if there is one little cost, if the young fellow or the young one has to go to hospital or there are braces to be bought, they do not know how they are going to survive. That is not good enough.

**Deputy Peadar Kirby:** I agree with Deputy O'Flynn. I talk to people who say they are a timing belt issue away from not being able to pay their bills. They tell me that if something goes wrong in their lives, they will be on the edge. People are lying awake at night wondering what bills they will be able to pay. That is an incredible situation.

The frustration I have is that the Government is acting like the cost-of-living crisis is nearly over. The Government is the main driver of that crisis. We often hear it blame foreign elements for the crisis. Let us consider fuel and energy in particular. Last year, the Government took €4.1 billion in fuel taxes. It was the biggest take in fuel taxes in the history of the State. The Government took more money than ever before in fuel taxes from people who are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. What does that say about the Government? Last year, the Government took €1 billion in carbon taxes. They are now the second biggest tax on fuel in the country. My real frustration is that TDs on all sides are wringing their hands and saying how difficult and terrible the situation is, but the Government is jacking up the taxes on fuel that are putting people into debt in a cost-of-living crisis. It is not just the case that carbon taxes are where they are at the moment. The Government will raise carbon taxes in budget

2025. It will do so again in 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029 and 2030. It has already locked in increases in carbon taxes on fuel for the next five years irrespective of whether people will be able to pay them, of where people will be at economically and of whether or not they will be in a cost-of-living crisis. How bananas and dangerous is it for a Government to lock in a tax five years in advance without knowing what condition people will be in at that stage?

The Government is ratcheting up costs during a cost-of-living crisis. That is having an effect on people. Hundreds of thousands of people are living in poverty in this country. One quarter of all domestic gas users are in arrears, which equates to 180,000 families. Some 300,000 people are in electricity arrears. Ireland has the second highest rate of rent and mortgage arrears in the EU. It is incredible that the price of electricity is either the highest or second highest in Europe, depending on which day of the week it is, and yet a semi-State body, the ESB, is enormously profitable. A Government that gives a semi-State body the mandate to make €800 million in profits during a cost-of-living crisis when so many people are in arrears does not give a tuppenny damn about the state people are in.

Actually, there was €700 million made in profit last year. Incredibly, during Storm Éowyn, when people were begging the Government for food and trying to get energy infrastructure back up and running to get their houses reconnected, the ESB's suggestion was that they should pay for the fixes themselves. This from a semi-State that was making so much money. The Government is talking out of both sides of its mouth, offering tea and sympathy to people while pilfering their pockets with extra taxes every year.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** The lights are on but for far too long no one seems to be at home when it comes to the factors that have made Irish households absolute outliers in European terms regarding the cost of energy. The State is generating hundreds of millions of euro through a ridiculous carbon tax that I opposed and is damning people to energy poverty only to then redirect the tax revenue back to them through the welfare system. That is like some Alice-in-Wonderland version of the circular economy.

It is not just the cost of energy, which is rocketing, that this is having an impact on; it is also one of the core contributors to the rising cost of food. Just recently, the CSO released figures from Eurostat that put Ireland's food price inflation at three times the headline rate, with food prices up 5%. This was a 20-month high. Economist Oliver Brown has calculated the cost of food shopping and has come to the conclusion that prices have increased by 36% in the past four years. This is now a full-blown, interconnected crisis that the Government must respond to with unrelenting determination, especially regarding energy costs, which, we know, are driving many of the increases.

We need to put aside the stupidity of efforts such as banning turf and criminalising those cutting turf in the midlands or in bogs in Galway. That needs to stop. Families have always used turf for heat and energy. Imagine persisting with this in the middle of a prolonged crisis, including a prolonged cost-of-energy crisis. It simply beggars belief.

Households cannot afford their energy bills. Businesses, farmers and SMEs are being pushed to the brink because of them, and all the while we still have ridiculous arguments from some quarters about the bogeyman of liquefied natural gas resources, despite the energy independence that potentially exists right here on our doorstep. The Government needs to cop itself on and detach itself and Irish households from the absurd ideological straitjacket. We

cannot afford the ongoing trends of Ireland's electricity price being among the highest in Europe and of our gas price being about the fifth most expensive. We cannot afford to have businesses closing, and we certainly cannot afford to have our most vulnerable in society living in cold conditions. So many people come to my office in a distressed state. Since the energy credits are no longer available, they are concerned about how they are going to pay their bills this year.

I felt that giving the energy credits was letting the energy companies off the hook. Why can the electricity companies not be brought before an Oireachtas committee? They are profiteering while people are living in cold conditions. It makes no sense. The Government needs to do the right thing, step up to the mark, serve the people and stop serving the big corporate interests of this country.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about the energy crisis. I thank Sinn Féin for giving it to us.

What I have to say I have said several times before. Since Bord na Móna was closed down by the previous Government in 2020, the cost of electricity has gone up day by day. That is a fact. In the past week or two, different energy companies have been raising their prices by 10%, 12% and 13%. Then we hear that one company has brought down the price by 4%. No one knows what is going on. Does the Government know? We were supposed to have an energy regulator, but there is no account in the world of him. I am asking the Government to bring that fellow and whatever team he has to task because they are not playing their part.

Social houses that are built now do not have any chimneys, meaning people are totally reliant on electricity. Many of these people are not able to pay their way, and many thousands are behind in the payment of their electricity bills. I ask the Government to look into this and the energy regulator to do something about it. Where individuals build their own houses, the banks are stopping them from putting in chimneys or having solid fuel heating because they want the energy rating as high as possible. Chimneys always let bad air out and good air in. The different approach is hurting people in many ways and it is ridiculous.

Elderly people applying for the energy grant to upgrade their homes have been told by the SEAI, including this week, that they will have to wait for at least two years. Can you imagine what two years is to someone in their late 70s or early 80s? It is like being told it will never happen in their lifetime. They worry more at that age, and it is not fair. When the Government says money it is collecting – including through the carbon tax, which I totally have opposed over the terms of the past two Governments or since I came up here the first day - is being put into the SEAI and being used to heat homes, I say to it that it is not reaching the people at all. It is taking too long to come to them. It is not fair to have them waiting two or two and a half years.

Small businesses are closing day by day. Eenergy costs are the main reason for this. Those businesses cannot bear the burden of the cost any more. They are totally reliant on electricity and gas. Then we hear that Ireland cannot purchase gas on the open market when it is cheapest. The Minister of State should listen to this because it is very important. We should be able to store any amount of natural gas in the Kinsale gas field. It is not being utilised at all. We are being told we have to purchase the gas when we need it, whatever the price. That is not right. I ask the Minister of State to consider this in order to determine whether we can store gas when

it can be bought cheaply, not operate the way we are operating at the moment whereby we have to buy when we need it, regardless of the price. It is ultimately the customer who has to pay for it.

Old people are struggling to keep their homes warm. Families with children have to be kept warm and people are fearful about the cost of electricity. Every man and woman on the road is suffering because of the cost of fuel owing to the carbon tax.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** Irish householders are facing a winter of increased fuel prices following recent announcements by energy suppliers of price increases, despite the companies involved already having made significant profits. I cannot understand how these increases can be justified in light of soaring profits. It seems to be just another instance of women and men at the side of the street being milked to create corporate profits for large institutions. What can be done to control these ravenous profit mongers that are operating like the highwaymen of old? Ordinary people, especially the elderly, just have to hand over their hard-earned income if they are to keep warm and cook food in their homes. It is scandalous that there appears to be no control over the actions of these entities and no comeback for ordinary people.

I am delighted that the distribution of the fuel allowance will begin this week. That will be a big help for some but many more citizens will look helplessly at their depleting funds, which have already been impacted by large increases in the cost of groceries, car fuel, etc.

We must help those people to survive. Yes, survive because that is all that many people are doing, particularly those on middle and lower incomes.

The Government must not alone help and support our struggling citizens. We must also find ways to ensure that corporate greed does not consume our nation. All this comes on top of the big push to cut out the use of fossil fuels, which were a great help to the hard-working small farmers who could, by their labours, save a bank of turf to help heat their homes and families. We must find a better way to both protect our environment and allow our people to live in some small comfort in a heated home. I ask that we do this initially by way of financial support and then by bringing in controls of conglomerates that appear to be a rule all to themselves.

**Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon):** I thank all the Deputies for raising these important matters and allowing time to discuss them. I also welcome the opportunity to discuss the pressures Irish householders are facing as a result of high energy costs and the actions the Government is taking in response.

The pressures placed on households and businesses by high energy costs remain a deep concern for the Government. Providing supports to alleviate these pressures remains a top priority. Extensive work has and will continue to be undertaken right across government to address these challenges. The programme for Government acknowledges these pressures and commits to bringing forward measures to help contain these costs. Ireland faces particular challenges in relation to energy costs as a result of long-standing factors, including our isolated island location, low levels of interconnection, our widely dispersed population and our historical reliance on fossil fuels. In particular, our reliance on gas for electricity generation is a major determinant of higher energy prices. Many Deputies failed to acknowledge that the electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate under a European regulatory framework

and prices are set by suppliers as commercial decisions. However, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has written to all the energy suppliers and will meet them shortly in regard to the increased prices over the past number of weeks.

Ultimately, as a Government, the best long-term approach for Ireland is to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets. That will continue to be our prime objective through investing in renewable energy generation, improving our energy efficiency, expanding electricity interconnection with neighbouring markets and deepening the internal market in energy. The climate action plan sets out the strategy that is in place to achieve these goals, which support our decarbonisation and climate objective. Cutting our dependence on fossil fuels and generating power from our own renewable sources will ensure a cleaner, cheaper energy future in the long term.

The Government has also committed to continuing with the carbon tax in alignment with recommendations from scientific experts and the Climate Change Advisory Council. This approach encourages a shift away from fossil fuels and ensures those who are most vulnerable receive targeted supports, making that transition to a sustainable future fair and equitable. It is supported by research findings, including an ESRI study finding that recycling revenue raised through carbon taxation would result in a reduction in poverty and leave lower income households better off. Since 2019, we have seen increases in carbon tax that have been ring-fenced so that they go back into the pockets of those on the lowest incomes and are also used to protect the most vulnerable households and communities. These revenues provide vital funding to support those at risk of energy poverty, as well as retrofitting programmes and agri-environmental supports for farmers. In budget 2025, an allocation of €951 million in carbon tax revenue was provided to a range of programmes supporting Ireland's transition to a low-carbon economy. This was an increase of over €163 million on 2024. This Government is redoubling its commitment to a just transition ensuring that our journey to climate neutrality leaves no one behind. This progressive use of carbon tax revenue is an important vehicle for cost sharing and the equity considerations required for this transition.

In terms of the Government's commitment to investing in our critical infrastructure, most recently, we saw that price review, PR, 6 will deliver on the programme for Government's priority to ensure we have the necessary infrastructure to improve our electricity grid. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, which is the independent regulator, is responsible for PR 6, for which the consultation has now closed. The CRU is considering submissions before publishing its decision, which is expected before the end of the year.

The Government is also investing €3.5 billion in equity in EirGrid and ESB Networks to ensure the required infrastructure programme is delivered. This investment will keep consumer costs down by ensuring both EirGrid and ESB Networks maintain high credit ratings and can borrow at a lower interest rate, thereby lowering the overall cost of investment. Delivering investment in our electricity grid offers one of the fastest means that can impact the overall electricity cost to consumers. While it is a hugely concerning and regrettable position that network tariffs will rise under PR 6, these increases are necessary so that we can invest in and future-proof our electricity grid. Officials within our Department will continue to work in conjunction with the CRU, ESB Networks and EirGrid to ensure we have the delivery of grid projects and see where they can be accelerated, where possible.

The national energy affordability task force has been established by the Government to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses, while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability. This will be a very important element of the Government's work to improve both our competitiveness and complement the action plan on competitiveness and productivity. A key output of the task force's work will be to deliver an energy affordability action plan that will identify a comprehensive range of solutions, including measures targeting households and energy poverty.

In recent years, the Government has demonstrated its commitment to supporting householders to meet energy costs both with the most recent energy credits but also on targeted social welfare payments. We will continue to reaffirm this commitment through the programme for Government and the energy affordability task force, as well as our commitment to investing in key infrastructure projects necessary to facilitate a more clean and just energy transition. We will support that, again, through further consideration in budget 2026.

I again thank all the Deputies for their input on this important matter.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** Families from all backgrounds are struggling. I meet people all the time, especially in my clinic and when I do my weekly grocery shopping. They tell me they are struggling with the high cost of groceries, the cost of housing and the high cost of utilities, such as electricity and gas. The cost of these utilities is not sustainable for hard-working families. The prices consumers are paying are rip-off prices and, despite the desperate need of citizens, the Government parties fail to take on the energy companies and work for the benefit of consumers. The average annual electricity cost for an Irish household is €1,752 per year. We have 300,000 households in arrears with their electricity bills, with the average arrears at €500. As the colder months approach, it is certain many more people will enter arrears or skip heating their own homes. It would be shameful if that happens.

The decision to liberalise the Irish energy market has led to increased prices for citizens.

It is a political choice not to address this challenge. The parties opposite in government are content to take the energy companies at their word regarding their prices. We in Sinn Féin want to provide the energy regulator with the power and resources to investigate the companies' profits and determine if these prices are simply profit driven. Wholesale energy costs have dropped dramatically in the past three years yet retail prices remain 75% higher than pre-2022 prices.

Ours is an energy market that functions not for families, but one that seems to prioritise the profits of these companies. In the past number of weeks, SSE Airtricity announced an increase in standard variable electricity prices of 9.5%, adding approximately €150 to the average annual bill. Bord Gáis Energy, Energia and Pinergy have all announced similar price increases. Despite this, the Government is determined not to introduce energy credits. We need reform of the energy market and to strengthen the power of the energy regulator to hold these companies to account. We need a focus on affordability and, crucially, transparency within the cartel-like energy market. Families need a break. They need help and the introduction of three energy credits of €150 each goes some way towards aiding them while we work towards holding these energy companies to account.

In the longer term, we must end our reliance on imported energy - 80% of energy is imported. There is significant offshore wind energy potential in Limerick. We have the deep port at Foynes and the potential to improve our electricity grid to make ourselves an energy-independent nation and deliver cheap energy to our people while exporting the excess but as usual, the Government acts at a snail's pace. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have an opportunity to support the constituents by supporting this motion but, unfortunately, I do not think they will do so.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** Looking at the energy markets today, it is hard not to see the amount of profiteering and rip-off prices that are fleecing ordinary people in this country. It is not hard to figure out who is doing it. Bord Gáis Energy is increasing its rate by 13.5%, SSE Airtricity by 9.5% with a 12% surcharge, Flogas by 7%, Energia by 12.1% and Pinergy by 9.83%. The ESB made profits of €700 million last year. Energia made an operating profit of €154 million. Shareholders are receiving handsome dividends out of ordinary people's pockets. Most of these companies are owned by outside interests. These hikes will have a significant impact on the lives of millions of people. Some small businesses will go to the wall while it is certain that more and more households will fall into deeper debt and energy poverty.

This issue must be tackled head on and with urgency. The solution is in the Government's hands. We have the highest electricity prices in Europe. This profit bonanza for these energy companies must be challenged and stopped. The Government has the power to increase the mandate of the energy regulator to hold these companies to account and to prevent them from exploiting and manipulating the markets. It also has the power to change the archaic metric measure used to compare one source of energy to another - known as the levelled cost of energy measurement - and replace it with a more modernised comprehensive measurement.

Another thing that can be done is to tackle the planning delays in renewable energy projects, which will help reduce costs. The Government can make sure that high energy users such as high-tech data centres pay their fair share instead of being subsidised by ordinary householders. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have said they will not introduce a cost-of-living package regarding energy credits during a cost-of-living crisis when people are finding it extremely difficult to get by on a weekly basis and pay their energy bills, during a homelessness crisis with over 5,000 children in shelters and bed and breakfasts, and when small businesses in rural Ireland see their livelihoods slipping away due to high energy costs and fuel hikes. This is the time to support the people. With billions of euro in surplus, there is no excuse for not looking after the elderly and the hard-working people of this country. It is time to step up to the plate and support this motion.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I start by thanking my colleague an Teachta Pa Daly for this motion and for all of his work on this issue. That we continue to put forward constructive solutions to the crisis caused by this Government is a great credit to my colleagues.

As the dark evenings draw in and it starts to get colder, it is important that we turn our attention to the reality of what is happening in homes across the State. For this Government, the cost-of-living crisis is only something it trots out and acknowledges in the run up to an election. With no election on the horizon, we see fuel taxes going up, college fees going up and energy prices increasing. In the run up to the election, energy credits were very important. Today, the election is behind us but the cost-of-living crisis is not, yet the Government tells us

there will be no cost-of-living package. A total of 300,000 households are in arrears with their electricity bills while 175,000 are in arrears with their gas bills. Believe me, they have been to the community welfare officer and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul but still they are facing into a very cold winter and they are already in arrears. They have built up those arrears when the sun was shining. They are facing into winter in arrears.

I see it every day in north County Dublin in my office in Balbriggan and in my clinics. People cannot understand why, on the one hand, the Government is telling them they have never had it so good - we heard that this afternoon - and, in the same breath, it is telling them that it will not help them to stay warm this winter. People are not stupid. They know they are paying what are among the highest energy prices in Europe. They see and know that the Government can help. They see, as do I, older people who are affected. I am thinking in particular of a man who, when it is cold, sits in the library in Balbriggan. I see him in the window and it breaks my heart. I know from talking to him that he is mortified at the indignity of not being able to heat his own home. To be indifferent to that and to turn its face against that man in the library trying to stay warm is a fairly damning indictment of this Government. I will tell him the next time I see him that the Minister is going to write a letter to the energy companies. I am sure he will be very heartened.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The response of the Government in this amendment is vague in places and downright inaccurate in others. The amendment is an insult to the millions of ordinary workers and families who are bracing for another round of energy hikes and to the hundreds of thousands of households that are falling further behind on their energy bills with each passing month and many more who are barely scraping by. I am disappointed but not surprised that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry-led regional independents are choosing to prioritise the profits of energy companies and the demand of data centres over the needs of workers and families. Ordinary people are being fleeced by the energy companies while the Government stands idly by.

Judging by the amendment, the Government seems to think it is inevitable that Ireland will have the highest electricity prices in Europe and that households will simply just have to grin and bear it. With one in five children living in poverty, it is totally unacceptable but the problem is not intractable. It is a matter of political choice. Sinn Féin's proposals provided the Government with the answers but it is clear that it is not prepared to listen. The energy task force that has been referenced is nothing more than a smokescreen for the fact that the Government does not have a plan or even the intention to end the rip-off for good. It was stated that the task force, which was set up in June, was not finalising a report but was instead working to finalise the preparation of an interim report. That does not sound like urgency to me with the winter coming in and the price hikes we have seen. The task force members' predecessors had a steering group. It achieved nothing. Ordinary people do not need another round of talking shops. They need action and urgency.

The amendment claims that electricity and gas prices have historically been higher here than in other EU states. That is not the case. It implies that we have no choice but to accept energy bills that outstrip our neighbours by over €500. Ireland used to have the lowest electricity prices in Europe. Following the disastrous decision to completely liberalise the Irish energy market, we now have some of the highest electricity prices. As many contributors have pointed out tonight, this is a political choice but does the Minister of State know what is regrettable,

given that the amendment talks about how regrettable the network charge rise is? Households are expected to shoulder a disproportionate burden while data centres do not have to pay their fair share. It is time for the Minister of State to stand up. Ordinary people are stretched way beyond their means. They need more than this. The Government must stop rolling out the red carpet for data centres. They must not be allowed to drive up energy prices any further. Ordinary people must be protected and energy affordability has to be the priority for the Government rather than an afterthought. It is time to end the rip-off.

Amendment put.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy):** In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 24 September 2025.

### **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

#### **Child and Family Agency**

1. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on her engagement with Tusla following the report of a missing child in Donabate, Dublin, to date in 2025; the steps Tusla is now taking, and the timeline for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49873/25]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Things have moved on since I submitted this question and we now know that child was Daniel Aruebose. I take this opportunity to offer my sympathies to everybody who loved him, especially the foster carers who looked after him.

**Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley):** I thank the Deputy very much. I reiterate the comments I have made previously. This is such an upsetting and awful situation and, like the Deputy, I extend my sympathies to all those who knew and loved Daniel and recognise what a great source of upset and heartbreak it is to everybody, from the immediate family to the foster carers and wider society as well.

I thank the Deputy for her question. I again acknowledge it is a matter of deepest concern to me and to the Government. I was saddened when we learned the remains of a young child, presumed to be Daniel Aruebose, had been found in north Dublin. We all recognise the death of a child is heartbreaking and the Government extends our sincere sympathies.

The Department was notified by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, of this case on 1 September, in full accordance with established protocols. Since then, the Department and I have maintained close and ongoing contact with the agency. As the Deputy will be aware, this case is the subject of an active and ongoing investigation by An Garda Síochána. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment on any specific details that could, even inadvertently, prejudice that vital investigation. However, I can inform the Deputy that I have requested the independent national review panel to prioritise a review of this case. This national review panel will examine the nature and extent of any engagement the child and his

family had with all relevant State services, including health, social, and educational services. The national review panel has an independent chair and operates with full independence, including its own legal advice, to ensure its findings are objective and factual.

Tusla has also initiated an internal rapid review of its own engagement with the family in this case and I understand Tusla expects to finalise this review in the coming days. In accordance with standard practice, especially given the highly sensitive nature of the personal information involved and the ongoing Garda investigation, internal reviews are not published. However, when the Tusla rapid review is completed, it will be forwarded to the Department and the national review panel. The internal rapid review will assist the national review panel in its work and the Department will be engaging with Tusla on the findings.

Separately and on a broader policy level, I have asked Tusla to conduct a wider well-being check of cases closed to child protection services during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, specifically where there was no further contact with the child since. This is a proactive measure to provide assurances about the welfare of vulnerable children, strengthen our systems and learn from the unique challenges of that period. I am pleased to confirm, as the Deputy may be aware, that this check will be independently chaired by Ms Tanya Ward. I made that announcement today. Ms Ward is the chief executive of the Children's Rights Alliance. A steering group will also oversee Tusla's well-being check and the final composition of the steering group will be decided in consultation with the independent chair. The steering group is expected to include representatives from relevant Departments, the HSE, Tusla, the community and voluntary sector, and independent social work professionals. Under the chair's leadership, the steering group will agree on terms of reference and a robust methodology for Tusla's well-being check. Tusla will commit all necessary resources to conducting the check in line with those agreed parameters. While the detailed timeline will be shaped by the methodology, I will emphasise the importance of completing this work as soon as practicable, without compromising its thoroughness or integrity.

Tusla's well-being check review is a proactive measure to provide assurance about the welfare of vulnerable children. It will seek to provide that assurance in relation to children whose cases were closed during the pandemic and I am committed to providing all necessary resources to support the work. It is a distinct and separate process from both the national review panel's investigation and Tusla's internal rapid review, which are focused specifically on the tragic case in Donabate. Tomorrow, I will also be chairing a meeting of the children first departmental group with the aim of identifying ways of enhancing check-ins on young children across the system.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I appreciate, and we all respect, that the Garda investigation is under way and the force has to be allowed do its work. It is important to acknowledge those gardaí as well. It was a very difficult search, especially finding the remains.

I have a couple of questions. I welcome that the closed cases will be examined, starting with those closed during Covid. For any social worker, like any of us in any job we do, cases may be closed and later on things may happen and unless they are brought to the attention of Tusla, nobody may know, so that is important. On that measure, I ask that, after these well-being checks are done, the mechanism of a look-back period of six months to a year after a

case is closed would be built more permanently into Tusla and the work it does. I appreciate it is a lot of work and the agency is getting a lot of referrals but a look-back mechanism should be built in so a child would be checked on maybe six months to a year after a case is closed. Is that something the Minister would be willing to look at?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Again, I acknowledge this is a significant step forward in terms of cases that were closed during the lockdowns caused by Covid. It is important to say there are many reasons for a case being closed. Oftentimes, we regard that as a real positive and then on other occasions a case can open again. It is important also to say many of these cases may well be to do with child welfare as distinct from child protection issues, and we need to be cognisant of that. This will be a very worthwhile well-being check.

I referenced it earlier, but tomorrow I will be chairing a meeting of the children first interdepartmental group. That includes Departments that have various engagements with children at different times. We will be specifically seeking methods and means to ensure we can identify ways of enhancing check-ins on young children right across the system on an ongoing basis.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I take it from that reply that perhaps this will be done in future by Tusla, and of course there is a role for other organisations.

On one other point, there appears to be a gap for preschool-age children. When a child is born, there may be a number of visits by the public health nurse to the home. After that, depending on whether the child goes into formal childcare, there really is no check that exists, and that is of concern. The Minister has cited ECCE data and maybe looking at that. That is something that should be considered. Unless a child is in a formal setting, who is there to check or to know? That gap is of concern.

I welcome, of course, the review of closed cases. A lot of them are advice, like parenting advice, and they will be straightforward, but that job of work is important. A look-back period built in is important and that gap should be followed through on, perhaps using ECCE data.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy and appreciate her engagement on this matter. I think we are all *ad idem* in our determination that we need to move proactively where we find any gaps in information or support. The Deputy is correct. I have identified the issue with ECCE. ECCE, the early childcare provision, has been hugely successful. It is two years of free preschool care, if you like. We have almost a 97% uptake of that, so it is an ideal opportunity to harness that information and put it to very positive use. We are currently looking at the manner and means of doing that.

Obviously, there are other Departments involved. The Deputy referenced public health checks for children as well as the Department of Social Protection because of the financial supports that are provided or whatever the case might be. That is one of the key reasons I am chairing this interdepartmental group to see how we can best harness the information that sometimes exists almost in silos. We need to have more joined-up thinking in relation to it.

9 o'clock

I thank the Deputy for her personal engagement and support on it also.

## Care Services

2. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality her plans for introducing a right to respite for family carers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50022/25]

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I think everyone in this House can agree that family carers right across the State do an outstanding job 24-7. I would, as I am sure the family carers would, love to hear the Minister's plans to introduce respite for those family carers.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The national carer's strategy 2012 sets out Government policy on family carers. Oversight of the strategy is led by the Department of Health, with individual Departments leading on action areas that fall within their remit. The Department of Social Protection provides payment supports to carers, while my Department supports the provision of respite services for people with disabilities and their carers.

The Government and the HSE are aware of the importance of respite service provision for the families of both children and adults with disabilities, and the vital work done by family carers, as well as the impact that caring can have on carers' physical and mental health.

The programme for Government contains a number of relevant commitments including addressing concerns in relation to financial supports for family carers and progressively increasing funding for respite services, including the home support emergency respite scheme, which is funded by the Department of Health. These commitments will be progressed over the lifetime of the Government.

Respite is part of the continuum of HSE-funded supports for people with disabilities and their families and typically consists of short breaks for service users and their carers. Respite services play a crucial role in preventing carer burnout, help to prevent out-of-home full-time residential placements, preserve the family unit and support family stability.

Currently, the demand for respite is outpacing the capacity of the system to respond. The Department is working with the HSE and service providers to increase provision, but also through the exploration of alternative forms of respite, such as home sharing and after-school respite.

Respite sessions for people with disabilities have increased progressively over the last few years. In 2025, the HSE is on course to deliver 164,059 respite nights to 7,460 people and 65,151 respite day-only sessions.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I appreciate the Minister's reply. As I said in my introduction, we are all aware of the great work of family carers, what they do for the State and the €20 billion they save the State every year. However, as the Minister said in her reply, they need a break, something we all can agree on. Today I attended the family carers' pre-budget presentation. One of the issues for the people they represent is that respite care is not strong enough in many places. I appreciate, as outlined in the Minister's reply, that this is also cross-departmental, but from the point of view of the Minister for children and disability, a huge cohort of family carers who are caring for those with a disability need respite care. They are caring 24-7 and are crying

out for some sort of respite. The Minister and her Department need to ensure that they get the respite they fully deserve.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I recognise the extraordinary service provided by family carers and all carers. Without their diligence and the work that they do, the lives of many would be in a far worse position. I absolutely and unreservedly recognise their work. As I said, respite sessions for people with disabilities have increased significantly, with over 164,000 respite overnights and more than 65,000 respite day-only sessions, but I absolutely accept it is not enough. Respite is a key priority for the HSE and for the Government and over the course of the Government's life there has been significant investment. For example, the action plan for disability services 2024 to 2026 proposes to increase the level of disability respite provision by around a third. It proposes to do that through a mix of provision of alternative respite options.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** One of the areas I want to concentrate on tonight is emergency care. I have come across a number of cases recently where family carers need that respite care in an emergency situation. I know that Family Carers Ireland has been providing such a service for a number of years and it tells us that that service is underfunded. I ask the Minister tonight to consider through the budget proposals, through her Department and in her cross-departmental conversations tomorrow to look at that emergency care and look at additional funding for Family Carers Ireland to ensure that when a family needs that emergency service, there is respite care available for them. It is a huge issue in this country that when their hour of need comes, there is somebody to answer that call. In fairness Family Carers Ireland has been doing that for a long time now. However, it is underfunded and needs more support. We also need that support throughout the State and not have it determined by a postcode lottery.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I join the Deputy in recognising the great work of Family Carers Ireland. Spending on respite services for people with disabilities is about €134 million annually. Since 2020 there has been a significant increase in this funding, of 58%. The Deputy is quite correct to put it in the context of the upcoming budget negotiations that we need to do more in this space also.

The HSE is about to undertake an audit of respite services across the country, which will also be very helpful and allow us to clearly identify where there is a particular dearth of service. That will be quite significant to us.

I do not underestimate the value of respite. It gives families an opportunity for a break but it is also very good for the service user as well. It is a different environment and provides other opportunities. It is very much a focus. I hope that the discussions and the negotiations we have for the budget will be able to do something positive.

### **Childcare Services**

3. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on key commitments made in the programme for Government on early years and, specifically, the commitment to undertake a broad consultation and publish a detailed action plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care system

with State-led facilities adding capacity, as well as a review of core funding; a timeframe for both; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49874/25]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I ask the Minister about a number of key commitments in relation to childcare in early years in the programme for Government, specifically the broad consultation, the detailed action plan to ensure accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare and also the review of core funding. I ask her to provide us with any timeframe in relation to any of those three key commitments. Within the broad action plan is also the use of State-led facilities for the first time, which is really welcome.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy for her continued engagement on these matters. As she is aware, the programme for Government commits to "undertake a broad consultation and publish a detailed Action Plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care system".

Given the need to make progress as soon as possible while also allowing time for a broad consultation process, I intend to publish the action plan in two phases. This autumn I will publish phase 1 of the action plan, which will be short-term actions for 2026 and which will reflect the budget made available through the Estimates process for 2026. I will publish phase 2 actions after completion of the consultation process, which the Deputy referred to. That consultation process will commence in the coming months.

Of course, we have not waited until publication of the action plan to start the important work we need to do in this area. The Deputy will be aware that the maximum fee caps were extended to all partner services in core funding this month. The introduction of fee caps is an important step towards the reduction of parental fees to €200 per month over the lifetime of the Government.

While the maximum fee caps were introduced for new services last year, they now cover all services that are in core funding. In addition, the new fee caps are set at a lower level than before. The maximum fee for a full-day place of between 40 and 50 hours per week is €295 per week before Department subsidies under the national childcare scheme and the ECCE programme are deducted.

For those in the minimum level of subsidy, this will bring their out-of-pocket costs down to less than €200 per week, with those on income-assessed subsidies paying less. While this is a helpful development for those paying the highest fees, it is important to note that with a median fee of €200 per week nationally, this results in many paying just €100 after the minimum subsidies are deducted. This latest measure builds on a range of supports already in place. The ECCE programme provides two years of preschool without charge and has participation rates of 96% to 97%.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I want to come back to the State-led facilities, which is a significant move. The Minister talked about looking at areas of unmet need.

I understand some scoping was carried out within the Minister's Department in terms of where that unmet need is. To provide one example, which I have given here before, an analysis was carried out with the family resource centre in Boyle, County Roscommon. That analysis

found that there are 20 childcare places per 1,043 children for Boyle and its catchment area. A total of 77% of children aged between zero and four years of age have no access to a childcare place. They would have liked, through the building blocks scheme, to purchase an existing building in the town. The limitations of the building blocks scheme - we have discussed this before - in that it applies to existing providers and to purchasing or building new premises only, are locking out a lot when it comes to building capacity. There are fine buildings in towns like Boyle that could be used for a service rather than lying derelict. Will the Minister look at the building blocks scheme and its limitations?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** That €25 million investment under the building blocks scheme has and will provide for an additional 1,500 additional places, which are obviously much needed and a positive step forward. It is important, however, that we take the opportunity to review an existing programme every year. I am absolutely committed to reviewing existing measures and adding new measures.

Deputy Kerrane referenced the State-led facilities, which are a new innovation and a positive step forward to facilitate those. There is a forward planning unit within the Department which will be focused on looking at areas where there are specific challenges. The Deputy has consistently referenced one such area in her constituency. There are other areas throughout the country where there are significant challenges regarding childcare provision. I have always been very clear that it is the determination of the Government to support existing providers through mechanisms like the building blocks scheme and, where that is not possible and the State needs to step in, the State will step in. We will use the information from the forward planning unit to make those decisions.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I appreciate the decision has not been made yet, but does the Minister envisage using the building blocks scheme to build capacity and allow a new group that has come together, particularly groups of parents, to purchase an existing building? It is a win-win then. A new premise is not necessarily needed in Boyle. There is an ideal premises in the town that is well located and perfect for its use, but they are not in a position to buy it. I am sure in all of our counties and towns we can point to buildings that would be great to see in use again where there is so much need. There are only 20 childcare places per 1,043 children in Boyle. The service is just not there for parents and they are under an awful lot of pressure.

Lastly, with regard to the review of core funding, core funding has been a game-changer for a lot of providers. It has saved a lot of them from closing their doors, but there appear to be issues for some providers. It is reasonable to ask that the review of core funding take place sooner rather than later, given it is a lot of taxpayers' money.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** To reiterate, I am happy to look at any mechanism that will support the provision of additional places. I am very open to that, whatever that mechanism might be. We have opportunities to look afresh now, whether that is through mechanisms like the building blocks scheme or indeed through this new mechanism that we have through State-led facilities. Often, that does not necessarily mean building a new premise. The Deputy is quite correct; there are already existing buildings in towns and villages throughout the country.

On the issue of core funding, there is an evaluation of the first year of core funding currently under way. That review of core funding will allow us to have an evaluation framework that will facilitate ongoing reviews of each of the other years as well. It is my expectation that work will be completed before the end of the year. It will be facilitating a mechanism to allow us, on an ongoing basis, to review year-on-year core funding.

*Question No. 4 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Disability Services**

5. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the means by which, under the national human rights strategy for disabled people, the delivery of therapies and assessments will be achieved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50191/25]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I wish to ask the Minister the means by which, under the national human rights strategy for disabled people, the delivery of therapies and assessments will be achieved. When I first put in this question, I actually asked a bit more that obviously related to other Departments, such as the cost of disability that relates to the Department of Social Protection, or issues that relate to transport or housing. We all know the issues that exist with regard to therapies and assessments. While I have received some figures back, I am seeking the latest update on the state of play so that we can actually offer a framework that provides the supports required by children.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank Deputy Ó Murchú. I recognise the other elements he had in place. In the context of the national human rights strategy for disabled people, there is a recognition that a number of Departments have different roles. This is and must be regarded as a whole-of-government approach. In the consultation process, one of the most telling exchanges that came from a disabled person referenced the fact that no one's life is divided conveniently into Government Departments. I thought that was a great learning process for anyone to appreciate that. There is an apportioning of responsibility, however. I appreciate that the other Departments are going to take up some of the issues the Deputy has raised.

As the Deputy will be aware and appreciate, engagement around the strategy was launched on 3 September. This is a landmark strategy that will advance the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and provide a framework for whole-of-government action on disability issues. It contains a significant commitment to the delivery of a quality, accessible, equitable and timely service for all disabled children and their families, based on their need.

The key vehicle for change and improvement is the roadmap for service improvement for disability services for children and young people. The implementation of this roadmap is well under way and will continue until 2026. The roadmap contains an important set of actions that, collectively, will enhance children's disability services in Ireland. They include significant measures to integrate and improve access to services, expand the workforce and advance better communication and engagement with families.

HSE data from April show there has been a nationwide increase of 26% in children disability network team staffing levels since October 2023. Most significantly, the national vacancy rate of CDNTs has reduced from 29% in 2023 to 18% in 2025, a reduction of 11 percentage points. It is still too high, however. We need to say that. I am very pleased to see this progress, but I know we absolutely need to do more. That is why we will continue to focus on increasing CDNT staffing numbers, reducing the vacancy rate even further and ensuring that more children with complex needs and their families receive the support they need.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** No one is going to have a difficulty with the pillars or the strategy, but we have had many well written strategies before. This will come down to the roadmap and the actual action plan. We will be waiting until approximately November or December for that. Can the Minister provide me with that timeline? It will come down to the specific points in that.

If we deal with the CDNTs and replies to my parliamentary questions, in April, there were 445.3 positions unfilled in the CDNTs. At the end of June, we were talking about 16,593 assessments of need, AONs, basically awaiting or overdue completion. We are talking about an end-of-year figure of 23,903. The figure at the end of July for those waiting on first contact with a CDNT was 10,714. Obviously, none of these figures work. Even in the area of in-school therapies, we are not where we need to be.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** When it comes to the CDNTs, I would be the first to say that a lot more work needs to be done in this regard. If we wish to look on the positive side, we have seen a nationwide increase of 26% in CDNT staffing levels since October 2023. The national vacancy rate has also reduced from 29% to 18%, but it needs to reduce a lot more.

With regard to AONs, I absolutely acknowledge there is an increasing demand for AONs every single day, which has led to a growing waiting list. However, progress has been made in the past year, with a noted improvement in the number of assessments completed in 2024, up 30% compared with 2023. The trend is continuing, with a 58% increase in completions in the first half of this year compared with the same period last year. When it comes to AONs, 58% were completed at the start of this year, which represents an increase compared with last year. That is not to say there is not an ongoing waiting list. The waiting list is quite significant.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We agree that, obviously, the figures I have are not acceptable. If I am wrong or those figures have been updated, I would appreciate if I could have them, whether that is now or later in writing, because we need to know the depth of the issue.

My fear is if those 445.3 positions were filled, the CDNTs would still not be able to deliver on the basis of the need.

Cara Darmody has been a strong advocate for the position that, whatever legislative changes the Government proposes, the right to an assessment of need within six months cannot be rowed back from. I understand at this point in time there is an absolute breach of the law by Government on this but we cannot move away from that right, as exists. I ask for an update on the legislative changes the Government proposes around this.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I acknowledge everybody in this field, the professionals on the front line and the families enduring what they are enduring. I do not forget Cara Darmody's great advocacy work. I want to acknowledge the additional funding in place - the €10 million that is very much close to Cara's heart - to ensure private assessments could be delivered under the AON process. Under that initiative, the HSE provides for the procurement of clinical assessments from private providers and almost 5,000 such assessments have been commissioned under the programme. That is quite significant. I know it is something Cara is quite proud of and she seeks to do more in relation to it.

On the right to an AON, the six months will not be interfered with, nor will the right to seek an AON. On any legislative changes, it is our ambition that they will be brought to the House during this term.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Childcare Services**

6. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality her plans to reduce the cost of childcare; the steps being taken to prevent the closure of early years and crèche services; if there is a timeframe in place to cap childcare costs as per the programme for Government commitment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50181/25]

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. He will be aware that the maximum fee caps were extended to all partner services in core funding this month. The introduction of fee caps is an important step towards the reduction of parental fees to €200 per month over the lifetime of this Government. While the fee caps were introduced for new services last year, they now cover all services that are in core funding. In addition, the fee caps are set at a lower level than before. The maximum fee for a full-day place of between 40 and 50 hours per week, which is the most common full-day care service, is €295 per week before State subsidies under the national childcare scheme and the ECCE programme are deducted. For those on the minimum level of subsidy, this will bring their out-of-pocket costs down to less than €200 per week with those on income-assessed subsidies paying less again. While this is an important development for those paying the highest fees, with a median fee of €200 per week nationally, or just €100 after the minimum subsidies are deducted, the reality is many families pay less than this figure.

This latest measure builds on a range of supports already in place. The ECCE programme provides two years of preschool without charge and has participation rates of 96% to 97%. More than 70% of families say that if it were not a free service, they would never have been able to access it. The national childcare scheme complements the ECCE programme, giving universal and targeted subsidies to reduce costs for parents. Recent improvements include the extension of the universal subsidy to children under 15 and two increases to the minimum hourly subsidy, now worth €96.30 per week for 45 hours. Almost 220,000 children benefited from a subsidy in 2024. Since last September, children in childminding settings can also benefit from these subsidies. The fee management system introduced through core funding has made sure the investment in affordability is not absorbed by unnecessary fee increases. Core funding

has enjoyed high participation rates to date. Currently, the rate of uptake for the upcoming year is 90%.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I acknowledge the massive investment made in recent years. Since the introduction of core funding in 2022, something in the region of €259 million has been allocated. In many constituencies, particularly in suburban areas like mine, we still face a severe lack of childcare places. One of the largest childcare providers in the country closed its doors to the scheme a couple of months ago in Carrigtwohill, east Cork, namely Mary Geary's Childcare. That facility has 450 children. When somebody like that turns their back on the scheme, it is not that they wanted to; it is that the offering they give to parents far exceeds the minimum standards required. You might say that is a decision they make, but they have set those high standards. Will the Minister talk about caps for large-scale providers like Mary Geary's Childcare? There is a cap in the region of €700,000 or €750,000 that prevents them from-----

**Deputy Norma Foley:** We are already at 90% of providers having joined core funding, which is 5% ahead of where we were at this time last year. The opportunity to engage in core funding remains open and services can sign up to the fourth year of the scheme at any point in the year. It is significant to be able to say that at this stage of the year we have reached 90%. We are in an Estimates period and will in the next couple of weeks have the budget. I am committed to seeking to do even more to provide resources, notwithstanding, as the Deputy said, the significant resources provided for in terms of core funding.

The Deputy referred to services closing. Every year some services will close while new services will open. That is the reality of it but 2024 saw a net increase of 226 services.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I think we both got stuck for time when we were trying to address the question. I specifically asked about the Mary Geary set-up in Carrigtwohill. I ask about it because it is the largest provider in Munster, if not the country. We are concerned because there are no alternatives for people who choose to go elsewhere. I asked the Taoiseach about it last week but have still not received a response. We are particularly concerned because there are about 300 families with 450 children affected and they are faced with the prospect of a 34% hike in fees because the provider has decided to go outside of the core scheme. It is perfectly entitled to make that decision but there are very few alternatives for people. They feel tied to the service and that is a massive increase for any household to take on. I ask for clarity on the threshold. I think there is a threshold of some €700,000 or €750,000 that they are not allowed to exceed. In cases of a massive provider like this, is there any way those thresholds can be looked at?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** There is, as the Deputy conceded, unprecedented Government funding going into the sector. If a provider steps out at any point, that provider can return. The Department has a sustainability fund. If a provider is of the view it is not viable to continue or is having particular sustainability issues, it can in the first instance engage with the city and county childcare committees and it can engage with the Department on the sustainability fund. The purpose is to ensure there is a free line of communication between all concerned and that these services are sustainable.

On areas of significant demand, which I have already discussed with other Deputies, we are looking at areas across the country via the forward planning unit we have. Where private providers are not in a position to provide, Government will seek to step in through State-led facilities.

### **Planning Issues**

7. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on the review of the 2001 planning guidelines for childcare facilities. [50179/25]

**Deputy Emer Currie:** I ask the Minister for an update on the review of the 2001 planning guidelines for childcare facilities whereby for 75 new homes, there should be the provision of 20 childcare places. The link between supply of new homes and childcare places has not been working effectively. I welcome how the Minister has addressed this as an issue of concern and I seek an update on her progress.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The 2001 planning guidelines for local authorities on early learning and childcare settings were issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The guidelines are intended to ensure a consistent approach to the treatment of planning applications in respect to the land use planning aspects of early learning and childcare provision. The programme for Government commits to reviewing the 2001 childcare facilities guidelines for planning authorities to ensure early learning and childcare spaces are provided and put to use for the purpose they were intended. The Planning and Development Act 2024 and the publication of the national planning framework now provide a strong basis from which to pursue this work.

An early learning and childcare planning matters working group, with officials from my Department and the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Education and Youth was established in 2024 and has met on a number of occasions in 2024 and 2025. In addition, meetings have been held over summer of this year with members of the working group and officials from different local authorities who were nominated by the city and county managers association planning and land use committee. This engagement with nominated planners was effective in identifying a number of important considerations for the review and is now informing a wider engagement with local authorities. These issues include ensuring that buildings developed on foot of the guidelines meet the needs of the local population and are fit for purpose, and balancing the need to ensure sufficient provision for children and families, regardless of the size or housing type of the development, with ensuring that buildings are effectively operated as intended. In parallel, planning is underway to ensure the views of other stakeholders who will have an interest in the revised guidelines are catered for.

I have engaged with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to discuss how best to support and inform the drafting of revised guidelines under the new Planning and Development Act. I will meeting him and his officials again shortly. The approach more widely to ensuring appropriate levels of early learning and childcare supply is core to the work of my Department and will be further articulated in the context of the action plan to build an affordable, high-quality and accessible early learning and childcare system.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** We have a rudimentary system from 2001, which provides that for every 75 homes the developer must provide 20 childcare places, but it is not working for a variety of reasons. The provision of childcare infrastructure cannot be based on such a basic formula alone. Like schools, we need a proper forward planning system based on demographics, assessment of need, new residential developments and that delivers appropriate childcare buildings based on the needs of that community. Instead, what we have now is crèches being built that are not fit for purpose or too expensive to be bought, kitted out and made financially viable for providers. We have empty crèches in areas of massive childcare demand. We have developers building crèches as future houses because they view as them as a liability. They are trying to get out of building them. This is not just happening because developers want to sell crèches as houses. It is because we currently do not have a joined-up planning system that views the provision of childcare in local communities as essential. We have the opportunity to address that through the programme for Government. What are the timings? Will it be part of the action plan?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The Deputy and I have discussed this at length. It is my strong view that the notion of 75 homes and providing 20 childcare places is not fit for purpose. We have also discussed that there are many units across the country that were built for purpose childcare but either went for a change of use or were certainly not used for the purpose for which they were intended. As the Deputy referenced forward planning, the forward planning unit of my Department, which is up and running, will be a significant tool to identify where there are specific issues. We rely on the laser-like commitment of local authorities in this regard. To ensure that we have the appropriate guidelines in place a series of meetings took place over the summer. I acknowledge the engagement we have had with city and council managers and the specific work being done with nominated planners and wider planners to ensure that we have a system that is fit for purpose and will inform the work we are doing. I acknowledge the engagement of the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, and indeed, my ongoing engagement with him. Another meeting is scheduled shortly.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** Is it envisaged that the review will form part of action plan? I am looking forward to that action plan because to address any of the issues in childcare, whether that be affordability or availability, we have to address all the issues in childcare, such as infrastructure, staff and retention and funding models. Does the Minister agree? Some of our small providers are struggling with core funding. I wish to give one example. A service opened in 2004 and it is a Montessori and after school. In those 20 years, she raised the fee twice. Each time it was less than 5%. She applied for a fee adjustment because she is desperate to keep her service open and stay in core funding. She was permitted to increase her full-time monthly fee by €4.40. She is still €100 under the county average while the two nearest services can charge €250 and €300 more per month because they were established after her. How does the Minister envisage addressing sustainability issues and an equity between services through the action plan? We want to keep trusted services that have been operating for 20 years open.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The entire purpose is to ensure that we can maintain the services that we have, and indeed, provide for new services to meet the demands that are out there. The Deputy will have to concede that the Government is the most significant contributor at this point in time to this sector. The investment from the Government is quite phenomenal but

equally so, it is the objective of the Government where necessary for it to step in in the provision of State-led facilities to do that going forward and to support existing providers to be sustainable going forward.

I am not familiar with the case the Deputy raised. I am happy for that case to be examined. However, there is a sustainability fund within the Department. There is a fee adjustment in the review, but it does take into account what happens throughout the county. The purpose of the action plan is to ensure that it focuses on all aspects of delivering or building an affordable, high-quality and accessible early learning and childcare system. The Government is committed to publishing that.

### Child Protection

8. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to set out the timeframe within which her Department intends to bring forward proposals for the establishment of a child death review mechanism; when implementation is expected to commence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50199/25]

**Deputy Grace Boland:** In light of the recent and heartbreaking death of Daniel Aruebose, I raise the urgent need for a statutory child death review mechanism. The Ombudsman for Children in the April 2025 child death review again raised his concerns as to the current system and provided clear recommendations for the Government. Such a mechanism is also provided for in the programme for Government, which is very good to see. Can the Minister provide us with an update as to where we are on implementing that commitment?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The establishment of a child death review mechanism, while very welcome, is not in the remit of the Department of children. As the Ombudsman for Children's recent child death review report outlined, the majority of deaths take place in medical settings, which the Deputy will appreciate is outside of the scope of the Department. It is important to state that.

I welcomed the report entitled Child Death Review: The Case for a National Statutory Review Mechanism for the Deaths of Children in Ireland. I am conscious that the data outlined in the report also highlights that deaths of children in care are only a small subset of the overall number of child deaths occurring in the State. In that regard, the Department has a limited overall input in this respect. However, I assure the Deputy that the Department and I will proactively engage with the nominated lead Department responsible for the delivery of such a mechanism over the lifetime of this Government.

The death of a child in care or known to State services, whether at home, in care or aftercare, is a tragic event and, indeed, the death of a child in any circumstance is a tragic event, but it deeply affects family, friends, carers and staff connected to the child and local communities. Specifically in relation to a child in care, we are fortunate to have in place the national review panel, NRP, which conducts reviews of child death and serious incidents where the child is in care or is known to Tusla. The NRP is independent in the performance of its functions, making findings of fact and producing reports that are objective and independent of Tusla. The NRP

produces reports that are factually based and identify points of learning to improve services provided to children and families.

I am conscious that since its establishment the NRP has played a critical role in identifying systemic issues, obstacles to good practice, and areas for learning to improve services. Tusla has advised that out of the 133 reports that the NRP has produced to date, 90 reports or executive summaries have been published and are available on its website.

I can inform the Deputy that in instances where the NRP makes recommendations which fall outside the remit of both my Department and Tusla, officials within my Department ensure that these recommendations are brought to the attention of the appropriate Department.

**Deputy Grace Boland:** While the State cannot control every tragedy, we do have a duty to respond to tragic deaths such as this with clarity and compassion, and that means heeding the ombudsman's recommendations. One of the ombudsman's recommendations relates to the Minister's Department where he is looking for immediate engagement with his office to find a resolution to the many limitations with the NRP in accessing information, engaging with other agencies and fundamental governance pending the establishment of a new statutory child death review mechanism. Which is the lead Department? Can we get some clarity on that? When will that happen? Will a cross-departmental group be set up and will we see progress on this? Unfortunately, these tragic deaths really underscore the need for this mechanism and we need to see follow through from the Government. I want to make sure I can do that and I need to know who I will be following up with.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** It is a commitment in the programme for Government and therefore there is agreement across the Government. I was party to the negotiation of that programme for Government so I am very committed to that initiative. I believe it is hugely important. On the matter of full disclosure, I have also met the Ombudsman for Children and was happy to do so. The lead Department has not yet been determined by the Government. My understanding is it will be determined in the next short while. There are number of engagements related to that matter and finding the appropriate Department. In terms of the Department of children there is already the very specific review around the national review panel for children who are in the care of the State or known to Tusla, but the vast majority of children's deaths are recorded in medical settings, so it is not clear cut. It does demand that there be a cross-departmental look at this matter and that is ongoing.

**Deputy Grace Boland:** The Minister will know from the review and also from engagement with the ombudsman that one of the things he is really calling for is that the reports of the NRP should be shared with families and every effort be made to remove barriers to information. The frustration with timelines and communication with families can be seen throughout the report. Like everything in life, communication and clarity are key and that people are not left ghosted and left hanging. People are really suffering when they lose someone and we need to treat them with compassion.

In terms of the NRP, I would really appreciate if the Minister could make sure there is a commitment in the interim to communicating with families and delivering finalised reports to them. We need to make sure learnings from tragic deaths like this are responded to by the State

in a co-ordinated and efficient way. It can be seen in the report that the ombudsman does not believe this is happening. We are not learning from these deaths and we have to do everything to make sure we can avoid future deaths.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I reiterate, for the purpose of accuracy, that the national review panel is entirely independent, and that is right and proper. There should be no interference with its work. It is entirely independent in its functions, making findings of fact and producing reports that are objective and independent of Tusla or anyone else. That is important.

I point out, and it is important this is stated accurately, that at least 90 of the national review panel's reports or executive summaries have been published and are available on Tusla's website. It is important to allow the NRP to do its work and do it independently. I agree 100% that utmost in our minds at all times must be the feelings, emotions and experiences of the families. There has to be extraordinary humanity here. When a child dies, it is the greatest tragedy, certainly in the lives of the immediate family and wider society, so the compassion the Deputy speaks of must be a given.

### Childcare Services

9. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she is aware of issues childminders are experiencing with the new regulations; if she is concerned that childminders are leaving the role; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49910/25]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I want to ask the Minister about the regulations that came into effect for childminders across the State in September 2024. They have now been in place for a year and there are issues being raised, primarily by Childminding Ireland. Given the severe capacity issues we have within our early years sector and the very high turnover of early years educators, particularly out of private childcare settings, we need now more than ever to retain our childminders and ensure they can work within these new regulations. Is the Minister aware of issues that have been raised?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I will say clearly that childminders are a hugely important part of early learning and care and school-age childcare provision, and they continue to be the option of choice for many families. I am firmly behind the regulation of childminding services, which is critical to the safeguarding of children.

The childminding-specific regulations, which came into effect in September 2024, are designed to be proportionate and appropriate to the home and family setting in which childminders work. Childminders were consulted on and involved in all aspects of the development of the regulations. Both the steering group for the national action plan for childminding and the advisory group on regulation and inspection of childminding included childminders as well as representatives of Childminding Ireland.

The phased, supportive approach to registration put forward in the national action plan for childminding seeks to consult and support childminders throughout the transition, to increase recognition of the important role that childminders play, and to strengthen this vital service. A

key objective of the national action plan for childminding is to enable parents who use childminders to benefit from State subsidies through the national childcare scheme.

As a result of the commencement of the relevant parts of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 and the childminding services regulations, childminders are now able to apply to register with Tusla and can therefore take part in the national childcare scheme. Only Tusla-registered providers are eligible to participate in the scheme. The limitation of public funding schemes to Tusla-registered providers helps to ensure that public funding is provided where there is assurance of quality of provision.

Childminders now have a three-year transition period during which they are able to register with Tusla, but are not yet required to do so. They actually have until September 2027. During the transition period, supports are available for childminders at local level through the city and county childcare committees. Each city and county childcare committee employs a childminding development officer who provides a range of supports to local childminders. Supports available include a short pre-registration training course as well as the childminding development grant. The annual grant scheme provides up to €1,000 to assist both registered and unregistered childminders who are providing a childminding service in their own homes.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I welcome and acknowledge the fact childminders can now provide supports of the national childcare scheme and that will perhaps encourage or allow parents the choice rather than choosing a formal childcare setting. This is particularly so in rural areas where childminders would be used a lot, especially where they can provide flexibility that perhaps the formal childcare setting cannot. I have met representatives of Childminding Ireland and there are significant concerns and issues in regard to the regulations. Childminding Ireland's ask has been that, 18 months into the regulations, which is coming up shortly, there would be a review of those regulations. I think that is a reasonable request to make sure the regulations are working and see if there need to be tweaks to ensure childminders are getting on board with them. Childminding Ireland's most recent survey found that more than 30% of childminders intend to pull out of childminding rather than sign up to these regulations and to Tusla. The issues of paperwork and inspections, etc., have been raised. Would the Minister consider that review mechanism 18 months in?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** To be fair, we want the system to work. We want childminders to feel they can register with Tusla and that this is in their best interests as much as it is in the best interests of the children they care for as well. The work childminders do is invaluable. The Deputy is correct; it is a matter of choice for parents as well. Some parents opt for this and want this. I come from a rural constituency myself and know of the great work childminders do. I can say that, at this point, 511 childminders have completed their pre-registration training. Notwithstanding that, they have until September 2027. Like most things, we find there is a greater imperative to complete registrations closer to the timeframe. In regard to the review the Deputy referenced, rather than it taking place post September 2027, a commitment has been given that that will take place during the transition period. I think that it is only right and that we would learn as we go along. I am committed to that review taking place during the three-year transition period.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** There will be a review between now and September 2027, which is the transition period. That is really welcome.

I encourage the Minister, if she has an opportunity between now and September 2027, which I would like to think the Minister will, that she might meet with representatives from Childminding Ireland. I was very impressed with them. The organisation obviously represents a huge number of childminders right across the State. The Minister has said we need to get this right. That is why that review is so important. We want to retain childminders. We want to bring more in. It needs to be regulated and nobody disagrees with that. I met a childminder in my own constituency recently. She said she wanted to be down sitting on the floor with the kids and not up at the table doing paperwork. She did not want to be doing administration; she wanted to be down with the kids on the floor. That is very much the essence of childminders. They do it for the love of the children and the care they provide is second to none. For parents, particularly in rural areas, it is so important we get this right. I welcome this review taking place and ask the Minister, if she has the opportunity, to meet Childminding Ireland.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank Deputy Kerrane. I have no argument with what she is saying. Childminders do provide a valuable service. It is important that they would be open to the registration process too though. That is important and will be a gain not just for children but for the childminders themselves. It also allows the supports to be put in place like those we have currently such as the €1,000 support to assist both registered and unregistered childminders. It is also only right and proper that parents themselves would benefit from the national childcare scheme. That is also a support to childminders. I am very happy to engage and do so on an ongoing basis with all of the different organisations. The review will be helpful because it will smooth out the immediate challenges or difficulties that childminders are finding. It is not the purpose of the system or the registration system to make things difficult; rather it is to make it accessible. It is for that reason that we specifically funded the childminding development officer with the city and county childcare committees to work with and to support childminders. If anybody has any specific difficulties, I suggest they make direct contact with that development officer in their own area.

### **Disability Services**

10. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality her plans for community neurorehabilitation teams for children with neurological conditions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50196/25]

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú):** Anois, tógfaimid Ceist Uimh. 10 in ainm an Teachta McAuliffe ach tá an Teachta Daly ag glacadh leis ar a shon.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I wish to draw the Minister's attention to the lack of a policy framework and service infrastructure for rehabilitation supports for children with a neurological condition. She will be aware that the national neurorehabilitation strategy only applies to people over 18 years of age and there is no equivalent of community neurorehabilitation teams for children. That means there is extremely limited access to therapeutic supports.

**Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I thank the Deputy for his question. The Government and I recognise the need for all children to receive the right services at the right time. We are committed to improving services for all children with disabilities. We have and will continue to do so. As the Deputy will know, there are currently 93 CDNTs across the country and these teams provide services and supports for children from birth to 18 years of age. Children with neurological conditions receive supports through these teams as well as through other community services. Almost 45,000 children and their families are being supported by children's disability network teams and in respect of the number of children waiting to access the CDNTs, it has been decreasing by 15% in the first half of this year. HSE data from April 2025 shows there has been a nationwide increase of 26% in CDNT staffing levels since October 2023. Most significantly, the CDNT national vacancy rate has reduced from 29% in 2023 to 18% this year, a reduction of 11 percentage points, and we will continue to improve that.

The model of service for all CDNTs is family-centred and based on the needs of the child. It is centred on the objectives of empowering and supporting parents and others who are with the child on a daily basis to facilitate the child's developmental needs. The programme for Government includes a commitment to advancing neurorehabilitation services nationally, including the completion of the national roll-out of HSE community neurorehabilitation teams. To date, the Government has provided funding for community neurorehabilitation teams in four regional health areas around HSE Galway, Roscommon and Mayo; HSE south west; HSE Dublin, South and Wicklow; HSE Dublin south west, south city and west; and Kildare west Wicklow. The Deputy's issue was in relation to children in particular and we will be increasing focus on children's neurorehabilitation going forward. The HSE is progressing plans to examine the demand for paediatric neurorehabilitation services for children in Ireland. I will come back in afterwards.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** As the Minister of State will know, in Ireland, 450 children suffer a moderate or traumatic brain injury each year yet the CNDTs do not have the capacity to provide neurorehabilitation. Moreover, the children's disability network teams cannot cater for children with complex neurological disability in areas such as spasticity management, orthotics, gait analysis, feeding issues, assistive technology, seating, neurorehabilitation vision and hearing assessment. The national model of care for pediatric healthcare recommends the development of neurorehabilitation services in the community for children with neurological conditions. Will the Minister of State provide an update on that?

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** As I was saying, we will be increasing our focus on children's neurorehabilitation. The HSE is progressing plans to examine the demand for those rehabilitation services for children in Ireland with acquired disability and to examine the current capacity rehabilitation services, as well as designing a service delivery model for children with acquired disability in line with national strategies for children with disabilities. Consideration of the children's disability services and the funding requirements for budget 2026 is ongoing. The Department has been actively engaging with the Department of public expenditure and reform and digitalisation and with the HSE throughout this process. As the budget has not yet been announced, confirmation regarding funding in specific regions cannot yet be provided. Following confirmation of 2026 funding, the HSE will publish its 2026 national service plan, which will set out the expected activity for 2026.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I welcome the announcement of additional services in the community. We need to point out that there are gaps in the current system. Children are discharged from pediatric, neurology and neurodisability services in hospital at 16 years of age. Adult disability services, including day services, accept clients from 18 years and over and therefore there is a gap there. There is also a clear lack of care co-ordination for children with acquired neurological conditions. There is a critical need for case management and key worker support for children with complex neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions. It is like everything in the community. We need more co-ordination and deeper capacity and we need services for children who have acquired brain injury most especially.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I thank the Deputy for his contribution. It is important. He is correct that we should address those gaps. As I travelled the country I have met those who look after people who acquire a brain injury - mostly adults - but issues around that gap between the ages of 16 to 18 are issues that have been raised with me. I appreciate the Deputy raising the issue here and it is something we will have to look at to make sure we are rolling out these hubs as is happening for adults across the country but also looking at gaps in the service.

### **After-School Support Services**

11. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the measures being implemented to ensure that the shortage of after-school childcare places does not act as a barrier to parents returning to the workforce; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50173/25]

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** We have seen the enormous demand for childcare throughout the country, particularly in my own constituency of Kildare North. However, a lot of the focus has been on preschool and not on after-school childcare. It is extremely difficult for parents to find after-school care and also to go back to work. What measures are being implemented to ensure this shortage of after-school childcare places does not act as a barrier to parents returning to the workforce?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. Improving access to quality, affordable early learning and care and school-age childcare is a key priority for the Government. Capacity in this sector is increasing. Data from the annual early years sector profile for 2023 to 2024 shows that the estimated number of enrolments increased by approximately 19% over the previous two years. School-age childcare has shown particular growth in recent years. The estimated number of enrolments for schoolgoing children nationally increased by 56% during this period. Moreover, 261 new school-age childcare services were added to the Tusla register in 2024, leading to a net increase of 225 new school-age childcare services in one year alone. That is significant, notwithstanding the fact that we always need to do more.

10 o'clock

It does appear, however, that the demand for early learning and care in school-age childcare remains higher than available supply in certain parts of the country. The Deputy specifically referenced his own area. While this is more generally a bigger issue when it comes to younger

children, there may be instances of misaligned supply for local demand for school-age childcare, notwithstanding the substantial increase in provision. Demand for places beyond sessional preschool provision is highly elastic and shaped very substantially by families' individual composition, circumstances and preferences; employment patterns and income, and the price and availability of services.

My Department continues to support the ongoing development and resourcing of core funding, which has given rise to a significant expansion of places since the scheme was first introduced, including school-age childcare places. Additional funding was secured in budget 2025 to facilitate a further increase expansion in capacity from September 2025. Expansion in school-age childcare has also been supported by the extension of the national childcare scheme subsidies to all children up to 15 years of age, and particularly the incremental increase in the rates of universal subsidy from 50 cent per hour in 2023 up to €2.14 per hour since 2024.

The Department also funds 30 city and county childcare committees, which provide support and assist families and providers. The network of 30 childcare committees across the country can assist in identifying vacant places in services for children and families who need them.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** I recognise the progress that has been made and the advancements, particularly around the additional funding with the national childcare scheme, NCS, and with core funding. The reality of the situation still stands that the shortage of affordable childcare drives what is called the motherhood penalty, which is the economic setback that parents, mostly women, face after having children. This leads to many women having to reduce hours, turn down promotions or leave the workforce due to childcare constraints. It deepens gender pay gaps and limits career progression, particularly for single women and low-income women. I have multiple constituents and friends who have come to me on this. One example is a parent in Kilcock who has highlighted the shortage of after-school care in Kilcock. She says that she cannot financially afford not to work but that, like many other working mothers, she is being forced out of the workplace due to this severe lack of childcare support. I agree that the county childcare committees have a large part to play in this as well.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** It is an absolute objective of this Government to ensure that we make provision for children of all ages. More specifically, the Deputy is interested in school-age childcare. We have had some very significant innovations I can point to. For example, in my time as the Minister for Education, I published procedures on the use of school buildings and sports facilities outside of school hours. The purpose here was to ensure that in the first instance community opportunities would be utilised such as school buildings and sports halls, and very specifically that there would be opportunities for early learning and childcare providers to make use of school buildings or whatever, in this instance because the building would be empty after school and would be in an ideal location for after-school services. There are now 565 school-age childcare-only services located on school premises, which represent almost two thirds, or 59%, of school-age childcare-only services in operation. That is quite significant. We need to do more work in this space with schools.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** I was going to reference next the work the Minister did as Minister for Education in ensuring that more schools opened their facilities after hours for

childcare, particularly for after-school care. The Minister will be aware, however, that there have been difficulties with some school boards in getting those schools open. There needs to be a co-ordinated effort between the Minister's Department and her former Department of education to ensure that schools are directed to open those facilities for after-school care and for childcare in general.

It would be great to see a national strategy for after-school and wraparound care. At the heart of this is allowing parents to get back to work knowing their child is being cared for safely, and to ensure that women are not being discriminated against in going back into the workplace. The affordability issue also comes up time and again. I appreciate the work the Minister is doing and has been doing.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I want to be clear that I 100% agree with the Deputy. It is only right and proper that everybody who wishes to participate in the workforce get that opportunity. It is certainly not acceptable or right that anyone's opportunities would be hindered because of a lack of childcare or that it would be one particular cohort of people. The Deputy specifically instanced women who would be disadvantaged here, and that is not acceptable. It is one of the key agendas of the Government to ensure that this is not the case.

Notwithstanding the progress that has been made on the use of our school buildings, there is scope to do more there too. Equally, it will be hugely helpful to us that the forward planning unit that is now up and running in the Department will be able to provide for us extensive data on where there is specific need in specific areas. The need in some areas is greater than in others. The unit is drawing on the expertise of statisticians on secondment from the Central Statistics Office, along with other specialists, which will allow us to future-proof so that the Government is aware and that the State can step in where that is required.

### **Disability Services**

12. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of people waiting to access children's disability network team, CDNT, services in Cavan and Monaghan for a period up to three months, three to six months, six to 12 months and greater than one year. [49902/25]

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister will acknowledge that one of the more difficult parts of our job is dealing with the families of children waiting to access children's disability network team services. My question relates to CDNTs in Cavan and Monaghan. How many children are waiting to access those services for up to three months, from three to six months, up to 12 months and greater than one year?

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** The Government and I recognise the importance of early intervention for children with disabilities and of ensuring they receive the right service at the right time. Under the programme for Government we are committed to ensuring that children and their families who need early intervention and therapy input can access that support in a timely way.

The key vehicle for change and improvement is the roadmap for service improvement for disability services for children and young people. The implementation of this roadmap is well under way and will continue until 2026. The roadmap contains an important set of actions that collectively will enhance children's disability services in Ireland. They include significant measures to integrate and improve access to services, to expand the workforce and to advance better communication and engagement with families. A key part of this work has been the improvement of access to services through the CDNTs. These are providing supports and services to almost 45,000 children.

I fully acknowledge that there is still a lot more to do to address the current delays faced by children with disabilities who are seeking services. The latest data received from the HSE for the second quarter of 2025 show that there are currently 41 applications waiting one to three months, while there are 334 applications waiting longer than three months in the Cavan-Monaghan area, CHO 1.

Recruitment and retention of health and social care professionals, HSCPs, is the most significant challenge. Work is ongoing to increase staffing levels. The HSE data from April of this year shows there has been a nationwide increase of 26% in CDNT staffing levels since October 2023. Most significantly, the CDNT national vacancy rate has reduced from 29% in 2023 to 18% in 2025. This is a reduction of 11 percentage points.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister of State has outlined that 41 children have been waiting up to three months but, if I am correct, she also said that 334 are waiting over three months. The question itself was fairly specific in asking for more detail with regard to those figures. I wonder if the Minister of State has that data for three to six months, six to 12 months and over a year. From dealing with a number of families in Cavan and Monaghan, which are two distinct CDNTs, I know that in some cases the wait is inordinate, with difficulties in getting initial meetings and then difficulties in accessing occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy after that. In many ways the initial contact is just the beginning of a very hard journey the families have to go through. Does the Minister of State have more detail on those figures so that we can have a better sense of the delays that are there?

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** That is the breakdown I received but I will go back and see if there is a further breakdown. The Deputy's question was specific but those were the figures I got back. I will come back to the Deputy if there is a further breakdown.

My Department and I know that more needs to be done in this area. My Department is working with the HSE to introduce specific recruitment and retention measures and incentives for therapists to work in our CDNTs, including the CDNT sponsorship initiative and facilitating direct access for funded agencies to existing professional panels. In 2025, we allocated €10 million in additional funding to be made available specifically for children's services, and that funding focused on recruiting for various positions right across our CDNTs. That included 20 senior therapist posts, 20 staff-grade posts, 20 health and social care assistants posts and 15 clinical trainee posts. Measures have also been provided to assist with sustainability. That is to address the assessment of need backlog while freeing up resources for therapists to actually carry out the therapeutic supports.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I appreciate the Minister of State indicating that she would get that additional information. It might give her a sense of the challenges we have sometimes in actually getting information from the CDNTs. I thank the Minister of State for that and I note what she said with regard to staff recruitment and the need to recruit additional staff and fill vacancies. There is also a big piece of work to be done in retaining the staff that we have. I often comment that probably the most difficult job is for those staff operating within the CDNT, obviously in very stressed conditions. Naturally, they are probably getting the ire of the families who have waited a long time to get them.

In a follow-up or supplementary, could the Minister of State give an indication, if she has it, with regard to the number of vacancies that are currently outstanding in Cavan and Monaghan? The figures I have, dating back to spring of this year, show that in Monaghan there were just under ten outstanding vacancies and in Cavan, it was over 12. If the Minister of State has those up-to-date figures I would appreciate them, or, if not, she could follow up in writing with them.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I will come back and follow up in writing on that. The Deputy makes a good point as well. I always stress when travelling around the country and visiting services that there is a lot of fantastic work happening within the disability sector. Sometimes those working within the sector talk to me about the narrative out there. We all understand the challenges that have to be dealt with and there are families out there who are waiting too long on these waiting lists for their children to access these services. As part of this, we need to be recruiting and retaining more, which we will be doing, and that will also hopefully build the morale of these fantastic teams on the ground who are dealing with very challenging situations in trying to get through these waiting lists.

We are also looking at our third level system. We had 150 extra therapists going through our third level system last year, going into first year. There will be more placements this year, developing the future pipeline. We are also looking at the national CDNT training programme. We have the expedited CORU registration process, which is for bringing therapists in from abroad, making sure we are doing absolutely everything we can to recruit qualified therapists in this area. We also have bespoke initiatives designed to provide specialist supports for children with complex needs and their families.

### **Disability Services**

13. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality her plans for introducing a reimbursement scheme for families who have had to pay for private therapies for their child due to long waiting lists for public services. [50027/25]

**Deputy Mark Wall:** We are all aware - and it has been discussed already tonight - of the length of waiting lists of families waiting for therapies in this country. I ask the Minister of State to address the House tonight on any plans she may have for a reimbursement scheme for families who have had to pay privately for their child due to these long waiting lists.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** The Government and I recognise the importance of early intervention, and the programme for Government, as the Deputy knows, commits to ensuring

children and their families get that early intervention and therapy input, and that they can access that support in a timely way.

A key response to this issue is the recruitment and retention of health and social care professionals, and I alluded to that in my last response. Substantial effort and investment has been made in this regard. Our CDNTs support almost 45,000 children with complex needs. HSE data from April of this year shows there has been an increase of 26% in CDNT staffing levels since October 2023 and the vacancy rate has reduced from 29% in 2023 to 18% in 2025, an 11% reduction.

I acknowledge that some families, as the Deputy said, are still facing unacceptable delays. Access to therapies for a child should not depend on whether their family can afford it. Rather than diverting funding to reimburse individuals for private therapy, we should utilise public funding to invest in our public system and to enhance the capacity to deliver these therapies free of charge. This is an issue of equity and it also speaks to our focus on building a sustainable service for children with disabilities. Notwithstanding this, individual health regions may procure private providers to provide therapies and interventions on a case-by-case basis. However, this is usually only in exceptional circumstances. This is about improving the pipeline of required therapies and a continued focus on recruitment and retention. We also need to develop that pipeline of future therapists through our third level education system, which we are doing.

In June, the Government approved an expansion in training places from September 2025 in disciplines critical to disability, health and education services. Additionally, alternative pathways into health and social care professions are being developed to widen access to critical skills areas. That includes apprenticeships, tertiary programmes, graduate conversion and mature entry.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I thank the Minister of State. I am all for public services and I welcome the fact the Minister of State is chasing down the maximum number of public services we can and increasing the number of consultants and clinicians we have in that area. Unfortunately, too many families are waiting too long for those much-needed services for speech and language, OT, physiotherapy or whatever their child might need. I know we spoke already about Cara Darmody and the €10 million fund that was created for private assessments of need, and I welcomed that at the time. It was discussed in this House.

In supporting any public development, the question around case-by-case basis emergencies remains. Does the Minister of State have any idea how many CDNTs have used that facility of using private services for case-by-case basis emergencies? The number of people coming to my office are probably not aware of that but they are definitely not using that particular emergency service.

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** I do not have the figures for that but I can tell the Deputy that the focus of Government, and my focus and that of the Minister, Deputy Foley, is to make sure we are increasing the number of speech and language therapists and occupational therapists so that they are actually going out there providing the therapies. As the Deputy knows with regard to the backlog of assessment of need, a lot of them are carrying out the assessments. What many people want and what parents send their children to get these

assessments for is to get access to the therapies, which is a huge part of this. That is the drive we are working on through the legislation around the assessment of need process to make it more efficient and effective, and to meet the needs of our children who really need these services. That is our sole focus. Yes, we provided €10 million to try to address the assessment of need backlog, for example, and we will continue to work our way through that. People do have a right to an assessment of need but we need to make sure that we are looking at our third level institutions, recruitment abroad and speeding up the registration process for those coming back from abroad through CORU but also looking at bursaries. If the Deputy has other suggestions, my door is open with regard to recruitment and retention of these therapists.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I always welcome the Minister of State finishing with a question like that. I am going to use the opportunity once again to raise Sensational Kids, a new building in Kildare town. I am sure the Minister of State is aware of this particular building. It remains unbuilt since November 2024. This building could have allowed up to 300 children per week in the greater Kildare and Leinster area to receive those services I mentioned but also training for those therapists in speech and language, OT and physiotherapy. That was a proposal that was part of Sensational Kids. I understand that proposal is with the HSE now but it would make a difference for so many families in Leinster. I still state that as much as I support public services, families are crying out for that early intervention and those emergency services. Maybe if the Minister of State or her Department get the chance, they might come back to me on how many have availed of those emergency services, and they might also look at that Sensational Kids proposal, which would be so beneficial to so many people in the area I am from.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I thank the Deputy, and I will come back to him if I have those figures available to me. He raised an important point around early intervention. I refer to the earliest milestones, and a child not reaching them.

What is happening now is a lot of these pressures are coming into the education system. Where a need is identified we need to be flagging it much earlier and providing the services much earlier. That is where that single point of access to the HSE will be so important as well as us dealing with the assessment of need process, recruiting and retaining our therapists at home and abroad but also getting that earlier intervention through the primary care setting, for example. Just one area is not going to resolve this. This is a whole-of-government approach but the HSE, the Department of Education and Youth and my Department will also ensure we are reaching those at an earlier level and allowing CDNTs to deal with those with the most complex needs.

*Question No. 14 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Childcare Services**

15. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if her attention has been drawn to the concerns of parents with children attending a childcare centre (details supplied); the actions she will take to engage with management of this childcare centre on these concerns; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49128/25]

**Deputy Barry Ward:** My question relates to a childcare provider in Dublin who has indicated it is withdrawing from the market. Has the Minister plans to do anything to prevent such things as this happening and thereby increasing the costs hugely for parents using those facilities?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I am aware of the facility to which the Deputy refers. As he indicated in the question, Once Upon a Time has regrettably chosen to withdraw four of its ten services from core funding. They are Once Upon a Time services in Ballymount, Dublin 2, Dundrum and Shankill, with six other sites remaining in the core funding. The Department, through the local childcare committee, has engaged directly with the provider in question to highlight the benefits of staying in core funding not only for their services but also for the families who avail of them. The provider has not reversed the decision to date.

Core funding has been designed with maximum participation of providers in mind as reflected in the year-on-year growth of investment in the scheme rising from €259 million in year one to more than €390 million in year four. Moreover, the annual changes to the allocation model and in the conditions attached to the funding has assured that the scheme remains responsive, balancing the needs of providers while seeking also to meet a range of other objectives. Among those objectives is ensuring taxpayers' money is used in a way that sustains services while not excessively increasing private profit.

Core funding translated into €1.5 million in year one of the scheme for Once Upon a Time services. It then rose to €2.1 million in year two and to €2.5 million in year three when all ten of the services in the chain participated. The Department projects that core funding for these services would be in the region of €3.3 million for year four of the scheme which would be an increase of 109% on funding for the chain since 2022. However, Once Upon a Time, regrettably, decided to withdraw four of its ten services from the scheme in year four, forgoing an estimated €1.1 million in core funding for those services.

As core funding is an optional scheme, this company has the autonomy and business freedom to choose not to join core funding, even though this will result in the loss of the significant financial support it offers and the substantial benefits and certainty it brings to the families accessing the services. For this coming programme year Once Upon a Time remains eligible to provide the national childcare scheme, the early childcare and education programme and the community childcare subvention plus saver programme.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I accept what the Minister said. This scheme is optional for companies and I understand why that is the case. I also understand that we campaigned on this issue last year and we promised the parents we would deliver serious cuts to the cost of childcare, reducing it to €200 per month.

There are 11 centres throughout Dublin. As the Minister mentioned, the owners of this facility have changed the facilities in three, one of which is in my constituency in Shankill but there are two others in my constituency in Dún Laoghaire and Cherrywood. Parents in my area are really worried that the contagion, if I can call it that, is going to spread to their facilities. The increase in cost is going to be up to €340 per child per month. It is totally unacceptable. We need to take action. I accept the Minister has engaged but it does not seem to be working. Can we make sure it is going to work?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** Core funding remains open and Once Upon a Time may reapply for the withdrawn services during the year and can join the overwhelming majority of providers. Already 90% of all providers are involved in core funding, which is a 5% increase on the number of providers involved in core funding this time last year. The opportunity remains open to Once Upon a Time to reapply for the services it has withdrawn. The Department is always exploring the potential for further changes to enhance core funding. Any changes for year five, starting 26 September, would be based on the operation of year four of the scheme, starting this month as well as stakeholder input. The issues faced by families accessing Once Upon a Time services will inform that work.

I also want to acknowledge the fourth year of core funding began on 1 September 2025 and as of that date, 4,336 services have signed up for the fourth year. Core funding has been designed with maximum participation of providers in mind, as reflected in the year-on-year growth of investment in this scheme from 259 in year one to 390 in year four.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I accept everything the Minister said. The owners of this facility say that the core funding model traps services in outdated, frozen fee structures while the cost of delivering quality childcare has continued to rise. I want this scheme to work. I want to make sure that the Minister's engagement with this company works and that we bring them back into the fold. However, the reality is there are parents in my area who are genuinely concerned that they are facing fees in the region of €1,400 per month, per child. It is an astonishing amount. It is a massive burden on parents throughout the country, which is why we all campaigned to bring that down to €200 per child per month. That is what we are trying to do. Does the Minister agree that if the companies are not buying into it - and yes, it is their option to do that - does that not massively compromise our ability to reduce the cost of childcare? They have changed it in respect of three centres but there are 11 in Dublin. Is the Minister not concerned that if she is not successful in engaging with these companies that it will compromise this policy?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I reiterate that the Government is absolutely committed to the €200 per month payment as outlined in the programme for Government over its lifetime. I took note of the Deputy's commentary that this provider and other providers are suggesting that core funding "traps services". That is not an accurate phrase to use insofar as I can point to the fact that core funding provided €1.5 million in year one of the scheme for Once Upon a Time services. That increased to €2.1 million in year two and indeed €2.5 million was made available in year three through core funding to those services. I am not so sure trapping the service is accurate nor indeed is it accurate when we reflect upon the fact that at this point in the year 90% of services have all engaged with the core funding model and have signed up to the core funding model. Clearly, the vast majority of services we have, believe in the core funding model, notwithstanding that we can always improve the situation. They have subscribed to the core funding model.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I thank the Minister.

### **Irish Language**

16. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on the supports she is providing for naíonraí. [49985/25]

**Deputy Aisling Dempsey:** Will the Minister give an update on the supports being provided for naíonraí?

**Deputy Norma Foley:** The funding provided by the Department for early learning and care, ELC, and school-aged childcare services is provided on the same basis to both Irish medium and English medium services, whether inside or outside Gaeltacht areas. In line with commitments in the five-year action plan for the Irish language, the Department recruited an Irish language support co-ordinator in 2020 to drive the development of a national plan. It has provided funding since 2023 to Better Start to recruit an Irish language early years specialist to support mentoring and advice to Irish medium ELC settings. The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht provides additional supports for Irish medium ELC services in the Gaeltacht through its agencies and organisations such as Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta. In addition, in June 2024, the Department's predecessor with responsibility for the Irish language, announced five-year funding to provide a comprehensive support and development service to naíonraí outside of the Gaeltacht to be administered by Gaeloideachas.

Furthermore, my own Department has provided funding to Gaeloideachas in 2025 to support Irish medium ELC settings. Additionally, the Department is currently working in collaboration with other relevant Departments and agencies to develop a national plan to further the development of Irish language provision in the ELC and the school-age childcare sector. The development of such a plan is a commitment in the five-year action plan for the Irish language. The national plan is expected to support the delivery of two commitments in First Five, the whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families: to introduce measures to ensure children in Gaeltacht areas have access to Irish medium ELC provision and to develop mechanisms to provide Irish language supports to ELC provision where huge proportions of children are learning through the medium of Irish.

**Deputy Aisling Dempsey:** I thank the Minister for her comments and for recognising the importance of naíonraí in our communities. As a TD for Meath, which has two of the only Gaeltacht areas in Leinster, namely Ráth Chairn and Baile Ghib, the importance of the Irish language and culture is not lost on me. We have some quality settings in the Gaeltacht area, for example, in Navan. At present, thankfully, we are seeing the Irish language under the spotlight like we have not for a while. The importance of speaking the language and being proud of it is coming to the fore. Naíonraí provide the best start for children who we want to be at least bilingual. Full immersion has significant and long-lasting benefits for our children. We all understand the pressures on our early education settings, including attracting and retaining staff. It is my belief that those who are fluent Irish speakers should be given extra incentives to work in early education.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I thank the Deputy. I know this is a matter close to her heart. As she has articulated so well in the context of her constituency, it is of particular importance given the Gaeltacht provision. The national plan is particularly important in advancing the supports and the vision we have for naíonraí. I agree with the Deputy that the earlier we can support the

language and ensure our children have access to and experience of it, the better it is in the long term.

The plan, to outline it, will support the delivery of the commitments in the programme for Government. There is a specific commitment in the programme for Government to directly support naíonraí and crèches to ensure early education access in Gaeltacht communities and beyond, and plan the development of State-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme, including Irish-medium naíonraí. There are specific commitments in the programme for Government.

In addition to the focus on Irish-medium ELC and SAC services, it is anticipated that the new national plan will also include measures to support English-medium early learning and care services to work within the updated Aistear early childhood curriculum framework, which was published in December 2024.

*Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar [[www.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtas.ie)].*

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú):** 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 Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss waiting lists for speech and language therapy in CHO 9.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the expansion of access to Irish language medium primary and secondary schools.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the closure of the local training initiative in Youghal, County Cork.

Deputy Paul Donnelly - To discuss the national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss waiting lists for psychology services in Cork and Kerry.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss restoration of the 9% VAT rate and supports for rural pubs.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the lack of available childcare places in Kilcullen, County Kildare.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss funding challenges for Laura Lynn and the lack of children's palliative care nationally.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the new guidelines for SNA reviews for 2025 to 2026.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the ongoing crisis in capacity at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the urgent need for outdoor sports facilities in Dublin 1.

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss funding of research into Okur-Chung syndrome and other rare diseases.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the failure to provide an SNA for a primary school child.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the full opening of the new Nenagh community nursing home.

Deputies David Cullinane and Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the status of the funding application for Waterford Airport.

Deputies Louis O'Hara and Claire Kerrane - To discuss maternity services at Portiuncula University Hospital.

Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss the national remote work strategy as a driver for employment and labour force participation.

Deputy Cathy Bennett - To discuss the rising cost of third level education.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss the impact of delays of SENO allocations on pupils and families in Cavan-Monaghan.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the reopening of Rattoo round tower.

The matters raised by Deputies Emer Currie, Michael Cahill, Alan Kelly, Paul Murphy and Matt Carthy have been selected for discussion.

### **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

#### **Departmental Strategies**

**Deputy Emer Currie:** Ireland is a leader in remote working, and that is not by accident. Approximately 15% of people in Ireland work remotely on a full-time basis. That compares with an average of just 10% across Europe. Access to any form of hybrid or remote work stands at 37%, which is also higher than the European average. I want to speak specifically about the benefits of fully remote and locationless work, distinct from hybrid models. Hybrid arrangements, while highly valuable, still require proximity to the office and, therefore, have limitations on where employees can live. Fully remote work, however, opens up opportunities to every corner of the country, bringing the same high-quality job to Boyle in Roscommon as it does to Blanchardstown in Dublin West. It means that where you live no longer limits the work you do.

According to Grow Remote, the average salary of remote workers in Ireland is €63,000, which is significantly higher than the €43,000 average in the five lowest income counties. For every remote job, there is an additional 0.7 jobs created indirectly in the local economy. Securing more of these remote roles locally not only strengthens the local economy of towns and villages but also plays a vital role in driving balanced regional development across the country.

Of course, it is not just about regional balance and renewal. On a personal note, as a mum of two children who lives in Dublin, I do not know how I would have managed to get elected or to keep up with the always-on nature of political life if my husband did not work remotely. Remote work has given us the flexibility to juggle school drop-offs and pick-ups and still be present when it matters. It has allowed us to be the parents and professionals we want to be. Flexible and remote work arrangements have contributed to record levels of labour force participation. A recent Department of Finance report credited these arrangements with increasing the number of women in the workforce despite the ongoing challenges in childcare provision.

Our success has not happened by chance. It has been driven by targeted policy. Our Rural Future rolled out nearly 400 connected hubs across the country. We had the making remote work strategy, which included Europe's largest State-funded remote work training scheme through Grow Remote, equipping workers and SMEs with the skills they need. Of course, Ireland's digital connectivity strategy will deliver high-speed fibre broadband to over 1 million homes, farms and businesses by 2026, which is ahead of schedule. We need to protect and grow that success. Remote work needs to continue to be supported by targeted policy.

There seems to be a global rowing back on remote work, often driven by hunches rather than evidence. Some argue that remote workers are less productive but studies, both at home and abroad, simply do not support that claim. For every remote job posting, there are more than twice as many applications compared with office-based roles. Workers want it and employers who want to attract top talent will continue to offer remote options. What comes next?

The four-year-old making remote work framework has been successful but we now need a new national strategy that treats remote work as a pillar of job creation alongside FDI and indigenous enterprise. That strategy should embed remote work into national job targets. We should create a unit within our enterprise ecosystem to attract international locationless jobs to Ireland. We must improve data collection so we know which jobs are truly remote, who is benefiting and how we can spread that. We should deliver a national remote work skills training plan for workers and SMEs to ensure that remote work is as accessible as possible. We need to continue investment in digital infrastructure and community hubs. If we secured just 10% of the 100,000 fully remote jobs currently advertised across Europe on a monthly basis, it would generate an additional €100 million annually to the Exchequer.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** I thank Deputy Currie for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Burke. As the Deputy is aware, there has been a significant long-term shift in attitudes to remote and flexible working among both employers and workers throughout the country since the pandemic in particular. Acceptance of remote and flexible working is high and the evidence suggests that they are here to stay. The most recent data from the Central Statistics Office shows that in the second quarter of this year, over 1 million people were reported to be working from home at least some of the time. Within this, over 500,000 people were usually working from home, down from peak levels of close to 775,000 in 2021. These are extraordinary numbers.

The Government is committed to facilitating remote and flexible working in a way that maximises their economic, social and environmental benefits, and the Department has worked with colleagues across government to develop and deliver all 15 actions outlined in the strategy to which the Deputy referred. Actions delivered under the strategy include legislating for the right of all workers to request a remote working arrangement through the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, publication of the code of practice on the right to disconnect, and significant investment in Ireland's national hub network and broadband infrastructure.

In 2022, research undertaken by the Department found that remote working was likely to have a positive impact on the Irish economy and society. The research examined the impact of remote working on several key policy areas, finding positive effects on the economy and society, including enhanced labour and employment opportunities for cohorts traditionally more distant from the labour market. The Minister, Deputy Burke, would highlight, for example, the contribution of flexible and remote working arrangements to achieving Ireland's record levels of female labour force participation, as the Deputy mentioned, and, in turn, record employment rates overall. For context and to emphasise this point, the most recent labour force survey data confirms that our policies are working with record numbers of people in employment. There were 2.8 million people at work in the second quarter of the year, an annual gain of 63,900 jobs. Since 2020, we have added approximately 660,000 extra jobs. These are exceptional numbers and remote and hybrid working has helped.

The programme for Government recognises the contribution of remote and flexible working to achieving our strong and inclusive labour market and reaffirms our commitment to promoting flexible working arrangements that benefit both workers and employers.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** The Minister of State has confirmed what I had set out, that Ireland is a leader in remote work.

We cannot take that for granted, however, particularly when we see announcements about companies rowing back on hybrid arrangements. There are great benefits to diversifying the tax base while revitalising local economies and communities. There are 100,000 remote jobs advertised on job sites across Europe monthly. We can continue to position Ireland as a leader in remote work, but we have to actively target the jobs. We can do that by creating this pillar as part of our job creation strategy. We have FDI, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland but we can focus on landing more remote-work jobs in Ireland because of all the benefits that brings to local economies and communities.

Grow Remote has published its pre-budget submission for 2026. It is actually more of a policy document. It goes into the detail required to bring our remote-working policy to the next level, and it does include enhancing skills. It covers continued investment in digital infrastructure and community hubs. London School of Economics recently said that to make remote work more inclusive, governments and employers should focus on reskilling, promoting remote-capable sectors outside cities and improving digital infrastructure. Ireland is already leading the way. Let us keep going and capture the opportunities others are leaving behind.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The Minister has mentioned the upcoming Working in Ireland survey, which the Department has funded. About 5,000 people, north and south of the Border,

have been surveyed. The Minister understands the survey has been completed and we can expect the research output in the coming months. We anticipate that there will be a lot of information on a range of labour market issues in this area, and this will be a useful input into the debate on where policy needs to focus. Certainly, the Minister will come back to the Deputy on that, taking into account the matters she has raised in the context of the forthcoming budget.

### **Air Services**

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I have lost count of how many times Waterford Airport has been raised over the last number of years in the Dáil Chamber. I have certainly raised it dozens of times. A meeting took place between Government representatives, the Minister for Transport and members of the board of Waterford Airport a number of months ago. There was a lot of frustration in Waterford following that meeting because, after years of business cases, more information being sought, further information and clarification, the people of Waterford saw funding going to other airports, in Cork, Donegal, Kerry, Shannon and, obviously, Dublin. Waterford seems left behind again. The frustration was over the fact that more information and another business case were sought for Waterford Airport. The situation has become ridiculous in that it was 2019 when a previous Minister for Transport, Shane Ross, actually signed off in principle that the State would fund the airport. A lot of work has been done since to provide the Department with countless clarifications to a previous business case that was submitted, and the people of Waterford are asking themselves what is going on and why the airport in Waterford cannot get a fighting chance. Everybody knows that either the runway happens and different types of aircraft can take off, which means we have a chance to have commercial activity at the airport again, or it does not happen and the airport closes. That is the stark reality facing us.

We want to have the same opportunities as any other region. Three local authorities – Kilkenny, Wexford and Waterford – are putting very serious money on the table. We also have private sector consortia putting money on the table. Those who have so far come empty-handed in terms of money, albeit with many promises, are the Department and Government. I ask the Minister of State again whether he can set out whether the Government is going to support the airport. When will he deliver the funding?

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** As my colleague Deputy Cullinane has laid out, this is not the first time the two of us, as Sinn Féin representatives for Waterford in this Chamber, have raised this. I believe the Minister of State was here the last time we raised it as a topical issue, just a short few months ago. We did so because of the demand and the urgent need for the Government to come to a decision on this.

We have the vista of Waterford – the economic engine of the south east, a region that has been left behind, neglected and left short of funding, investment and IDA Ireland visits for far too long – being without an airport that can actually cater for scheduled services. The solution is to build the runway and for the State to invest in the same way it invests in airports in other regions. The indignity or insult added to the injury of the decades of neglect is to see Cork Airport, a fine airport with good rationale for investment, getting a huge amount of public money for a new VIP lounge and additional retail space when we in Waterford do not have a runway that can cater for the commercial aircraft and scheduled services we need.

In SETU and the Walton Institute in Waterford last week, I was at meetings with ambassadors and diplomatic staff from six embassies – namely those of the United Arab Emirates, the People's Republic of China, Britain, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada – to consider international innovation and best practise, including in academia, business development, and research and development. One of the core components we are missing in Waterford is transport connectivity through the airport. I implore the Minister of State, in the name of fairness for the south east, regional balance, economic development and jobs, to make the decision. He should bring this message back to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. Let us make a decision to invest in Waterford Airport now.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The Government does support Waterford Airport. I assure the Deputies that the Government is committed to working with all stakeholders to see the Waterford Airport project to lengthen and widen the runway progress. In line with this commitment and the requirements under the Government's infrastructure guidelines, Waterford Airport was invited earlier this summer to submit a preliminary business case to the Department of Transport. As the Deputies will be aware, the infrastructure guidelines set out the value-for-money guidelines for the evaluation, planning and management of public investment projects. These arrangements apply to all public bodies and all bodies in receipt of Exchequer capital funding of this nature.

In relation to the timeline around the development proposal, it was in fact 2018 when Waterford Airport brought forward its proposal for an expanded runway and related services. I understand this proposal was in the form of a letter to the Department of Transport with a one-page overview of the projects proposed, which included high-level indicative costings. Following this, as mentioned, in June 2019 the Government gave approval in principle to an expression of support for the expansion proposal and to providing Exchequer funding of €5 million towards the project, which was then estimated to cost €12 million.

Government support at that time was contingent not only on €2 million in local authority funding and €5 million in private investment funding, necessary to complete the project, being committed and any risks relating to cost escalation being borne by the non-State investors, but also on full details of the project being provided to the Department of Transport for appraisal. Despite engagement with the airport over the intervening period, this detail remained outstanding from Waterford Airport until 13 December 2023. I understand the Department prioritised the necessary assessment of the detail provided in line with the requirements under the Department of Transport's transport appraisal framework. This framework provides guidance to ensure investment schemes in the transport sector can comply with the Government's infrastructure guidelines. The Deputies will be aware that this detail outlined that the project costings have increased substantially above the original estimated cost of €12 million, to €27 million, deviating significantly from the original proposal. The Exchequer contribution sought has risen from €5 million to €12 million.

It needs to be recognised that certain conditions attached to the Government decision of 2019 have not been fulfilled. However, the Government is committed to working with all stakeholders to see this proposal progress and, as such, Waterford Airport has been invited to submit a preliminary business case for consideration.

This was all discussed in detail when the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, met with his Government colleagues the Ministers of State, Deputies Mary Butler and John Cummins, and the CEO of the local authority on 2 July last.

Given the Exchequer funding being sought by the airport to support this proposal, the Department of Transport's role is as an approving authority. It will be the airport's role, as the sponsoring agency, to ensure that the necessary detail and evidence are provided in its business case to demonstrate that sufficient demand and industry commitment exist to facilitate regular scheduled passenger services. The Department of Transport will work with the airport in its development of the business case and is available at all times to engage with the airport. Any business case will be assessed as a matter of priority once it is received.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The Minister of State might be familiar with the phrases "Build it and they will come" and "Show us the money". He stated that it is up to the airport "to demonstrate that sufficient demand and industry commitment [should] exist to facilitate regular scheduled passenger services". That can only be determined when there is a runway. If there is no runway, no airline will come in. At the moment, jets cannot take off from Waterford Airport. It is turboprop planes only. That is the difficulty. If we get a runway extension, we have a fighting chance. The Minister of State talked about sponsoring agencies. There are three local authorities, not just Waterford. Kilkenny and Wexford are putting serious money on the table. This is needed.

Games are being played here for far too long. I said a number of months ago this was a case of sending a fool further. Every time we come in, a Minister stands up and the first words out of that Minister's mouth are that the Government is supportive of Waterford Airport and the runway extension. Again, as I said, show me the money. Show the people of Waterford the money. Give us the opportunity to have a fighting chance to be able to get that commercial activity. It is the Government that is holding up progress, not private sector sponsors, or the airport or local authorities. It is the Government that has, so far, refused to put any money on the table. I still hear nothing tonight from the Minister of State that tells me that will change any time soon.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** From listening to the Minister of State and scanning his speech as he read it, it strikes me as a bad mash-up between "Yes Minister" and "Computer says no". It is shifting the goalposts every single time. It is putting unfair demands on Waterford and the south east that simply are not placed on other regional airports around the State. No other regional airport is forced to jump through these hoops one after another. The Minister of State is quite right to point out that the costs have risen at an alarming pace in the time that has been wasted because the Government will not invest. It will not do what is needed here, which is to invest in an airport runway extension that means this airport can actually stand up and take the kinds of flights we need into the south east.

I said it before and will say it again: this is about regional development. We need the investment. We need the Government to make the decision, and stop prevaricating and wasting time, because the costs are only going one way. The longer this is let go, the higher the costs will ultimately be. Let us invest now and invest well in Waterford.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** If the Government broke the public spending code, or the infrastructure guidelines in this case, or decided to spend money without doing a proper analysis and proper business case, you guys would rightly be down at the public accounts committee castigating the Government. The Government is committed to working with all stakeholders to progress this project when the business case is received and reviewed.

We recognise we are an island nation. We have a dispersed population and an open economy. We need good connectivity with the rest of the world within and outside the country. We are an exporting country. We know that we need all this, but the infrastructure guidelines set out the value-for-money guidelines for the evaluation, planning and management of public investment projects. This applies to all public bodies. This is not just a Waterford thing. All public bodies and everybody in receipt of Exchequer capital funding are required to comply with this. That is why the public accounts committee is there, to hold the Government to account on items such as this. Some may say private investment is there so the State does not need to look as closely, but the State has a different role from that of private investors. We are happy to work with them but we have different functions and different objectives. The State wants its investment protected also. There are also state aid rules from the European Union.

At the meeting on 2 July I mentioned, the airport authorities were advised that the Department of Transport will continue to work with them on the development of the business case, which will be prioritised within the Department once it is received. Any potential support will be considered then, when the necessary appraisal is done under the infrastructure guidelines.

### **Mental Health Services**

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** The waiting list for children needing psychological treatment in County Kerry, and in the Cork-Kerry region, as recently outlined by the HSE for the period 2022 to 2025, shows a growth pattern that only be described as highly horrendous. The list grew by 470%. These figures appear to have spiralled out of control during that timeframe. There is widespread fear and frustration in the families of those affected.

It is of the utmost importance that the Minister of State outlines to us the valid reasons why we find our healthcare community in this horrendous position and for the emergency solutions that are being implemented, along with timeframes for drastic improvements. Do the Minister of State and the Minister have concrete plans for the employment of sufficient additional professionals suitable for the roles that are lacking in Cork and Kerry? Will provision be made in the upcoming budget for the very significant increase in funding for this obviously under-resourced health service in Kerry and Cork? Is the Minister of State satisfied that the steps being taken will show big improvements very quickly? How quickly? Is he satisfied that the steps being taken will show major improvements in this area?

The shocking figures for Kerry show that at year end 2020, the number of children in Kerry registered as waiting was 217. The figure for 2025 is 1,022. Yes, 1,022, which is an astronomical rise of 470%. Does the Minister of State agree that it is indefensible that the HSE allowed this trend to continue unchecked for over four and a half years? Is this down to bad management on the part of the HSE? Is the option of replacing the management team responsible being considered? We have already witnessed the CAMHS fiasco in both south

and north Kerry and in other parts of the country. Our vulnerable children who are suffering from psychological issues need to be seen, diagnosed and treated with speed, professionalism and efficiency. This does not appear to have been the case over this five-year span.

I trust that as the Minister of State is taking on tonight's session, he will make his views strongly known to Cabinet in the budget formation talks as the voice of these children, who are the responsibility of all of us. I trust that his colleagues in Cabinet will see, understand and heed the most dangerous position these children have been allowed to fall into through no fault of their own. This situation has the potential to damage an awful lot of these children, who await somebody to simply see what is wrong and what has to be done to make it right. Patients and their families will endure an extreme amount to see their loved ones getting better, but waiting lists should be avoidable.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of my colleague the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

Primary care psychology plays a central role in providing care and treatment to both children and adults in the community and, particularly, in offering the opportunity for early intervention for children and young people. The increased pressure and demand on primary care services, and on primary care psychology for children and young people in particular, are related to the increase in referrals and the increasing complexity of presentations requiring longer intervention times, as well as staff shortages and ongoing recruitment challenges in the community. These factors all contribute to an increase in waiting lists for primary care services, including primary care psychology services across the country, including in Cork and Kerry.

To address long waiting times at a national level, the Department of Health is working with the HSE on a focused programmatic approach to primary care waiting list management to put in place considerable standardised infrastructure to support systematic responses to primary care waiting lists.

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This will facilitate a greater understanding of the scale and drivers of demand; allow for improved planning, interventions and investment considerations; and support the most efficient use of capacity. As well as looking at the long-term changes that are needed, the programme of work will also examine what can be done to address those waiting over a year on access to primary care therapies. This approach involves three main workstreams that aim to improve access to primary care therapy services by analysing activity and maximising capacity, developing national measures to reduce long wait times and creating a consistent management protocol for referrals and waiting lists to these services.

At a regional level, HSE South West has highlighted significant work that is currently under way to enhance access to primary care psychology in Kerry. In June 2025, the regional executive officer appointed a regional director of psychology with a specific focus on reviewing psychological services, including workforce planning, reviewing the service provision model and considering other psychological support services that can meet the needs of the population.

Progress has also been made in relation to advancing recruitment to fill allocated vacancies in the Kerry primary care psychology service. National primary care funding was allocated to HSE South West mid-2025 to initiate waiting list initiatives to increase access to psychological intervention for children and young people on existing primary care waiting lists.

In terms of increasing capacity, there has also been a significant increase in 2025 for doctoral training places for psychology - clinical and educational programmes - in the region, with a total of 18 trainees funded by HSE South West who commenced in September 2025. This is part of a sustained trainee programme that now has 45 trainees in the system over a three-year cycle. All graduates will be offered a permanent post in the region on completion of training, capitalising on the investment and thereby improving staff to population ratios and reducing waiting lists. HSE South West has also highlighted several key initiatives currently in process and aimed at improving access to services.

The establishment of the new single point of access working group is supporting a more efficient triage of children to ensure that they access the most suitable service in a timely manner and is reducing waiting list duplication across primary care psychology, CAMHS and CDNTs. The HSE South West child psychology service waiting list improvement initiative working group has also just been established under the regional director of psychology. Its three main priorities regarding aiming to improve access to psychological services for children in the region are workforce planning and development, waiting list and capacity solutions, referral pathways and demand management and clinical service model innovation. I will bring the points raised by the Deputy to the attention of the Minister and the Department.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** As I outlined earlier, the figure for 2025 is 1,022. The list grew by a massive 470% from 2022 to 2025. These figures appear to have spiralled completely out of control during that period and there is widespread fear and frustration within the families of those affected. This cannot be allowed to continue. As I stated earlier with regard to CAMHS, we have already witnessed the fiasco in north and south Kerry. We cannot allow a repeat of this disaster. I believe the Minister of State will make every effort to ensure that these issues will be addressed in the upcoming budget, with proper staffing levels and adequate resourcing. I plead on behalf of the children of County Kerry, their parents and the children of Cork and the rest of Ireland that everything possible be done to address this very serious matter. I believe it is in the interests of all of us here in this Parliament to address this most serious issue.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** The Minister recognises fully the frustration of people in the local area with long waiting times for certain services and realises that much more needs to be done to fill local vacancies, address waiting lists and ensure consistent, equitable and timely access to primary care services. Since 2021, the primary care psychology waiting list initiative, which targets removals from the waiting list of those under the age of 18 waiting longer than 52 weeks to access services, has been operational. To date, the initiative has successfully removed 12,000 clients from primary care psychology waiting lists nationally. Funding for the continuation of this initiative will be allocated as part of the Estimates 2026 process. Outside this, a joint Department-HSE programmatic approach to primary care waiting lists is also under way to develop short-term and long-term solutions to long waiting lists for primary care services. The Minister wishes to again assure the Deputy that this Government remains committed to the further development of primary care and community healthcare services as

part of the programme for Government. HSE South West is also working to reducing the waiting lists for primary care psychology as evidenced by the initiatives to which I previously referred, including advanced recruitment efforts, building capacity for the future and the introduction of bespoke waiting list initiatives targeted at children and young people who need to avail of this very important service. I will bring the matter raised by the Deputy in terms of the upcoming budget to the attention of the Minister and the Department.

### **Nursing Homes**

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am glad to see the Minister of State back in here because we spoke about this in March so I am sure he is fully on top of it and has some good news for me. This issue is very personal for me. I have said here before that I fought for this. St. Conlon's Nursing Home was very personal for me. Many members of my family had their last days there. It provided an incredible service and the staff were amazing. However, HIQA wanted to close it because it was not meeting requirements. We had to fight to get funding and a site. I had to work with the HSE, in particular Joe Hoare. We found the site. I got the funding when I was a Minister. Construction started in May 2021, €24 million was spent and it was ready in early 2024. All that is positive.

This is where the problems start. I have visited the site. Nobody was being transferred. We were waiting for 18 or 19 people to be transferred from St. Conlon's to a 50-bed state-of-the-art facility. A total of €24 million of taxpayers has been spent and it is lying idle. As the Minister of State is aware, the HSE took it over. It is a step-down facility. I, along with Councillors Louise Morgan Walsh and Fiona Bonfield and Independent Councillor Seamus Morris, marched with thousands of people through the streets of Nenagh protesting about the fact that so many elderly people could not get access to that home. Some of these who protested have now passed. Those who were there have lost out on using this facility despite paying their taxes all their years. There are now quite a number of people in locations around north Tipperary, particularly next door in the actual hospital, who are high dependency - people who need three attendants to lift them out of a bed - have been there for months and need to get into this nursing home.

Following on from what the Minister of State said to me last March and in light of the fact that Bartra has left the actual facility it was running with the HSE for UHL, when will this open? I do not want to know when the 18 residents in St. Conlon's will come across. I want to know that only as a component of this answer because the regional executive officer told me and others that this would come back in a year. I was also assured at a meeting attended by his colleagues and about which the Minister of State would have been informed when we have our regional meetings in Catherine Street in Limerick that they had the whole year to get the resources in place to make sure staffing was available, so I do not want to hear anything about staffing not being available. They had a whole bloody year to get the people. There are queues of people on panels to fill this nursing home. Bartra, which was wrongly put in there to run a step-down facility, has now finished.

This building is empty. HIQA takes weeks. It would probably take minutes to sign off on this as a nursing home again because it is state-of-the-art. It is incredible. We are very proud of it.

I need to know when the 50 beds so many families and so many people need opened will open. We have suffered so much in Nenagh and north Tipperary when it comes to health services. When will this state-of-the-art nursing home, which should have been opened 18 months ago, be fully opened and fully staffed, given the commitments by the HSE and by the Minister of State here previously in March that it would happen in the third quarter of this year? It is now September. I want to know not just when the 18 residents of St. Conlon's will transfer and the staff will transfer but also when it will fully open, and I do not want to hear any issues about staffing or HIQA or anything else.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank Deputy Kelly. I know of his keen and genuine interest in this particular subject. I will deal with the questions he actually raises. I have an answer there for him. I am going straight to the capital programme. As part of this capital programme, older persons' services in north Tipperary are being enhanced by the opening of a new state-of-the-art 50-bed community nursing unit in Nenagh to replace St. Conlon's Community Nursing Unit. As the Deputy said, there was a €24 million investment. The new Nenagh community nursing unit will provide a high-quality living environment which will be in line with all regulatory requirements.

On the issues the Deputy particularly raises, as he is aware the HSE has vacant possession now of the new nursing home. It has applied to HIQA for registration as a designated facility for older people. HIQA is currently assessing the application. It would be expected that will be processed quickly. As part of the process, which I want to work with, the first element is that the residents who are currently in St. Conlon's will be moved to the new nursing home. They will be facilitated in this regard once HIQA has done the inspection and obviously issued the licence to operate as a nursing home. These people will then be able to pick the rooms they wish to pick. They will have first choice from what is there, which is only appropriate. The staff who are currently in St. Conlon's will move over with the residents to the new nursing home. I am advised by the HSE that it has the requisite staff and will have the requisite staff to scale up to the full complement of 50 residents in the nursing home.

The process at the moment is the HSE has taken vacant possession of the new nursing home, it has applied to HIQA in the past week for a licence and HIQA is currently assessing the application. Once HIQA grants the application - I hope that will be relatively soon but obviously the Deputy will appreciate it is independent in the way it assesses applications - then the residents currently in St. Conlon's will move to the nursing home along with the staff. Then the HSE will proceed to scale up to the 50 beds. It advises me it has the requisite staff to ensure that can happen. I hope that will happen relatively quickly.

As Deputy Kelly mentioned, to alleviate the significant pressures at UHL the decision was taken to use the new Nenagh community nursing home building on an interim basis as a step-down sub-acute and rehabilitation facility for UHL, run by a private provider with expertise in such services. The Deputy will appreciate one of the reasons was to dovetail that with the opening of the new 96-bed unit. That will happen relatively quickly, so the intention is the new 50-bed nursing home will be up and running relatively soon after HIQA has granted the registration. The first step will be to get the existing residents in St. Conlon's over and then to scale it up to 50 beds. The HSE has the requisite staff in place to do that. The HSE is advising me of that.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The Minister of State is one of the more diligent Ministers of State when it comes to trying to be genuine in his answers. I have been asking parliamentary questions for months looking for a date for when this is to be opened. The Minister has not provided me with that and it is the Minister who is responsible, not the HSE. The Minister is answerable to this Dáil in this Chamber and has refused to answer that question. I want that stated on the floor of this House. I have had to chase the Ceann Comhairle.

The Minister of State was not able to provide a date, or a month, when the 50 beds will be open. Everything he has said there I know. It might be extra information to him, and I appreciate that, but I know it. I know the HSE has gone to HIQA. By the way, this was the same HIQA which was meant to have the review into acute services in the mid-west out this month, which we still have not seen. The review by HIQA of turning this into a nursing home should take as long as it does to snap my fingers. It is the most modern building in Ireland when it comes to nursing homes. At €24 million it would want to be. The issue is when the 50 beds will be available to the 30 or more people from around the locality who desperately need it, because they are stuck in hospitals for months at €2,000 per night to the taxpayer. When will it be open? I need to know that. I understand the staff will transfer from St. Conlon's. I understand the staff will come from the panels. I understand there are the people who were working for Bartra - local people and people who have come from all over the world - who have been treated absolutely disgracefully by Bartra. It was put out that they would in some way TUPE into this. They will have to apply to the HSE now to get on a panel to get in there. Bartra should be looked into by the Minister of State's Department and the HSE to see how that happened, but that is another issue. I want to know when this will open. That is all I want to know. Give me a date, give me a month. That is all I want to know. Please do that, because I have been here twice now with the Minister of State and I have not got than answer. I really need to know it because there are so many people in the locality who need this open because not every nursing home will take people who are high-dependency.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I appreciate the frustration of people, including the residents of St. Conlon's and the people in the area. I have gone through this intensively and there is a process. There is an application before HIQA. It takes an average of about ten working days to assess an application. The application has gone in within the past week. I cannot pre-empt the outcome of the registration by HIQA, but it is normally a ten-day working cycle, and once that is complete, the residents who are in St. Conlon's will be brought to the new nursing home to pick out the rooms they wish. I regard them as a priority.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** So do I.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I am not in any way questioning the Deputy, but on the process, they have been waiting a long time. Once they are moved over along with the staff, the HSE has assured me locally, and I have made very up-to-date inquiries, that it has the resources staff-wise to be able to move and scale up to the 50-bed unit very quickly. Looking at the cycle of it, we are in the month of September and certainly it will not happen before the end of September. I think that is reasonable to say. We are looking, I hope, at it happening in the month of October. However, once again, I have to work within the parameters that are set down. The key element at the moment is for HIQA to give registration. Once the registration

is granted, everything else will move along at pace. We will then have the new 50-bed community nursing home unit in Nenagh up and running.

I expect that will happen.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I hope the Minister of State is right about October.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I am saying it will not happen in September. I think that is reasonable. While I cannot give a firm date, we would be looking at the period from October on.

### **Disease Management**

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I wish to raise the issue of funding for rare diseases. Rare diseases are not all that rare, given that 300,000 people are affected by one rare disease or another in Ireland, involving over 8,000 different diseases. While each individual disease is very rare, as a total they are quite common and have a big impact on people's lives. Often they suffer from a lack of research into their condition which then impacts treatment and the assistance they are able to get.

I want in particular to raise Okur-Chung neurodevelopmental syndrome, which is a rare disease that causes gene deletion. It is associated with a range of clinical features but especially developmental delay affecting language and motor skills. In the data only 300 cases have been identified worldwide with seven people in Ireland affected. It is likely that there are more cases that have not been accurately diagnosed as yet. We have seen that to be the case with other rare diseases with initiatives such as the 100,000 Genomes Project helping to identify a number of previously unidentified cases in the UK. Between the difficulty in diagnosing cases of Okur-Chung and the wide range of symptoms associated with the condition, what parents of children affected by Okur-Chung and patients both need is more research and more information. Many more cases of Okur-Chung and other rare genetic conditions could be identified with more funding for research projects based on whole-genome sequencing along the lines of the 100,000 Genomes Project. With more cases to observe, clinicians could offer better advice and more certainty to parents. With luck, researchers might be able to uncover new approaches to the treatment and management of the condition.

This came to my attention because of a case in my constituency. The mother of a young boy, Leo, came to me. He suffers from Okur-Chung syndrome which has caused him a number of challenges, such as learning disabilities, speech delay, a heart murmur and underdeveloped muscles which only allow him to walk for five to ten minutes at a time. He requires help when using the bathroom. He is also at risk of developing scoliosis. He has hearing difficulties and other conditions. His mother is concerned that her son's health will deteriorate further.

The worst part is that she simply does not know due to the lack of research into rare diseases like this. His doctor did not even know about the disease until it was diagnosed. We know that some of the common symptoms of Okur-Chung are well characterised and can even be treated, but other features of the condition are less well understood and at present there are no treatment or management plans.

There is a fundamental gap in the scientific literature on Okur-Chung as with many other rare diseases, which can only be addressed by funding from the State for fundamental research projects into human development in general and particular rare conditions such as Okur-Chung. There is not a sufficient market here to invite in the pharmaceutical companies on a profit basis; it is too niche to be worth the investment. Instead, we need a people-first approach to researching rare diseases with more appropriate funding for other research into this condition among others so that we can better characterise other features of Okur-Chung in order that individuals and their families can better understand their situation and plan for their lives ahead.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am responding on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Health, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

As the Deputy will be aware, Okur-Chung is an ultra-rare neurodevelopmental syndrome with an estimated 160 individuals living with this syndrome globally. Okur-Chung was first identified in 2016 and, as such there is still much we do not know about this syndrome. However, ongoing international research seeks to provide a better understanding of Okur-Chung syndrome and explore possible treatment options.

The recently published national rare disease strategy acknowledges the important role research plays in developing a better understanding of the mechanisms of disease which can enable early diagnosis, earlier treatment and overall better health outcomes for people. Greater knowledge of rare diseases is important for the development of novel therapeutics, treatment strategies and facilitation of more responsive and appropriate services for people living with a rare disease, their families and circle of support. Research is also important for supporting the recruitment, retention and motivation of healthcare personnel who will drive the development of quality services.

Substantial advancements have been made to embed research within Ireland's healthcare system, and the Department of Health has ensured that research is a key aspect of strategies and frameworks, such as the national rare disease strategy. In Ireland, several organisations have their own specific roles in contributing towards the advancement of rare diseases research.

Organisations such as Health Research Charities Ireland and Taighde Éireann, Research Ireland, have a central role to play in funding and supporting research initiatives related to rare diseases through the provision of grant schemes, co-funding of research projects and programmes and partnerships that prioritise rare diseases.

Research in Ireland is further supported by the involvement of patient advocacy groups such as the Irish Platform for Patients Organisations, Science and Industry, IPPOSI, and Rare Diseases Ireland, RDI, which, through ensuring that research is aligned with patient priorities, advocate and provide a voice for the needs of people with rare diseases and ensure their perspectives are included in research agendas.

Recognising that improved engagement, collaboration and partnership both nationally and internationally with industry, Government, representative organisations, healthcare professionals and academic partners will help to drive strong research and innovation for all aspects of living with rare diseases, the new rare disease strategy recommends that a national rare disease research group be established to provide a structured, co-ordinated, multi-actor and strategic approach to ensuring more high-quality rare diseases research in Ireland. The

strategy also recommends that opportunities for rare disease-specific funded research calls, targeting both indigenous research and greater participation in international consortia, be increased, as well as ensuring that healthcare professionals are supported and encouraged to pursue research in rare diseases and provided with the dedicated time to do so.

By streamlining collaboration and establishing stronger relationships between stakeholders through the development of a clear and co-ordinated approach, research efforts can be better integrated into the health system and have greater impact on patient outcomes.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I might just quote from Elizabeth who was in touch with me to let the Minister of State hear her voice.

... I would like you to explain to [the Minister] Leo's everyday struggles (he has autism a heart murmur, a learning disability, and muscle weakness) these are all due to his ocnds [Okur-Chung neurodevelopmental syndrome] diagnosis I would like you to explain that though deteriorating isn't a noted symptom this is likely due to the lack of research on the small numbers of 300 people worldwide! That I've spoken to other mothers and they are noticing the same deteriorating! One of those mothers is also from Ireland and her son is now in a wheelchair. That we need research on this condition to know what the future holds for our son, having no answers as parents is hard enough without having no answers to give him! We can't tell him if his legs will just keep getting more tired and less able to support him. (This week he has started to fall like his legs have just started going from under him)

Obviously, the Government has announced increased funding for rare disease initiatives, which is welcome. However, on the basis of the current funding the Government talks about nine rare diseases which are being screened for. Obviously, that is a drop in the ocean when we consider the over 8,000 rare diseases affecting 300,000 people in this country. Therefore, we need more funding for research, which is not going to come from the private sector. Research will enable people to be less isolated in their own condition and enable them to see some light at the end of the tunnel to say, "Okay, this is what is likely to happen and this is the treatment and management that can be used to assist me."

I appeal to the Minister of State, in the context of the budget discussions and so on, to ensure that the most possible is provided.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I acknowledge the story the Deputy tells about Elizabeth. Is it her son Leo?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yes.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** What age is Leo?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** He is seven.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** It is called Okur-Chung Neurodevelopmental Syndrome, OCNDS. Is that the norm?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yes.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I appreciate how difficult it is for Elizabeth, Leo and his family. Once again, I thank the Deputy for providing the opportunity to discuss this important matter. As previously stated, it is hoped that through the implementation of the recently launched national rare disease strategy, we can increase rare disease research opportunity in Ireland. Knowing that meaningful research is being undertaken offers hope for the future as well as possibly leading to treatment options.

By building on the work already undertaken through the rare disease clinical trial network, the rare diseases research and innovation catalyst award and through participation in the European Rare Disease Research Alliance, we can foster a cohesive research environment that responds to the needs of people living with rare diseases and clinicians.

Improved engagement, collaboration and partnership nationally and internationally will help to drive strong research innovation for all aspects associated with living with rare diseases. The established national rare disease research group has outlined that a new rare disease strategy will be an important step forward in providing a structured, co-ordinated, multi-actor and strategic approach to rare diseases research in Ireland.

I will bring the case of Elizabeth, and more particularly that of her son, Leo, to the attention of the Minister. I will put that in the context of the upcoming budget as well.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.32 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 24 Meán Fómhair 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.32 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 September 2025.