



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 24 Meán Fómhair 2025

Wednesday, 24 September 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

9 o'clock

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): 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 Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the delays businesses and potential employees experience while applying for work permits.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss issues with public transport in Wicklow.

Deputy Frankie Feighan - To discuss wheelchair accessible transport for cancer patients based in the north west.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the national planning framework and the sustainable rural housing guidelines.

Deputy John Connolly - To discuss the proposal by Inland Fisheries Ireland to close the Cong Salmon Hatchery at Lough Corrib.

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 Sinéad Gibney - To discuss funding challenges for LauraLynn and the lack of children's palliative care nationally.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the new guidelines for SNA reviews 2025-26.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss capacity issues at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the need for outdoor sports facilities in Dublin 1.

Deputy Cathy Bennett - To discuss the rising cost of third level education.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the reopening of Rattoo round tower.

Deputies Louis O'Hara and Claire Kerrane - To discuss maternity services at Portiuncula University Hospital.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss recent fish kill on the Blackwater river in County Cork.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the issues in Mahon, Cork regarding the sewerage system.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss the promised restoration of the 9% VAT rate along with the need for targeted supports for rural pubs and the proposal by the VFI for a 40% reduction of excise duty on draft products for rural pubs.

The matters raised by Deputies Frankie Feighan, Pádraig O'Sullivan, Eoghan Kenny and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Cancer Services

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The radiotherapy bus, known as the "cancer bus", provides a daily service for patients travelling from Sligo to Galway University Hospital for radiotherapy treatment. The current bus is not fit for purpose as there is no wheelchair access and no toilet facility. Wheelchair access goes without saying, really. It is a bus providing a service for people who are ill and should surely have wheelchair access. Many patients require the urgent or frequent use of a toilet because of the nature of their illness. The bus has designated stops at service stations but sometimes a driver has no choice but to pull over on the side of the road.

There is clearly a huge lack of dignity for these people who are at their most vulnerable while undergoing cancer treatment. It is an unacceptable way to treat people in this day and age. I add that the radiotherapy bus is a fantastic service. I have spoken to many people who have used the bus and they cannot speak highly enough of the service and sense of camaraderie and support provided by their fellow patients while travelling to and back from Galway. However, the need for a new bus was brought up time and time again during last year's general election campaign. I was assured by both the HSE and the Minister that a new bus with wheelchair access and a toilet would be provided this year.

A working group was set up locally in March of this year to advance the purchase of a bus. However, we are still no further along. Every time I ring the stakeholders, they say they are working on it. Over the weeks and months, they have said it is imminent but no bus is here now. The current bus was secured back in 2011 through fundraising and is still funded by local charities. I thank them for their dedication and hard work on this. However, with the current cost of living many charities are finding it harder and harder to keep raising funds for vital

services. Many people believe that if patients in the north west have to travel to Galway for treatment, the HSE should be providing the bus service. That is a simple and clear statement. It is time for the HSE and whoever else is involved to provide 100% funding or matched funding for this vital oncology service. I ask the Minister of State where is the funding for the new Sligo to Galway radiotherapy service and why there is such a delay in providing it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for his question. He has raised a really important issue with what he calls the radiotherapy bus. He is right; local charities and local people who volunteer do phenomenal work. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

As the Deputy said, the bus was originally procured using one-off funding from the HSE in 2011, following on from the essential relocation of breast cancer services from Sligo to Galway. These services were relocated as part of a wider centralisation programme for cancer services. The centralisation of services is a key part of successive national cancer strategies, ensuring that expertise and resources are concentrated to provide the best possible service for patients, as this is known to have a direct benefit on patient outcomes. Since the original bus was recently retired from service, a local bus company has been providing interim transport for patients. The buses currently used, as the Deputy has quite rightly said, are not wheelchair accessible and do not have toilet facilities on board. As the Deputy said, these are two components that are really important.

The Department of Health was informed in December 2024 that the HSE Community Health Organisation, CHO, 1, as it was then, had committed to provide €100,000 towards the procurement of a new bus. The charity seeking the funding has raised €50,000 from its fundraising efforts. I believe that this amounts to over 80% of the funding required for the bus. The Department of Health recognises the significant additional burden that travelling long distances for cancer treatment can have. I reassure the Deputy that the Department is committed to ongoing engagement with the HSE and partners to find a solution that works for patients. In addition, the national cancer control programme collaborates and supports the "Travel2Care" initiative administered by the Irish Cancer Society. This transport programme is available to patients attending a designated cancer centre for cancer tests or treatment. I have also been informed that the HSE has advised that a new patient transport service also runs from Letterkenny University Hospital to Galway and commenced in August 2024. This bus is wheelchair accessible and while it does not have a toilet on board, the service facilitates comfort breaks along the route. I again take the Deputy's point that the comfort breaks might not always be at the appropriate time for a person who needs those supports.

The Department is committed to ongoing engagement with the HSE and partners to find a solution that works for patients. A total of €150,000 has been secured, including €50,000 from the fundraising efforts and well done to those involved in those efforts. An amount of €100,000 was secured from CHO 1, as it was previously known. It is now really important that the remainder of the funding, however much it is and whether it is €20,000 or €30,000, is found and the bus is up and running to provide supports for people who are very ill and going for radiotherapy treatment.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. I am happy that more than 80% of the funding required for the bus has been secured. I really thank the local charity

for raising €50,000 through fundraising efforts. This has gone on far too long. The Department is committing to ongoing engagement with the HSE and partners to find a solution that works for patients. This is going on for at least nine months. What has happened in the previous nine months has been nothing but passing the buck from one Department to the other when there is loads of money in this country.

These people - patients - deserve the best possible service in their time of need. I want to the Minister of State to go back to the Department and ensure that whoever is dealing with this bangs heads together and get a resolution as soon as possible. The people who contacted me have been very patient. I have been very patient. However, the patients who need this are putting up with a bus that is substandard. I thank the Minister of State for her reply and for coming in here today. If there is not a resolution for this in the next few weeks, we have to have a meeting with all the stakeholders, in Sligo or in Dublin, to get this situation resolved. It is simply not good enough. It is obvious that one Department is passing it on to the other, and the patients who absolutely need this vital service are going without it. I thank the Minister of State for her reply.

Deputy Mary Butler: I do not disagree with any word Deputy Feighan has said in relation to this. The fact is that we are almost there, but that is not good enough for anybody who is travelling today with regard to wheelchair accessibility and having a toilet on board for those travelling from Sligo to Galway. It is a long enough spin as it is, especially when they are going for a specific treatment to support their cancer journey. I will give the Deputy a commitment here on the floor that I will go back to the Department this morning and ask it to make contact with the old CHO 1, as we called it, to see whether a sensible approach can happen. Notwithstanding the fact that we are two weeks out from a budget, we would be hopeful that money might free up after the budget. I will give the Deputy that commitment, however. He has raised a really important item. It probably points to the question that there are *ad hoc* arrangements all over the country in relation to transportation for people with cancer who are availing of radiotherapy supports. I also want to commend the community that raised €50,000. That is not easy to do, and well done to them. As I said, €150,000 is there now. I am not really sure how much a bus would cost, but if it is 80% of it, we are not too far out. Hopefully, a solution can be found very quickly. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue.

Work Permits

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for being here this morning to take the question. I want to discuss the delays businesses and employees are experiencing when applying for work permits, particularly permits for haulage companies. I am under no illusion as to the gravity of the situation. I understand there has been an unprecedented volume of applications for these permits over recent years. Nonetheless, there are significant problems. There is a particular problem in my constituency of Cork North-Central and in my neighbouring constituency of Cork East where most of the haulage businesses in the south are based.

I am regularly contacted by companies regarding delays in processing and accessing work permits for employees, particularly outside of the EU. There is already a shortage of haulage drivers, as we know. They were recently added to the critical skills list as a profession. The

Irish Road Haulage Association warned earlier in the month of a severe driver shortage, which could impact the supply of goods across Ireland in the lead-up to Christmas. The association has been clear in its calls for urgent intervention to assist the sector.

I note that the Oireachtas transport committee recently cited three key concerns. One of those concerns is the barrier to international recruitment, including time-consuming administrative processes across multiple Government Departments for hiring qualified drivers. Speaking from my own experience in this regard, some of these applications have been going on in excess of 12 months. The Department, in response to parliamentary questions, will often cite that there is a lack of information or there is incorrect information on the application, but the turnaround time and the lag in between the processing of those various correspondences is very long and drawn out. A company that contacted me earlier can be used as an example. In early March 2024, it initially contacted me about a work permit issue, which was eventually resolved, but an issue then presented with visas, and they are still outstanding to this day. That is a year and a half. The process appears disjointed, likely due to the number of Departments involved. It is my understanding that a haulier could face a two-year wait to hire a driver from a non-EU country, consisting of five different Departments.

Surely it is well acknowledged right across the floor at this stage that between the visas and the work permits, something falls down in between. Regardless of whether it is the time lag I referred to earlier or a cross-departmental lag, it is contributing to the excessive waiting list problem we are experiencing. Surely somebody needs to look at how we can co-ordinate the Departments better to streamline this service to the benefit of everybody because we are crying out for these drivers. I do not think there is anybody in this Chamber who has not been approached by business people like couriers, hauliers and people in other professions. They are urgently seeking these drivers. Can the Minister of State confirm if he or his senior Minister have met cross-departmentally with the Departments of transport and justice to streamline the cross-departmental employment status of these employees? Can he also advise the steps that his Department is taking to address ongoing delays? Can he advise if he or his Department are engaged with the Irish Road Haulage Association?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Burke, who could not be here this morning. I welcome the opportunity to address the issue of employment permit processing and its impact on businesses and prospective employees.

Ireland operates a managed, demand-led employment permits system under the Employment Permits Act 2024. This system supports our labour market by enabling non-EEA nationals to take up employment in sectors where genuine skills or labour shortages exist. It is underpinned by defined eligibility criteria and a statutory review mechanism for refused applications. The Department has made significant progress in recent years to improve the efficiency of the system in response to rising demand. In 2024, we issued a record 39,400 permits from 46,600 applications received. The launch of employment permits online, EPO, in April 2025 marked a major digital transformation, introducing a modern, cloud-based system that streamlines how permits are submitted, processed and tracked. As with any system transition, some short-term pressures have emerged. However, the Department continues to prioritise the timely processing of applications and remains focused on maintaining a high

standard of service. Turnaround times remain well below the levels experienced during peak demand periods and compare favourably with international norms. The new system's enhanced validation features are already helping to reduce refusals on technical grounds, and this in turn is expected to ease pressures on appeals. The Department has also allocated additional resources to ensure that initial applications are processed as efficiently as possible, while continuing to improve appeal timelines.

Appeals processing has seen increased volumes, particularly in the food and hospitality sector. Many of these relate to revised eligibility criteria for chef roles. The Department is actively working to reduce appeal wait times and expects improvements as the system stabilises. I am not aware of any specific delays in the processing of employment permits. However, in an operation of this scale, it is to be expected that applications will be at various stages of processing. Some may take longer due to additional checks or because they are subject to appeal, both of which are standard features of a robust and fair system. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment remains focused on ensuring the employment permits system is agile, fair and responsive to Ireland's evolving labour market.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State. I know it is not his direct remit, and I appreciate him coming in and delivering the script, but there is very little information in relation to how many applications people are currently waiting for, and there is no information in relation to numbers waiting in excess of three, six and 12 months. I ask the Minister if State to bring that back in order that the information could be provided to us by way of supplementary information. It would paint a picture for us. I do not think it is endemic to my part of Cork. Deputy Eoghan Kenny is in north Cork, and I assume he is hearing the same. I would appreciate if the Minister of State could take that back to the officials to give us numbers of how many people are waiting and for certain periods of time be they in excess of six, 12, 18 months and so on.

The Minister of State said that any system needs to be agile. That goes without saying, but I am genuinely saying to him that from the cases I have been dealing with, the system is far from agile. We are talking about turnaround times of three months just to get an acknowledgement and a letter back. All being fair, if people submitted the correct information at the time of application, there might be no need for supplementary information and all that, and I take that as a given.

Nonetheless, the system is far from agile because, like any system, in particular an online system, there will be mistakes and errors, people ticking the wrong boxes or whatever. I do not think it is fair to describe the system as agile.

I would appreciate if the Minister of State could make available the numbers I have requested. The reply states the Department is working actively to reduce appeal wait times, but it has provided nothing in terms of statistics or facts. Rather, it is about broad strokes such as a reference to reduce appeal wait times. The very least I would expect from an answer is for the Minister of State to say the Department has reduced appeal wait times by 20% in the past year and by 40% over the past three years. Again, the answer is lacking detail. I would appreciate if the Minister of the State could take my comments back to the Minister.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke. I heard the issues the Deputy raised and I hear them in my office. There are many delays in certain types of work permits, in particular in the transport sector. There are many transport companies in the west of Ireland, in particular Galway. I have met many and one of their major issues is trying to source drivers. In terms of bringing in drivers from abroad, the work permit system is taking a lot longer than it should. I will bring back the Deputy's comments to the Minister and Department. I will not read out my closing statement because it is the same as what I said at the beginning. I will ask the Minister whether something can be done to speed of these applications. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue.

Water Pollution

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The Minister of State will be well aware that on 11 August this year members of the Mallow angling group reported dead fish in the River Blackwater which, in turn, led to an investigation by Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, Cork County Council and the Marine Institute. Fish mortality in the River Blackwater is on a scale that we have never before seen in this country. It is heartbreaking for the wildlife and natural habitat of the area. I would like to note that the committee on the environment has scheduled a meeting for the agencies concerned to come before it on 30 September and I want to thank the Chair for his engagement on that.

However, significant concerns still remain unanswered. The bottom line is that we still do not know what killed upwards of 40,000 fish in the Blackwater, which includes 40 km of water. That is quite extraordinary. I do not present myself as any expert in the area and I am not a scientist in any way, shape or form, but there has to be some evidence of the particular chemical agent, which was referred to by IFI, that killed these fish and polluted our water. The distress this has caused among many communities along the river is quite extraordinary and the outpouring of grief in the community is huge.

People, including me, have come to realise the importance of the river, and have realised the extent of pollution within our rivers across the country. This ecological disaster has taken quite an emotional toll on anglers, regular users of the river and members of our communities. I know many people who have fished on the Blackwater for upwards of 50 years and it has been a deeply distressing and depressing situation to be in for the past month. Added to this is the lack of communication and answers. A level of anger remains in Mallow and its environs, and I am right there with the people on that.

On the State agencies, I appreciate the fact that this was an extraordinary event that took place on the Blackwater. I was, and still am, dumbfounded by the lack of detail and communication from all State agencies involved in this ecological disaster. I attended a meeting in Mallow GAA sports complex, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley - it is much appreciated that he came and met the people of Mallow - and State agencies in late August.

The presentation given on the day by the IFI was nothing short of a disgrace. I, along with many members of the community, left the meeting with more concerns and questions than answers. The presentation consisted of four slides, two of which contained one word. If it was not such an important issue, it would have been extremely comical that a State agency in front

of us was giving a presentation that, with all due respect, could have been given by a primary school child. That is not disrespectful. I fully believe the level of detail and communication afforded to the members of the community that morning was disgraceful.

Along with that, people did not know about the meeting. As the local TD, I have lived in Mallow for 25 years and did not know the IFI was coming to present to the community, and neither did members of the community. Only for the fact that a member of the public saw the information on the IFI website that morning, people would not have been made aware of the meeting. If I was reading between the lines, I presume that was the intention, namely not to have a significant number of people attend.

As the local TD, I should be allowed to act as a go-between between the State agencies and the constituents I represent. However, getting people to answer the phone or give concrete answers to my questions was extremely hard, which led to huge public anger. The fundamental issue is that our rivers across the country are not being protected. They are being constantly polluted by individuals, companies or State agencies. They are seen as some sort of a dumping ground for waste and, as horrific as it is to say, we have come to accept that. However, we will not accept it in Mallow. In plain English, we want to know how, when and who polluted the River Blackwater, killing upwards of 40,000 fish and destroying an entire ecosystem.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, who could not be here. I thank Deputy Kenny for raising this important issue and allowing me to update the House on matters relating to it. I want to begin by acknowledging the importance of the very serious kill that occurred on the River Blackwater and its tributaries near Mallow, County Cork, last month and I wish to emphasise that the Government fully recognise the enormous impact this incident has had on local communities, anglers and users of this important river catchment.

Since becoming aware of the incident, the Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries and marine, Deputy Dooley, has been in close contact with IFI and other relevant agencies and he has visited the site on two occasions to consult with the local community and anglers. The Minister of State chaired a well-attended town hall meeting in Mallow between agencies and stakeholders, principally anglers and their representatives. Officials in the Department have also been working closely with IFI and other agencies to co-ordinate public updates and to ensure information is being released as it becomes available.

To ensure that a co-ordinated and thorough response is in place, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, established an inter-agency group last month, co-ordinated by the IFI, which includes the EPA, Marine Institute, Cork County Council, the local authorities water programme, Uisce Éireann, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, and the HSE. The function of this group was to pool necessary resources and expertise across multiple bodies to provide for a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to addressing and investigating this fish kill. The group has already met on several occasions in the last month, including twice under the chairmanship of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, and met most recently on 22 September to agree and sign off on a draft report concerning the investigation.

Over the last month, extensive investigations and testing have been carried out by the relevant agencies and all potential pollution sources in the area have been examined. While pathology testing carried out by the Marine Institute indicated possible exposure to some form

of environmental insult or water-borne irritant was likely to have caused or contributed to the incident, no definitive cause for the fish kill has been identified in any of the test results. Unfortunately, this is not unusual. In some cases, the triggering factor has either dissipated or is not detectable by the time an investigation commences, making identification impossible.

A significant mortality of fish has occurred, primarily of the trout species. While it will take time for stocks to fully recover, the river remains open for fishing and healthy stocks are present. Importantly, the results of ongoing monitoring and testing indicate that the river continues to be safe, including for angling, with no water quality issues currently detected. All agencies will continue to carry out ongoing monitoring and routine surveys and inspections in the Blackwater catchment and more widely across other water courses.

A full incident report is being completed by the inter-agency group involving a review of actions taken by all agencies, including full and comprehensive findings from all investigations and recommendations for future action relating to the River Blackwater catchment and other river ecosystems.

On behalf of the Government and the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, I thank local anglers and community members who provided vital information to IFI staff during the course of this investigation.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I appreciate it. I fully recognise the Government's response to this. To be fair to them, the Ministers of State, Deputies Dooley and O'Sullivan, have taken calls from me and have recognised the fact that a significant ecological disaster that has affected many species and wildlife has taken place on the River Blackwater. My issue lies solely with the State agencies involved, particularly IFI. Trying to get those agencies on the phone is next to impossible. Trying to get a response from them as to the reassurances I possibly bring back to local anglers, other regular users of the river and members of the community is nearly impossible.

No definite cause for the fish kill has been identified in any of the test results. The IFI website refers those results indicating that some sort of chemical agent was the cause of the issue. I call on the IFI to give some sort of reassurance and a definite answer in plain English to ordinary members of the public. It is very difficult to understand the results that are being presented to people. That has to be recognised.

The fact that it is going to take upwards of ten or 12 years for the river to be fully restocked in terms of trout and perhaps even longer for salmon is quite difficult to understand. Some reassurance has to be given to local anglers. In particular, I want to mention Mr. Conor Arnold from the Killavullen Angling Club who owns an angling company that operates on the river. What happened has had a detrimental impact on his business. I want to be in a position to reassure the public. To be fair, the Government's response has been quite good, but I have serious difficulty with the State agencies and their lack of accountability.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Deputy for his remarks regarding the Government's response to this. I reiterate that the Government takes this significant fish mortality very seriously. As the House is aware, farmers have been asked to escalate their efforts in respect of water quality protection. State agencies must do the same. Moreover, there is a duty on

State bodies and actors in the public sector to take a lead in ensuring that the risk of pollution incidents and events is minimised. Incidents of this nature are a significant source of concern because of their devastating ecological impact on local ecosystems. They should not happen. I assure the House that no effort will be spared in the context of seeking to prevent or minimise the advent of further incidents of this nature.

It is deeply regrettable that the extensive work carried out to establish the cause of this incident has not yielded any significant results. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, has requested a comprehensive interagency report on the investigation into the incident. That report will be important in the context of understanding how we can streamline our cross-agency response to these incidents and ensure that we are identifying the source of pollutants and irritants in our catchments as quickly as possible. It is essential that our agencies work with all stakeholders to ensure that our prevention compliance and incident response actions are as effective as possible. Now that the investigation is concluding, it is imperative that lessons are learnt in order that we will be in a stronger position in the context of ensuring the prevention of events of this nature in the future. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

Wastewater Treatment

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This matter relates to issues that the communities in Mahon and Blackrock in the south-east of Cork city are experiencing. Fundamentally, the answers people are looking for is how and when the problem that exists is going to be fixed. They have not received such answers. When a resolution will be found is not something the communities in question have a sense of at this point.

The main issue is a foul odour that can be smelled in the open air. This has been the case for four weeks. The odour is legitimately and correctly being linked to sewage issues. However, residents can also smell it from their sinks and toilets. It is not so much that there is matter emerging; it is the odour itself. People are quite reasonably concerned about the health implications of this for them and the community in general. Unfortunately, this is not the first sewage-related issue in that part of the city. Not far away on Monahan Road, there were issues regarding a sewage overflow near the marina earlier this year. The Minister of State may have heard about that.

I have been in contact with Irish Water a number of times over the past couple of weeks. The most recent response I received referred to early contractor involvement, ECI, works going on at Atlantic Pond and Ballinure to upgrade the pumping stations there. Part of these works include septicity dosing at Atlantic Pond due to the low flows and high temperature in the network during the summer months. That was basically the nature of the update I received. The concerns that exist seem to relate to the Mahon pumping station and possibly one other station.

In response to the update I received two weeks ago, I made further inquiries. I have not yet receive a reply.. The fundamental questions people are asking are as follows. First, is the explanation I received satisfactory? I am not sure that it is. The community is not convinced that it is. Would septicity explain the foul smell? If so, how does the relevant process work? More crucially, when will the dosing be concluded and when can the smell be expected to be gone? When is this matter going to be brought to a conclusion?

There has not been any communication about this matter. Irish Water has merely told us that it is trying to address it. In the almost two weeks since I submitted my questions, I have not received any clarification on the issues raised. To be totally frank, from speaking to former employees of Cork City Council and people who would have worked in the water section there, their contention is that the pumping stations are operating above capacity. They indicate that new connections have been added that the pumping stations were not built to accommodate and that the level of maintenance and checks carried out at these locations is not what it would have been four or five years ago. In other words, these pumping stations are not receiving the attention they would have received in the past.

We need to get to the bottom of this. What the people of Mahon, Blackrock, Ballintemple and the surrounding areas are looking for is a clear sense of how this is going to be fixed and when it is going to end. It needs to end. There are questions as to whether there are implications for public health. People have reasonable concerns in that regard. They need to know that this is going to be brought to a conclusion.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire for raising this issue. I imagine that he experienced frustration during the summer and has probably waiting for an opportunity to highlight this matter in the Dáil. Perhaps he could provide some feedback on whether this malodour was at a heightened level during the summer months. We had a pretty dry June and July, with high temperatures and low rainfall. There probably was not much flow in the system, if that makes sense. I am not an engineering expert, but my understanding is that this can lead to malodours.

We had a similar issue with a brand-new system in Courtmacsherry. What happened was that because the sewage had to travel such a distance from Timoleague to Courtmacsherry, the malodour was exacerbated in areas where it was settling and remaining stagnant. That is pretty much the explanation Uisce Éireann is giving in this instance.

The response is perhaps not much different from the one Deputy Ó Laoghaire received two weeks ago, but I will endeavour ensure that he gets clarity on the other issues he has raised.

Uisce Éireann informs me that during the summer months, it is not unusual to see a seasonal spike in odour instances across the country. Odours can be more pronounced for a variety of reasons, including prolonged warm or dry weather, humidity, reduced wastewater flows, increased biological activity and seawater infiltration, wind direction and agricultural activities can also be contributing factors.

As the Deputy outlined, the primary cause of the odour locally is septicity in the wastewater network. When wastewater becomes stagnant and oxygen levels drop, hydrogen sulphide gas is produced, resulting in strong, unpleasant smells. This is exacerbated by low flows and high temperatures, particularly during the summer months. That was the explanation I was given in terms of what we experienced locally in the Courtmacsherry-Timoleague area. I wonder if that is what is happening in this instance.

The Deputy will know from the response he received that Uisce Éireann is making improvements and is carrying out early contractor involvement, ECI, works at Atlantic Pond

and Ballinure to upgrade the sites there. As part of these works, Uisce Éireann will be introducing septicity dosing at Atlantic Pond.

That is where specific chemicals are introduced that have an impact in terms of reducing the malodour. The idea is to reduce that stale malodour during the summer months when flows are low and temperatures are high.

In summary, Uisce Éireann is aware of the issues. The Deputy has asked for clarification in terms of getting a bit more evidence as to whether what Uisce Éireann is saying is producing these malodours is factual. I have seen in my personal experience where this has been the case. If further works are required in this case, however, I know that, in the situation where I am, an extra pumping station is the solution. Perhaps Uisce Éireann needs to go a step further and inquire if an extra pumping station is needed in this case, too, to increase the flow so there is not that stagnant sewage and malodour. Uisce Éireann is going to continue to monitor the situation there, but it is also talking about reviewing and updating operational procedures as needed to ensure a long-term resolution in the area. If I can give the Deputy and the residents of Mahon and the Blackrock area any chink of light, it is that Uisce Éireann is open to reviewing the situation so that a long-term solution can perhaps be built there.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank the Minister of State. It is important that representations are made from the offices of the Minister of State and-or the Minister to Uisce Éireann in relation to this issue. I say this because the response seems to offer two potential causes for the malodour without necessarily nailing the company's colours to the mast as to whether it is the low water levels and the summer, the septicity, or a mixture of both. I am unclear on that.

Regarding the weather, this issue originated in late August. Obviously, there was good weather then, but we have had periods of rain since and I think there was a smell as recently as two or three days ago. There has been rain in that period now, so I am not sure that dry and hot weather alone is the answer to why the issue exists. It is not clear from the answer today or the correspondence I have received that septicity dosing itself causes malodour. I know it is intended to address malodour, but it is not clear whether it causes the problem itself, either for a short or medium time.

The fundamental issue here is that this problem is continuing. It has still been an issue in the last couple of days and there has been no indication from Uisce Éireann that it is going to be brought to a conclusion. That is the key bit of information we need. We need a timeline for when this issue is going to be resolved. If it is the case that further infrastructure is needed, then I think that needs to be communicated so people have a sense of when interventions like this are going to be needed.

I do think there is a bit of an issue here. Problems have arisen in two nearby areas in the last eight or nine months. Is this a sewerage system in that part of the city that is struggling to cope? That potentially seems to be an issue of capacity but also an issue with maintenance. I have spoken to former contractors who worked for the council in this area and they say the level of checks happening now is not what it should be and is not what it used to be.

The big issue here is the timeline. If the Minister of State can try to get Uisce Éireann to give a timeline of when this problem is going to be resolved, the people of Mahon and Blackrock would appreciate it.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Minister, Deputy Browne, apologised that he could not make it here to deal with this question personally, but we work collaboratively within the Department anyway. I will absolutely undertake to try to get more detail and a timeline. Regarding the cause of the issue, septicity is the cause of the odour. The untreated sewage at this point remains stagnant *en route* to the treatment plant, so it is not necessarily a situation where the treatment plant is not working. I am sorry to keep harping back to my own example, but the treatment plant in Courtmacsherry is working perfectly. The flow stops, though, where the raw sewage is being transported to the treatment plant and that is where we get the septicity. The chemical being added is the way of treating and trying to remove the odours. That is my understanding of the treatment process Uisce Éireann is incorporating in what it is doing in the Mahon area and in this instance. It may be the case, however, that the approach is not going to work and there may be a case for an extra pumping station to increase the flow so there is not the septicity and stagnant water. The Deputy is looking for clarity, more accurate answers and timelines, and I undertake to get those timelines for him.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): As we have finished Topical Issues, we will suspend the House.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 9.45 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 9.45 a.m. and resumed at 10 a.m.

Child Poverty and Homelessness: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Mark Wall: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the number of children in consistent poverty nearly doubled in 2024 to 8.5 per cent, rising by over 45,000 in one year to 104,780, up from 4.7 per cent in 2023;
- the research by Economic and Social Research Institute shows one in five children, over 225,000, live in families below the poverty line when housing costs are accounted for;
- the cost-of-living crisis is deepening with annualised food price inflation in August up by 5 per cent;
- Ireland already has some of the most expensive energy costs in the world, and suppliers are now increasing their rates by over 12 per cent for the winter ahead;
- over 300,000 households are in arrears on electricity bills, and nearly 175,000 in gas arrears, while the moratorium on disconnections only covers the Christmas period;

— there were 5,014 homeless children in emergency accommodation at the end of July, an increase of 14 per cent in a year;

— the reduced funding available for the Tenant in-Situ Scheme is not enough to meet demand, and local authorities do not have sufficient resourcing for the purchase and repurposing of vacant and derelict properties; and

— the School Meals Scheme has been rolled out across primary schools, but remains unavailable to far too many children in schools not signed up to the scheme;

recognises that:

— budgets are about choices, and regrets that the Government intends to spend over €630 million a year to reduce Value Added Tax (VAT) on food and catering hospitality, while the number of children living in consistent poverty and homelessness continues to increase; and

— the reduction in VAT:

— will be of most benefit to those businesses with the highest turnover;

— will not be passed on to customers;

— will not be reflected in better pay and conditions for workers; and

— will not address the underlying issues facing the hospitality sector; and

calls for in Budget 2026:

— the €630 million cost of an untargeted VAT reduction, instead be committed to measures to relieve child poverty and homelessness, the improvement of public services, and reduction in waiting lists for disability and health services;

— the urgent implementation of a targeted rate of child benefit, a new child income support payment - to address the shocking rise in child poverty;

— a ban on the eviction of children into homelessness, and legislation to prioritise the housing needs of homeless families;

— the removal of the restrictions introduced in March 2025 on the Tenant in-Situ Scheme so it is demand led, and the resourcing of local authorities to tackle the scourge of vacancy and dereliction; and

— the introduction of targeted energy payments, an extension of the moratorium on disconnections, an increase to the Fuel Allowance payment and widened eligibility to include those on the Working Family Payment.

This Government is presiding over record levels of child poverty and homelessness. There are now over 5,000 homeless children in Ireland and one in five children or more than 225,000 children live in families who have incomes below the poverty line. Over 300,000 households are in arrears on their electricity bills and almost 175,000 families are in arrears on their gas bills, not to mention that food prices have risen by more than 5%. Let me be clear. When over 5,000 children are homeless, we are no longer in a housing crisis, but an emergency and we need to act like it.

Instead of emergency measures to address spiralling child poverty and homelessness, the Government is hellbent on wasting more than €600 million on a non-targeted VAT rate reduction for the big hospitality lobby. Just over half of that money could, as the Minister will be aware, abolish the carer's means-test in the morning. The Government has utterly failed the children of Ireland. Childhood lasts a lifetime and unless we take radical action, we are likely to see the impact of Government failure and inaction on future generations.

Budget 2026 must be a cost-of-living budget. We cannot return to the previous "Late Late Show" style of one-for-everyone-in-the-audience budgets. The Labour Party's motion today puts forward real and meaningful measures that would help to support many working families who are struggling to keep the lights on and food on the table. We need a radical reset to address child poverty and homelessness. We need a policy reset that lifts households out of poverty and provides a basic standard of living so that no household is left behind. It is more than disappointing that the Government will oppose this motion. I sincerely hope that many on the Government side of the House will take a good long look at themselves and at exactly where their priorities lie.

Day in, day out, almost 40 struggling families sit in my office or contact my office because they are unable to find housing. They are worried about their children's future. A father recently told me that his landlord is selling the home they have rented for ten years. He is being made redundant and has until November to find a place to live. There are only 12 houses available to rent in Kildare for this family. A number of young mothers who are trapped in homeless hubs have to travel from Dublin or one end of Kildare to the other just to get their children to school. The Minister can just imagine the pandemonium each morning when people living in homeless accommodation in Lucan, County Dublin have to get their three children to Athy, County Kildare in time for school. These children cannot have their friends over to play because there is nowhere to play as they share a room with their entire family. Unfortunately, this is the reality of this Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government.

I am dealing with six families at the moment who are trying to access the tenant in situ scheme. I have been calling on the Minister for housing for months to increase the funding for Kildare County Council to address the demand and prevent more families entering into homelessness. In the recent announcement that was again trumpeted by the Minister, an additional €50 million was put forward by the Government. Kildare County Council received no funding. In my opinion and that of many others, Kildare County Council is being penalised because it does its best to remove families as quickly as possible from homelessness, which seems to be the criterion set by the Minister for housing for this additional funding. Yet, at the end of August this year, there was a 50% increase in families in Kildare who are in homeless accommodation for more than 12 months. The questions remain. What should these 12 families now do? Do they simply not count?

In a rich country, we are again failing the most vulnerable in society. We are now running just to stand still. We need to increase funding for the tenant in situ scheme across all counties to support families facing homelessness. This funding must be dynamic and allow local authorities to respond to the level of need in their area. No child should ever be made homeless.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I completely agree.

Deputy Mark Wall: I hope that is something we can all agree on in this House. An eviction ban on cases where children are involved should help to provide some respite for the many households that are struggling. We can help to protect future generations and that would lead to a long-lasting, positive outcome for Ireland's young people. The eviction ban during the Covid-19 pandemic prevented people entering homelessness at a time of enormous uncertainty and, most important, protected vulnerable children.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I second this motion and pay tribute to my colleague, Deputy Wall, and the rest of my colleagues for bringing it forward.

Almost 250,000 children in this country live in poverty. That is one in five children living in poverty. That is a damning indictment of a Government of a country, which this year can boast that among EU member states it has the healthiest set of public finances, the highest rate of economic growth, the highest rate of domestic demand, the lowest rate of harmonised index inflation and a general Government budget that is in surplus. In this context, how can we be a shining leader among EU member states in a country that has had budget surpluses for seven of the past nine years, during which Fine Gael has been in power, propped up by and then joined by Fianna Fáil? These figures mean that the children in this country are living in a shameful paradox of plenty.

It is not that in those nine years we have been moving from the bad situation of the economic crash to a better one. No. The number of children in consistent poverty almost doubled in 2024, rising by 45,000 children in one year alone. Despite rising wages, real household incomes, particularly among the lowest income households, have fallen in recent years. Thanks to important research by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, we can now point to findings that show that lower income households experienced inflation of 7%, while better-off households experienced a rate that was two thirds lower at 5%. The reality is that lower income households cannot avail of the multi-purchase deals. They cannot put solar panels on their homes. They are exposed to the sharp end of the cost-of-living crisis. The Minister for Social Protection and other Ministers come in here and trot out figures to show that inflation is down and that the energy crisis is not as bad as it once was. That is not the case. The rate of inflation may have eased, but prices have remained very high and the reality is that the cost-of-living crisis is hitting lower-income households the hardest.

We did not come here today just to give out. We came with proposals, which the Government is disgracefully opposing. Child poverty cannot be turned around overnight. The roots of child poverty, including joblessness, low pay and extortionate private rents, cannot be turned around quickly. However, the Government can ensure that no more than 5,000 children are living in homeless accommodation coming into this winter. The Government can introduce an immediate ban on any child being evicted into homelessness. The stories coming into my and other offices of families facing notices to quit are harrowing. I am dealing with a family at the moment who have been on the housing waiting list for ten years. They are number six in their area of Dublin City Council and they are overholding. They have nowhere to go. The mother has had to reduce her hours because her child has a disability. She cannot get services for that child. The family has been forced into poverty by the Government because of failures in housing and a failure to provide adequate services for her child who badly needs them.

One of the longer term measures the Government should have taken and now needs to take is the second tier child benefit payment. The Minister's Government and the previous Government have sat on their hands on this. The Minister said it would take a period of approximately two years to put it in place. He has offered all the reasons it cannot be put in place now and not an iota of progress has been made by the Department of Social Protection in the 13 years since the advisory group on tax and social welfare issued its report at the height of the recession. I was on that advisory group and the biggest issue was the integration of the tax and welfare systems. In a country that is home to the Europe, Middle East and Africa, EMEA, headquarters of the biggest tech firms in the world, we cannot seem to get our acts together and integrate the two systems.

The second biggest issue of the time was that our report could not have a cost impact on the public finances. Well, we live in a very different country now. We have lived in a very different country over the last decade, but nothing has been done to progress this. No one is denying that it is complicated or that there could be unforeseen losses that we need to mitigate, but the reality is we need to introduce the second-tier child benefit payment because for those families it is crucial that we ensure the State supports them out of poverty into work.

Deputy George Lawlor: It gives me no great pleasure this morning to stand in this historic Chamber not just as a public representative but as a citizen of this nation deeply troubled by the reality that in our modern democratic republic, children are going to bed hungry, cold and without a place to call home. Let us all let that sink in. In 2025 thousands of children are homeless – 5,000 children - and thousands more live in poverty so deep it robs them of their dignity, potential and hope. These are not distant problems. They are happening in our constituencies, schools, hospitals and streets. They are happening on our watch and on this Government's watch and of that of the government before it. What are we doing about it? If we are not here to protect the most vulnerable - the child sleeping in a car, the child missing meals, the children who think they do not matter - then what is the purpose of this Chamber? This motion, which sadly the Government is opposing, is not just a policy proposal; it is a moral reckoning. It is a call to conscience and a demand that we stop managing this crisis and start ending it. We have to stop treating homelessness as a housing issue alone. This is a childhood issue and an issue of trauma and justice. A child who grows up without a stable home is more likely to suffer from anxiety, fall behind in school or face lifelong disadvantage. This is not just a personal tragedy, it is a national failure and it is a failure that is happening on our watch and that of the Government.

Poverty is not just about income; it is about exclusion and shame. It is about children who cannot afford to go on school trips, who wear shoes with holes or soles falling off, or who pretend they are not hungry because they know their parents are doing their best. It is about the silent suffering that too often goes unseen. When we see it we have to act. As this motion states, the ESRI research shows that one in five children, over 225,000, live in families below the poverty line when housing costs are accounted for. How can this Government justify spending over €630 million a year to reduce VAT on food and catering hospitality while the number of children living in consistent poverty and homelessness continues to increase? This reduction in VAT will benefit those businesses with the highest of turnovers such as McDonald's, KFC or Burger King and will certainly not be passed on to customers or reflected

in better pay and conditions for workers. Nor will it address the underlying issues facing the hospitality sector, as the motion says.

Supporting this motion means building homes - not just units - and communities. It means ensuring that no child goes to school hungry. It means increasing social supports so that families are not forced to choose between rent and food. It means investing in wraparound services, mental health, education and healthcare, all of which lifts children out of crisis and into possibility. It also means listening to the parents who feel forgotten, the teachers who see daily the effects of poverty, and the children themselves who are wise beyond their years because their life has made them grow up too fast. It also means we need courage that we will not allow the famous market forces to solve this because we all know that will never happen. We see it daily. We need the courage to say that charity alone is not enough, and to legislate boldly to fund generously and act decisively.

This is not just about economics; it is also about values. What kind of Ireland do we want? Do we want an Ireland that turns away from suffering or one that meets it head-on with compassion and resolve? We have the resources - God knows we have more resources than we have ever had - and we have the knowledge. What we need is the will. We need problem solvers and not problem finders. Let us be the generation of parliamentarians that ended child homelessness and refused to accept that child poverty is inevitable. Let us be the generation that looked into the eyes of every child and said: "You matter, you are seen, you are loved and you will not be left behind". I urge every Member of this House to support this motion not out of political obligation but out of human decency. I ask the Government to reflect on its opposition to this motion because every child deserves a warm bed, a full belly and future filled with possibilities.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Over 225,000 children live below the poverty line in this country. How are families meant to get out of poverty in Ireland in 2025? Food is getting more and more expensive. Food is not an optional extra. It is an everyday basic need. People are working to the bone. Parents are skipping meals to ensure their children are fed. Coming into winter, once again energy costs are going up. Heating one's home, cooking meals and refrigerating food are all basic necessities and people are being continually squeezed more and more. How is anyone meant to get out of that situation? If you are constantly working just to tread water, where is the hope for better coming from? Wages have not nearly kept up with inflation. Everyday basics get more and more expensive. Running a car is getting more and more expensive. Insurance costs are exorbitant. The NCT has gone up in cost. Road tax is more expensive if you have an older car. What are you supposed to do if that is the only car you can afford?

When it comes to housing, rent in Ireland is incredibly expensive. Getting a social home has a years-long waiting list. If you can get a mortgage, you will pay huge repayments and it could take 35 years before you will finally own your own home in your 70s. The future that successive governments have presented us with is incredibly bleak. Since 2016 a paltry total of 99 homes have been purchased under the tenant in situ scheme by Cork County Council. That is under 100 homes purchased in a nine-year period. That figure is quite pathetic.

The Government parties have presided over this housing crisis for nine years. In those nine years, they have seen homelessness figures soar along with the number of young people stuck

living in their parents' homes. They have removed an eviction ban, failed to meet construction targets and seen house prices rise and rise again. Every time we raise the issue, the Taoiseach and the Government refer to hot school meals and the free books scheme as long-term budgetary measures. He is trying to fool the people into believing that these long-term measures are working for every single family but I want to say they are absolutely not. In the middle of August, a very distressed and deeply upset mother came to me about the price of a laptop for the school where her child was going into first year. The cost of the laptop was €500. She could not pay it. I considered sending her to the credit union but that should not be a measure we have to take. A loan was not the solution. We had to apply for an additional needs payment. That parent had never applied for a social welfare payment in her life. In Nenagh, we visited The Lunch Bag during our think-in. It is one of the biggest producers of hot school meals. It is a fantastic company that has brought huge employment to the area. However, at a well-informed meeting with The Lunch Bag, we heard how the regulations and red tape introduced in late August mean that a significant number of schools, and therefore children, cannot get a hot school meal in some instances which can leave some children without a hot meal all day. The Government should not disingenuously claim both of these things as long-term budgetary measures because they are absolutely not. This is what we are seeing: children going to bed hungry. The Government is being disingenuous about a free books scheme that is not working because a majority of schools now use ICT equipment.

The Government is spending its time drafting a budget to give tax reductions to the food and catering industry while mothers and fathers are struggling to put food on the table.

The Government is focused on market supports while those who keep these industries working, the workers, are more often than not trying to get by on a minimum wage that has not nearly kept pace with inflation. It is simply a fact. If we want to socialise and spend our time off in these businesses, we need to treat those who work in these industries with the basic dignity of a wage that can support a decent standard of living so they can support their own children. That will not be achieved through tax cuts for large companies.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

— reducing child poverty and ensuring every child has the best start in life are key priorities for this Government and will be a core focus of Budget 2026;

— the Government has prioritised the reduction of child poverty through the establishment of the dedicated Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office, ensuring cross-departmental coordination to address the root causes of poverty affecting children and families;

— the increases in child poverty rates, as reported in March 2025 by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in its Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2024, are disappointing, until the release of this data, child consistent poverty in Ireland had been on a downward trend, peaking in 2013 at 12.7 per cent and falling to its lowest level in 2023 at 4.8 per cent;

— the CSO data is based on 2023 income data, and therefore does not reflect the Government's full response to the cost of living that were contained in Budget 2024 and Budget 2025;

— overall, the last two budgets each contained the largest social welfare packages in the history of the State and combined, invested €4.9 billion in communities across the country;

— this included, unprecedented increases in core social welfare rates, the largest ever increase in the Child Support Payment, an increase in the Working Family Payment, and increasing the number of people who are eligible for the Fuel Allowance;

— none of these increases are included in the latest CSO data, nor has the Government's significant investment in non-income supports for children and families during this time, such as the significant expansion of School Meals Scheme and free schoolbooks;

— the School Meals Scheme has now been expanded to enable the roll-out to all primary schools, with 3,200 schools and 550,000 children now eligible;

— in addition, over 23,000 children are availing of cold lunches, while a Holiday Meals pilot project took place this summer with 914 schools providing meals to 68,000 children;

— the Government has expanded the roll-out of free schoolbooks for all children in primary education, and more recently this has been expanded to Junior Cycle;

— the Government have announced a new Child Poverty Target of 3 per cent or less, of consistent poverty, to be achieved by the end of 2030;

— meeting this Child Poverty Target will require sustained investment over the lifetime of this Government and beyond;

— the Government is investing almost €6.8 billion in 2025 to support the delivery of social, affordable and Cost Rental homes, housing supply has increased significantly with almost 32,800 social homes delivered between 2022 to 2024;

— Budget 2025 provided an allocation of €303 million for the delivery of homeless services, an increase of €61 million or 25 per cent on the 2024 Budget allocation, in addition, €25 million in capital funding is supporting the delivery of high quality transitional and emergency accommodation for individuals experiencing homelessness;

— the Government recently announced that an additional €50 million for housing acquisitions will prioritise families in long-term homelessness;

— the Government has committed €325 million to support a second-hand acquisitions programme in 2025, allowing local authorities to target priority categories of housing needs, including families in long-term homelessness;

- the Government approved an extension of the 9 per cent Value Added Tax rate currently applied to gas and electricity to October 2025, at an estimated cost of €85 million; and

- a cross Government National Energy Affordability Taskforce has been established to identify, assess, and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability; and

acknowledges that:

- the Government is committed to further progress, building on the initiatives already introduced, targeting those most at risk, and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive in a fairer and more inclusive society; and

- the Government will utilise Budget 2026 and future budgets, to prioritise measures aimed at tackling child poverty and reducing homelessness."

The amendment outlines our determination to drive down child poverty rates and records the progress that has been made to date on this critical issue. I think we all agree that tackling child poverty and homelessness is not merely a matter of policy, but a national imperative that is rooted in our values as a Republic. The cost of inaction is measured not in economic terms but, much more importantly, in the futures of those children and in the well-being of the families across Ireland. Any child who grows up in poverty faces barriers that limit his or her potential, from poor educational outcomes and diminished health to reduced opportunities for participation in school or community life. Where unaddressed, these challenges will perpetuate cycles of disadvantage that stretch across generations.

At this point, I will apologise on behalf of the Minister for housing. He will be with us but he is currently opening 290 new homes for Tuath Housing in Citywest. He will join the debate to deal with the issues Deputy Wall has dealt with. I have already given my apologies to Deputy Wall at a previous commitment.

The Government is determined to break the cycle. We will strive to create a society that gives all children the opportunity to succeed and to maximise their potential. It is this commitment to tackle child poverty that the Taoiseach outlined at the child poverty and well-being summit held on 11 September. The Taoiseach has made it very clear that tackling child poverty and homelessness is a key priority for this Government. Speaking at that summit, Dr. Mike Ryan of the World Health Organization said that children are our most precious resource and that we cannot leave children behind. As articulated in our programme for Government, child poverty is not inevitable. Dr. Ryan also told us that day that there are no easy solutions to child poverty, which is complex and multidimensional, and that the only way to ensure our children feel they belong and that they can thrive is through shared commitment and targeted and sustained action over a sustained and continual process. He also mentioned that there can never be an end to this effort. Therefore, as a society, we must continually strive to tackle child poverty. While difficult, it is an immensely important challenge that we must and will achieve. The Government is absolutely committed to breaking the vicious cycle of child poverty in a sustained and continuing process.

Reducing child poverty and ensuring every child has the best start in life will be a core focus of budget 2026 and throughout the lifetime of this Government. Our determination to have a decisive impact on child poverty is reflected in our programme for Government commitments and in our actions since taking office. The Government established a child poverty and well-being programme office in the Department of the Taoiseach in 2023. This ensures cross-departmental co-ordination to address the complex issue of child poverty. In addition, on 10 September, we published our commitment to a new and ambitious child poverty target. This target is 3% or less in consistent poverty, to be achieved by the end of 2030. The goal is ambitious and reflects a reduction of 5.5 percentage points from the current child consistent poverty rate of 8.5%. It will require sustained investment across the whole of Government as part of a continual process. In addition to that child poverty target, the child poverty and well-being programme office is developing a dashboard of indicators, which will allow for the measurement of child poverty and well-being in a holistic manner across all of Government. In the years ahead, this new target will guide those cross-government policies and will ensure that investment is targeted at those who need it most so that we can lift as many children as possible out of poverty.

A whole-of-government approach means that, along with targeted income measures, we will focus on concrete and measurable actions in respect of areas such as housing, employment, childcare, health and education. These cross-government actions will be outlined in the successor to the national poverty strategy, the roadmap for social inclusion 2026-2030, which is currently being developed by my Department. This will be launched in the first half of 2026 and will, for the first time, have a specific focus on child poverty.

Our commitment to reducing child poverty is reflected in investment in concrete support to the families and children who are most in need. The last two budgets, those for 2024 and 2025, contained the largest social welfare packages in the history of the State. Combined, they invested €4.9 billion in communities across the country. They included increases in core social welfare rates, including child benefit. They also included the largest ever increase in the child support payment and increases in the working family payment, targeted measures that reach the families with children who are most in need. The number eligible for fuel allowance was also increased.

The Government has also invested heavily in non-income services for families and children. We have significantly reduced childcare fees through the national childcare scheme. I tell Deputy Kenny that we have expanded the hot meals scheme to all primary schools. There are difficulties with one company and its linked companies but others are standing in. Officials in my Department are working to fix that at the moment. There are a number of parliamentary questions on it tomorrow and we will go through it in detail. That is a €320 million investment on the part of the Government to address child food poverty in particular. Those glitches cannot be allowed to hide a very important programme. We delivered a holiday meals pilot project this summer, which provided meals to 68,000 children in 914 schools over the summer holidays. Free schoolbooks have also been rolled out to all children in primary school. In fairness, Deputy O'Reilly has championed the need for us to look at that scheme with a view to laptops and iPads. That is something I am anxious to do.

The increases in child poverty rates reported in March 2025 by the Central Statistics Office in its survey on income and living conditions for 2024 are very disappointing. Until the release

of this data, child consistent poverty had been on a downward trend, peaking in 2013 at 12.7% and falling to its lowest level in 2023, at 4.8%. That trend was reversed and the figure increased to 8.5% in the CSO survey on income and living conditions 2024. It is important to remember that the data collected under the SILC has a time lag. This latest data is based on 2023 income and therefore does not reflect the full response to child poverty in recent years including the measures I have just referred to. In budget 2025, the weekly personal rate increases to social welfare payments were expanded. We specifically invested €167 million in children through the largest ever increase in the child support payment, €8 per week for children aged 12 years and older.

With regard to budget 2026, we have made clear the importance of directing support to families with children who need it most. We know from research previously undertaken, which was referred to by Deputy Sherlock, that the most effective means of achieving this objective is through established targeted measures. Those measures include the child support and working family payments, which is why these will be a priority in the forthcoming budget. The payments provide targeted assistance directly linked to household income, supporting low-income families with children, and are paid to qualified households in addition to the universal child benefit.

As has been discussed, we have a programme for Government commitment to explore a targeted child benefit payment and to examine the interaction this would have with existing targeted supports. We are continuing to examine this and other approaches to ensure resources are directed at families with children who are most in need of support. There is a wide range of possible approaches. We want to ensure that all are given full consideration and to determine which will have the maximum impact in reducing child poverty. It is vital that any new approach introduced does not have unintended consequences that would leave those families and children we are trying to help worse off in the medium term. We know from discussions with the ESRI that some proposals for a second tier of child benefit would not see all affected families better off.

Some families could see a reduction in the support they receive under some of those proposed models. While that exploratory work is under way to ensure that we do not end up in that situation, and therefore a second tier payment will not be announced as part of budget 2026, specific targeted supports will be in place through the programmes I have already mentioned.

The Government fully recognises that supporting families with children on low income with housing costs, as well as supporting families in homelessness to secure sustainable housing is key to reducing child poverty. Preventing and reducing homelessness among families is a cornerstone of tackling child poverty and the Minister, Deputy Browne, will deal with that when he speaks in the debate.

On energy costs, the Government fully recognises the pressures that these costs have on families with children on low income. As a result, we have approved an extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity to October 2025, at an estimated cost of €85 million and the cross-government energy affordability task force has been asked to identify further measures.

These are priority issues for this Government. The Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, will deal with more later. They will be tackled over the

lifetime of this Government. We are determined that we will reduce child poverty and we will make lasting and sustainable progress to support children across our country.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I know the Minister, Deputy Calleary, ended by saying the Government will strive to reduce child poverty. What he should be saying is it will aim to eradicate child poverty. Not enough debates in here are about philosophy, but ultimately this is a debate about political philosophies. If you want to break that down into layman's language in relation to this issue, it is about whether we should be doing everything we can to prevent children from being homeless, sleeping with their families in a car, which I have had to deal with in the not too recent past, or whether we should give a tax break to McDonald's. This is a real issue for the Government facing into this budget, because it is either children sleeping in cars and homeless, or a tax break to Ronny McDonald. That is the choice. Ultimately, we need to break it down for the general public out there that these are the choices we, as a Chamber, collectively have to make, and which the Government will be pushing through. That is the difference between what the Government believes in and what we believe in. We do not say that too lightly, but we have to say it because we have to break it down into the choices that we have. The Government has choices.

The cost-of-living situation is chronic. I have never seen it as bad. A teacher has told me of a situation, and I support the hot school meals programme, where a student stuffed their bag with a couple of extra meals because they said "Mammy likes those meals." It is great that they actually have those meals. Where are we going as a country when a child is eyeing up excess meals from the school-based programme to bring them home because their parents need to eat? That is where we are at.

I accept the school meals programme, the back to school books allowance and the provision of books and other resources are good. However, the fact of the matter is that the escalating costs in this country across all the range of issues my colleagues mentioned is so excessive that we need to continue the targeted measures my colleagues have listed. The Government really needs to make those decisions within the next two weeks, otherwise when the budget is announced I will be coming back in here and repeating what I said at the start. The Government has a choice between trying to help children who are sleeping in cars with their families because they are homeless or giving a tax break to Ronny McDonald. Which one will the Government do?

Deputy Duncan Smith: There are swathes of people raising families in a rental system that was never designed for long-term living, with the inflationary impact of increased rental costs. The average industrial wage in this country is just over €50,000, but the average rental price in Dublin is over half the industrial wage. If we take into account all the cost-of-living increases, particularly relating to food, they have been well discussed. We have brought forward motions in relation to this. My colleague, Deputy Nash, has done great work in raising the issue of increased food costs. However, some households are worse off to the tune of €3,000 per year on food costs alone. If we look at beef, there was a 23% increase in beef prices in four months earlier this year. We are not talking about fillet steaks or premium cuts of meat. We are talking about beef mince that will go into lasagna, spaghetti bolognese and shepherd's pie, meals and staples that should last a couple of days. Ordinary families are being priced into poverty. Workers are being priced into poverty by this Government's inaction.

Rents remain too high. Not too long ago this Government asked us to rise and applaud nurses, gardaí and teachers on €35,000, €38,000 or €45,000 per year who are unable to afford so-called affordable housing schemes. Look at the other workers in those sectors, namely, the healthcare assistants, the Garda clerical staff, and the school secretaries who have been on the line in recent weeks who are earning less than their colleagues in the same industry. They are even further and further away.

The Government is gaslighting people in relation to the tenant in situ scheme, announcing more money in late summer for a scheme that is an absolute zombie scheme. I am working with numerous families who were well down the road, along with their landlords, of availing of a tenant in situ scheme but who have had the rug pulled from under them and who are now overholding, some of them over two years, and one of whom was advised not to take an allocation that they had accrued through their time on the list because a tenant in situ scheme was about to come through for them. That scheme has been pulled and they do not have a housing allocation and they are entering homelessness with a child with severe additional needs. There are 5,014 homeless children in a country that cannot stop bringing in money and that cannot stop finding extra billions. It is an absolute scandal.

One measure that will help tackle poverty is to get the community welfare officers out from behind the hatch and to decentralise the system and to give them mileage and allow them to set up clinics and meet families in towns and villages all over the country and to understand the community. They must be allowed to pay for new gas boilers when 94-year-old women in my constituency are unable to avail of them because they have to avail of the full retrofit scheme and pay up front. It is an absolute scandal.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I am proud the Labour Party has brought forward this motion. This Government has many things to be considering and reasons to be under pressure. There are 5,000 children who are homeless and that one in five children is growing up in constant poverty. That will be the legacy of this Government. Food prices are up, energy prices are up, childcare fees are up and college fees are up. Rents, when you can find the property, are out of control. That is the truth. Families have nothing left to give. The food presses are bare and the bills are in arrears. Families are turning off the lights. A mother in my constituency told me that the one small treat she had was bringing her kids out at the weekend. That is gone because her food bill has shot up by 20%. That is the reality we are living in. The gap between those who have and have not is widening every single day.

The Government talks about full employment, but what good is a job when you need two to keep the lights on and when those on disability payments, carers and low-paid workers are trapped in deep poverty.

As mentioned by the previous speaker, the Minister gutted the tenant in situ scheme, which was literally keeping people in Dublin Fingal West out of homelessness. Now I am dealing with parents getting notices to quit with absolutely nowhere to go. One mother told me she does not have enough money for bread and milk for breakfast from Tuesday to Friday. They were in the supermarket and the sister leaned over to her brother and said, "Put that chocolate bar back, we're poor". Imagine what it feels like for that kid to say that to their sibling. Imagine what it is like for a parent to hear that.

That is the Ireland we live in in 2025.

For years, children's organisations have warned that one-off payments are not the solution to poverty and that we need real systemic change. This has been ignored and instead the easy options were taken with gimmicks and promises of double payments. With no cost-of-living package this year, it seems we are pulling the ladder up behind us.

We know from decades of evidence that poverty scars childhood. However, when supports are directed at families most at risk the results are clear and fewer children go hungry, more children thrive and the gap between those who have and those who have not narrows. A second rate of child benefit would lift thousands of children out of poverty. We need a serious commitment to this in budget 2026 but it has to be targeted and not replace the measures already in place. We must remember that, when the Government claps itself on the back, families in this country are at breaking point.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Child poverty is rising. It is incredible to think that, in 2025, in one of the richest countries in the world, we have a situation whereby this generation is so much more worse off than the previous. I think of my own parents who were born in the 1960s. When they grew up, they had very little but they were never hungry. That was 60 years ago. There are serious questions, and the Government needs to have a serious look at itself, when right now today the basics and guarantees in life in Ireland do not exist any more, right down to children being hungry. It is the greatest shame of all. We hear a lot about the child poverty and well-being office in the Department of the Taoiseach when we speak about child poverty. It has been in place since 2023 but poverty is rising. This needs to be looked at again because from my read of it, it is not achieving what it should.

I listened to the Minister speak about child poverty targets. Targets are not new and missing targets is not new either. I was reminded of working on social protection policy for my party from 2016 to 2020. At the time, Regina Doherty was the Minister. By 2017, the Government realised and acknowledged it would not meet its 2020 target, which was to lift one third of children out of poverty. Targets are set and targets are missed.

As the Minister for Social Protection is here, I want to use the time I have to raise several issues. We know when it comes to the SILC data, the at risk of poverty data, the deprivation rate and the consistent poverty rate, the increases are a lot of the time with regard to one-parent families and our disabled citizens. The cost of disability payment has been promised and we have report after report. It is like the Government does reports that tell it we need a cost of disability payment but then nothing happens. Similarly on one-parent family payments, at least three times we have published proposals on establishing a child maintenance service similar to what is in place in the North of Ireland. Research has proved that, where child maintenance is paid, it can play a role in lifting children out of poverty. It needs to be looked at.

With regard to community welfare officers, the Minister will remember we tabled a motion and tried everything to stop the Government's plan to centralise community welfare officers. Last week, a gentleman came to my office whose disability allowance had been taken off him. We have been over and back and the decision is being appealed. It is an absolute nightmare. The medical assessor says he can work but his GP, who knows him best, categorically states he cannot work. I know this gentleman. He has worked since he was about 15. If he could work, he would work. He would love to work. He waited seven years for thyroid surgery in UHG, which was scheduled for last Sunday. He was going to cancel it because he did not have

the money to get to the hospital. I could not get the CWO. I had no number or name. I rang the national line, which could not put me through. It was an absolute rigmarole. In the end, he got €75, he got in and he got his surgery. That was good but it was a horrible experience for him. The CWOs should be in the community where they know Johnny and Mary and can assess the situation there and then. The system is horrendous and it is really failing people.

This man is one of several cases I now have where disability allowance has been removed from a person on a decision by a medical assessor who has never met that person and has never seen him or her but decides that person is able to work when that is clearly not the case. I do not know whether it is to reduce the money paid out on disability allowance. That man was in my office again this week. He was crying because he would not be able to feed his children after tomorrow. The last place he will go is back to the CWO after the horrendous experience. This is a pity because the vast majority of CWOs are brilliant but this is where we are at.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: What does this Government have against children? Despite the enormous resources at its disposal, thousands upon thousands of children are being left behind every year. When Fine Gael took office in 2011, there were just over 600 children officially classified as homeless. Now, it is a staggering 5,000 and continuing to rise. This means that, in the 14 years that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in one shape or another have been in charge of housing policy, tens of thousands of children have been forced into homelessness. The impact on these children is enormous. It has impacts on their physical, emotional and intellectual development, particularly when they are forced to spend two or three years in inadequate and insecure emergency accommodation.

The Taoiseach tells us that, apparently, child homelessness is a complex problem. I think this is blaming the victim of Government policy because child homelessness is not complex. It is a direct result of bad Government housing policy. There is a refusal to provide an adequate supply of social homes, particularly for those in or at risk of homelessness, and an overreliance on a private rental sector that is expensive, insecure and shrinking. The consequence of these two things is ever rising homelessness. I have not heard anything from the Minister who is present that the new housing plan will address these fundamental problems.

Thankfully, there are alternatives. Sinn Féin's alternative housing plan sets out emergency and medium-to-long-term actions needed to tackle this crisis. The Housing Commission report, which the Government continues to ignore, sets out the scale of ambition required to end homelessness and meet social housing needs. The homeless policy group, our homeless NGOs, have set out the solutions in a ten-point plan, again ignored by the Government. The problem is the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Government are simply not listening. Until this changes, more and more children will be forced into homelessness. It does not have to be this way. The Minister can make the difference. Let us see the colour of his money when the new housing plan is published, and if he is serious about tackling this problem, which he himself is making worse.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Deputies for tabling the motion because we cannot speak enough about child poverty. We on the Opposition benches have put forward plenty of solutions. We have flagged to the Government time and again issues as they arise. They arise in our advice clinics and in our offices and we make sure we bring the message directly to the Government.

In his opening remarks, the Minister for Social Protection told us the motion did not reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of child poverty and it did not reflect the significant progress made by the Government. I suppose he might forgive us for not rambling in here to give the Government a massive pat on the back, given what we see every day of the week. He told us that tackling child poverty and homelessness was not merely a matter of policy but a national imperative rooted in our values as a society. The absolute neck of him to say this. It is everybody else's fault and everybody else's problem except the Government's. We see it every single day of the week. It is heartbreaking to see parents who cannot afford to manage with their kids. It is heartbreaking when they tell us that, after they have paid the rent, for food, the exorbitant crèche fees and the fees for devices in schools because the free book scheme does not take account of them, and in many instances having been to the Society of St Vincent de Paul or the community welfare officer, they have nothing left. They are left to face their kids and tell them they have nothing left. Treats are gone. They are a thing of the past.

It is not hard to see the solutions. The solutions are very simple but the Government needs to start by recognising the facts and acknowledging the failure of policy. The number of children in consistent poverty is at 8.5% but this is doubled when we take into account the cost of housing.

If he can, I urge the Minister to imagine for a moment just how expensive it is to be poor. To live in emergency accommodation is to be reliant on fast food and takeaways, which are more expensive. When people are poor, the Government forces them into a situation whereby they have to pay for the most expensive option. People who are on the ESB meters are the same; they pay the most expensive rates. There are children in this State, in a time of plenty, who are going to bed hungry. That is a matter of Government policy and Government policy, if it changes, will address that issue.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: No child in Ireland in 2025 should grow up without a home or without hope for the future. If this Government runs its full term, every single child in Ireland will have been born and grown up under a Fine Gael Government. Thousands of those who are children now are going to look back in the years ahead and ask why did this happen and why did they have to grow up in these circumstances.

Those on the Government benches opposite are at pains to tell us how well the economy is doing, reciting statistics on low unemployment, GDP and economic growth when, in reality, child poverty has reached crisis levels in Ireland and shows no sign of improving. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. Just last month, the number of children experiencing homelessness in Ireland reached a new record, with over 5,000 children in emergency accommodation, but that does not count all of the children who are in overcrowded, impossible situations. A total of 226 of those 5,000 children come from the west of Ireland and many come from my own constituency in Mayo. The impact of what they are experiencing - being pushed into poverty and forced into impossible situations - on their physical and mental health is enormous. They are experiencing increased anxiety, developmental delays and lower educational attainment. How in the name of God are children growing up in homelessness, in impossible situations or in poverty supposed to compete with those on the other end of the scale who can afford grinds and everything else that they need in order to get the best life chances? They cannot compete because of the failures of Governments throughout their childhood that have pushed them into these situations. The isolation, stigma and impact on self-esteem of poverty do not stop when

children reach the age of 18. They continue on beyond that, with reduced life choices and widening inequality, leaving scars on those children for the rest of their lives.

I thank the Labour Party for tabling this motion today. Research from the ESRI reveals that one in five children is now living below the poverty line once housing costs are factored in. There is one thing that the Minister can do. Will he please reinstate the tenant in situ scheme? Right now, there are children that I am dealing with in my constituency who are frightened of losing their homes.

Deputy Thomas Gould: A number of Deputies have referenced the more than 5,000 children who are now homeless and living in emergency accommodation. That figure is actually much bigger because people are living in overcrowded accommodation, with three generations of families in one home, children growing up in box rooms and so on. I mean it sincerely when I say that it is going to get worse. I know that because people are in my clinic every week who are at risk of becoming homeless, who are hanging on, overstaying or living in cramped accommodation with their families, which can only last for so long. The Minister, as the Minister for housing, has done nothing. If anything, he has actually made things worse. He has stopped the tenant in situ and housing first schemes. He has also stopped downsizing or rightsizing so that three- or four-bedroom houses could come back into use because he has cut the capital budgets. These are facts.

I have one straight question for the Minister, man to man. How many children must become homeless before he finally admits that he and his Government are wrong? I asked his predecessor, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, that question when the figure was at 4,500. We are now at 5,000. How many children? Where is the accountability? Deputy Browne is the Minister for housing and the buck stops with him. Is he going to stand up and take responsibility? Is he going to do that?

We are talking here about child poverty. Sometimes, it is actually hard to see it when children are playing together but I see it in communities right across this country. My previous role was in addiction recovery and well-being and I know that the number one reason for people going into active addiction or ending up in the throes of addiction is childhood trauma. The damage that this Government, as well as previous Governments of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, is doing and has done to the children of this country is untold. In a couple of years, weeks or days, someone from Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael will stand up and talk about criminality and what is happening on the streets and about how they are going to crack down. If they looked after children who were in poverty and took them out of that poverty, they would not have to be coming out with this drivel about cracking down. The Government did not support families with children when they needed it.

On Saturday, 4 October, there will be a Raise the Roof protest in Cork. I plead with everyone to come out at 2.30 p.m. to the Grand Parade to send a message to the Government that enough is enough.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The starkest example of how unimportant child poverty and homelessness are to this Government is in its amendment to this motion. The Government's response mentions reducing child poverty but nowhere does it mention eradicating it entirely. The response also mentions that this Government has announced a target of 3% or less of

consistent poverty to be achieved by the end of 2030. Does the Government believe it is acceptable for up to 3% of Irish children to live in consistent poverty? Will it make that its campaign slogan and put it on its election posters the next time around? I think not, somehow.

The motion states that the number of children in consistent poverty nearly doubled in 2024, up to 8.5%. Research by the ESRI shows that one in five children, or more than 225,000, lives in a family below the poverty line when housing costs are accounted for. The cost-of-living crisis is deepening, with annualised food price inflation in August up by 5%, and for the first time in the history of the State, child homelessness has surpassed 5,000. These are all the result of Government policies and decisions. Does the Government listen to the ESRI, the Children's Rights Alliance or any of the other bodies and agencies that are ringing the alarm bells on child poverty? The number of children in consistent poverty rose by 78% in the last year. This amounts to over 100,000 children trapped in poverty, with advocates warning that it could take four to five generations to break this cycle. This State has the funds to end child poverty. Alternatives to the Government's position are given regularly but are ignored and this is the outcome of that. I dread to think what the figures would be like without the Drogheda Women's and Children's Refuge, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and all of the other fantastic groups operating locally in Drogheda and elsewhere around the country trying to alleviate and reduce the consequences of this Government's failure of the children of this nation. I urge the Minister to listen here today and to make a pledge to end child poverty and homelessness. I urge him not only to make that pledge, but to bloody well act on it.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Right now in Ireland, 5,000 children are homeless and more than 100,000 children are living in consistent poverty. That is only the tip of the iceberg and what the official figures are telling us. One in five children is living below the poverty line once housing costs are counted and 250,000 children in this State are in enforced deprivation. This is a State that has recorded unprecedented surpluses and in that context, children are paying the highest price for Government failure.

Let us not kid ourselves; this has not happened by accident. It is not happenstance. It is the consequence of years of underinvestment and a refusal to ensure adequate funding. It is the result of Ministers refusing to index core rates and child income supports and starving the very community infrastructure that keeps families afloat like family resource centres, youth work, community development programmes, breakfast and after-school clubs, addiction supports and local mental health supports. These services need multi-annual, ring-fenced funding. Instead, they have been left scrambling year to year. We see the impact of this across a whole litany of failures that face children every single day, including record child homelessness and the CAMHS crisis.

11 o'clock

Children are waiting unconscionably long times for disability assessments. This Government is breaking the law on therapies. I could also mention scoliosis and spinal waiting lists, shortages of school spaces, school building delays, unaffordable childcare and school transport chaos. Families are turning to food banks while parents skip meals so children can eat. The ESRI has shown today that child poverty is at crash-era levels. Barnardos has shown that almost half of families are cutting back on heating, electricity or food. Targets are set in press releases only to be missed by a mile. It does not have to be this way. Sinn Féin would do what

this Government will not. We would guarantee adequacy by benchmarking and indexing core welfare and child income supports, and introducing targeted measures for low- and middle-income families. We would cut family bills by extending fuel support to low-income working families, moving all prepaid meter households and expanding free hot school meals, schoolbooks and school transport.

Communities need to be funded with sustained multi-annual investment in family resource centres and youth and community development. We need to recruit the therapists and clinicians to end scandalous CAMHS and scoliosis backlogs. We also see a need, as Deputy Eoin Ó Broin has laid out quite clearly, to build public and affordable housing at scale to end the pipeline into homelessness and poverty, because that is the legacy of this Government. The money exists but what is clearly missing is the political will. The legacy of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry Independents is rising child poverty and homelessness. It does not have to be this way. With the right choices and the political will, we can end it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I thank the Deputy. That brings the Sinn Féin contribution to a close. The speakers from the Social Democrats have ten minutes between them.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this vital motion. It is unfortunate that the Government is opposing it. There are 5,014 children homeless in this country. When that number is thrown out, we often do not consider that each of those children is a child whose life is being damaged. It is equivalent to 220 primary school classes of children being homeless. Homelessness has doubled under this Government since 2021. These children and the 225,000 children in poverty are growing up experiencing what psychologists define as "an adverse childhood experience", which is something that causes trauma, stress and developmental delays and potentially has lifelong physical and mental health impacts on children. It is shameful that one child is homeless in a country that has never had such wealth. That there are 5,014 children homeless is an utter scandal. The truth is that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have never prioritised children. This includes the children who are made homeless and the children who are living in poverty. The Government has refused to put in place a ban on evictions because it is making housing policy for the big investor fund landlord lobby. This week is Simon week and it points out that prevention is what is needed. We need the ban on evictions, a properly resourced tenant in situ scheme and investment in prevention of homelessness to keep children in their communities where they have the support of family and friends.

A mother in my constituency who is facing homelessness because she is facing eviction from a rental home contacted me this week to tell me that Dublin City Council has told her that when she is evicted and needs emergency accommodation in the coming months, there will be no emergency accommodation available in Dublin. It is full. She will have to go to Meath, Kildare or Louth. How is her child going to go to school? How is she going to go to work? The housing crisis is absolutely out of control.

In recent weeks, I listened in disbelief to interviews with the former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar as he spoke about his time in office with no acknowledgement of the fact that he never prioritised tackling homelessness. The truth is that the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin; the current housing Minister; and previous housing Ministers from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael can waffle

on with hollow words about record economic growth and achievements, but the legacy of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael after 100 years in power is an utter failure in their primary and most important task and responsibility, as set out in the Proclamation, to ensure all children are cherished equally and to guarantee the welfare of all children. There are 5,000 children homeless and 225,000 children living in poverty. This budget must invest in housing and in supporting those who are in poverty. We can end homelessness and child poverty. It is a question of political will.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: What does it say about our State that it cannot ensure every child has an equal, just, flourishing and fun childhood? What does it say about our Government that it refuses to ensure every child has a bed to call their own? What does it say about our Cabinet that it is doubling down on its so-called attention to the issue of child poverty, rather than facing up to the facts before our eyes? Ireland is fast becoming a worse place to grow up for too many children. When I was preparing for this debate, I wondered if any of us would be here if the children who have been plunged into poverty had been the people who voted in last year's general election. I doubt it, because for the nearly 250,000 children who are experiencing poverty right now, my words and the Minister's words, respectfully, mean nothing. For the thousands of children who woke up in emergency accommodation this morning, the Minister's sentiments and my thoughts mean nothing. For the tens of thousands of children who are languishing on waiting lists for medical care, childcare, disability assessment, child or adolescent mental health services, speech and language therapy or physical or occupational therapy, the Government's track record and even weaker commitments mean nothing. It now has the audacity to seek to amend a motion that states facts. Last week, it allowed a motion from another Opposition group, calling for curfews on children and young people, for a mini-CAB to confiscate PlayStations and Xboxes and for fines for parents, to go through the House. It did not amend that motion but it is amending this one. That is shameful.

I am not here a long time, but I have learned that we cannot expect the people who caused a generational failure with regards to policy to try to fix it. What does it say about Ireland that children and families must fight, appeal, persevere, go public and fight again simply to navigate a system that seems hell-bent on keeping them out? That tells me that our State has given up on children, young people and their families.

Deputy Jen Cummins: This House can talk about many different things. Today we are talking about child poverty. I thank the Labour Party for bringing this motion forward. I have to say that talk is cheap and action is limited when it comes to child poverty and this Government's record. I worked in some of Dublin's poorest communities for close to 30 years. I do not need to remind people in this House that there was an economic boom and there have also been crashes. The economy has been shattered but it has also been fantastic. I can tell the House that in some of the homes I visited, you would not know whether there was a boom or a bust going on because the poverty was so high and so deep that it did not matter. It did not affect any change of circumstances for those families. When I visited homes where families were living in deprivation, the emptiness there never ceased to shock me. There were empty fridges, empty cupboards, no warm coats, no toothbrushes, no heating, no school supplies, no toys, no books, no games and nothing for children, but there was lots of fear, lots of shame and lots of anxiety. There was love, because not one parent wants their child or their family living in poverty.

Intergenerational poverty means that there is a risk, although it is not fate, that children will grow up to be adults in poverty. Education is a mitigating factor to help with that. However, childhood poverty or economic uncertainty is associated with lower cognitive scores and lower attainment to junior cert, and indeed, retention to leaving cert. I could talk about this all day but the point I want to make is that no matter what the Government thinks it is doing and getting right, until no child is living in poverty it has not got it right. There is a way out of this but the Government needs to want to do it. I implore the Minister to do everything he can to do it, but his record so far is not proving that he wants to do so. I ask him to listen to what people here who have expertise are saying. I ask him to go to the experts and do what they say, rather than continuing to make up things that are not working for families. There are children living in poverty today - the numbers have been shared here - and it is a disgrace.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion.

If we were to look for another way to express the concept of storing up problems, I do not think there are better words than "child poverty" and "child homelessness" to capture it. The lasting inequality and lifelong implications the Government is storing up because of its failure to deal with these crises will live with us for generations. Experiencing poverty as a child lowers life expectancy, increases risk of health issues and impacts across a range of other areas including crime, addiction, mental health, employment and education; the list goes on. With every inspirational story of people who have overcome the odds, the Government must acknowledge that thousands more are left behind. The levels of child poverty and homelessness that we currently have in this country represent a total breach of the social contract. In a country as rich as we are, it is chilling that in 2024, 104,780 children or 8.5% of our child population in Ireland, experienced consistent poverty, nearly double the rate of 2023. One in five children lives in enforced deprivation, all while we have full employment and a booming economy. How can it be that in a country where most people have jobs and we have so much money flowing in, 20% of our children are going without? It is because this Government is failing them. It can table as many amendments to the motion as it likes. These children are not just numbers; every one of them is a child who has fallen through every safety net of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments.

The Minister's Cabinet colleague yesterday trotted out the line we hear all the time that we do not have a monopoly on empathy. We know that. The people we are talking about today are some of the most voiceless in society. We in the Social Democrats and our colleagues across the left will continue to display that empathy here in the Chamber and hold the Government to account for its continued failure to deal with these crises.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have apologies from Deputy Coppinger. Our group will divide the time equally between the three of us. I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion. One thing it does very well is draw a straight line between handouts for big business and child poverty and homelessness. It is utterly scandalous that the Government is planning to hand over €675 million in unnecessary VAT cuts to hotels, restaurants and fast food chains when one in five children is living in poverty. Employment in hospitality is up 6.6% this year. There are 13,200 more people working in the sector than there were two years ago. Closures are down 10% year on year. According to the CSO, gross value added increased by 14% from 2022 to 2024. None of that suggests an industry in crisis that needs Government support. That this is

on the agenda for the budget is all purely down to the power of corporate lobbying. One of the greatest scams I have ever seen pulled in politics is to suggest that there is a massive crisis and that the answer is not targeted supports for small businesses, some of which are in crisis. No, it is a massive handout from the State, paid for by the public and by children in poverty, to some of the richest corporations in this country.

Since January 2023, the CEO of the Restaurants Association of Ireland, Adrian Cummins, has 59 entries in the lobbying register. He has met with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. He has met with the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Chambers, three times. He has met the Minister for enterprise, Deputy Peter Burke, twice. He has met the Taoiseach. He has attended Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parliamentary party meetings and enterprise round tables. Adrian Cummins can pick up the phone and call the Government any time he wants. Can a parent struggling to put food on the table for their family do that? Can a child who is going to bed hungry? No. The Government has already worsened child poverty by delaying a living wage for low-paid workers by three years. It has refused to abolish sub-minimum wages for young workers despite being told to do so by the Low Pay Commission and the ESRI. It has a People Before Profit Private Members' Bill on Committee Stage right now that could end this age discrimination and impoverishment of young people at the stroke of a pen, but it refuses to do so because it always sides with the bosses over the workers. This is who Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Lowry crew and the other right-wing Independents joining the clamour for a VAT cut represent. They all met with Adrian Cummins too and they do not care about child poverty either.

Last week, we heard that the Government is planning not even to give minimum wage workers the measly 65 cent per hour increase recommended by the Low Pay Commission. It is nowhere near enough to cover the rising cost of living for minimum wage workers. The biggest chunk of minimum wage workers work in hospitality. Not only is the Government planning to screw those workers by keeping them on unlivably low wages, but it wants to give their bosses a massive tax cut as well. Where is the money going to go? Adrian Cummins says it is a matter for each business. Translation: it is going straight into their back pockets.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion today. I fully support it, particularly its call for budget 2026 to commit €630 million towards measures to relieve child poverty and homelessness, as well as its call on the Government to introduce a total ban on evictions of children into homelessness, and the legislation to prioritise housing needs of homeless families. As a member of the children's committee, it has been devastating to hear about the rising levels of child poverty in this country. The Children's Rights Alliance has reported that over a quarter of a million children experienced enforced deprivation in Ireland in 2024, showing just how prevalent this issue of child poverty is. As a parent, it is unimaginable that over a quarter of a million children lack a warm home, a nutritious meal or a winter coat in this day and age. It is unimaginable that over 5,000 children in this country are currently homeless. It makes me sick to my stomach to think so many children are without a bed or a home at night. The Government's lack of intervention is even more sickening. How can we sit back and allow this to continue? Homelessness has devastating long-term negative effects on children's physical and mental health. We know that children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to have health problems, poor academic performance, higher rates of depression, anxiety and behaviour disorders, and are more likely to go hungry and

experience developmental delays. This will cause social and health issues for decades to come. We must act now.

We are already seeing the devastating impact on children in my constituency of Donegal. Hundreds of children in Donegal face homelessness. Hundreds are facing living in crumbling, unsafe homes due to the defective concrete crisis. The sense of security and belonging that a home is supposed to provide has been stripped away from these children. As the walls crumble beneath them, they are forced to live in homes and try to maintain their lives when everything around them is falling apart. It is extremely psychologically damaging to the children and their parents. They lie awake every night wondering how they are going to manage the roof over their heads crumbling, constant fear, worry and anxiety. While substantial harm has already been caused, we need to prevent this psychological damage. We need to act now on the defective concrete Act. I urge the Minister in his role to please meet with these families and listen to them, and get this sorted out once and for all.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The child poverty and child homelessness statistics are absolutely shocking. They are an utter scandal. We as a nation should be ashamed of ourselves. There are 104,780 children living in consistent poverty, up 45,000 in a year. There are 225,000 children living in families below the poverty line, and 5,014 homeless children in emergency accommodation, up 14% on last year. These are not just statistics; they are real individual children living in real families. Barnardos, the children's charity, has confirmed that homelessness is damaging childhoods right across the country. The real scandal is that the Government is trying to massage these figures and normalise this outrageous situation. This is a very wealthy country, at the last count the eighth richest in the world. These children can be taken out of poverty and homelessness. We have the money and the resources. The Government has a choice in the coming budget to take children out of poverty and homelessness, or to continue to support corporate landlords, vulture funds and the golden circle of the rich and powerful in our society.

Evictions lead directly to homelessness, in particular to children being homeless. We must stop evicting children into homelessness. No-fault evictions must be banned immediately.

The tenant in situ scheme must also be funded properly. Not a single house has been purchased in Tipperary this year, because this scheme has been completely vandalised by the Government. Households, especially those with children, are under huge pressure from the cost-of-living crisis. Food price inflation was up again by 5% in the month of August. In recent years, an additional €3,000 per year has been heaped on the grocery bills of families. Energy prices are among the highest in Europe. Recently, a whole host of energy companies announced huge increases. SSE Airtricity is up by 9.5%, an extra €150 a year. Bord Gáis Energy's electricity is up by 13.5% or €218 per year. Pinergy is up by 9.3% or €199 a year. Energia is up by 12.1% or €200 per year. Flogas electricity is up 7%, an extra €126 a year. The cost-of-living crisis will push more and more families into poverty. Significant energy credits, totalling at least €500, must be introduced in the coming budget. There must be a new child income support payment to address the shocking rise in child poverty.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome transition year students from Ballyhaunis Community School in County Mayo, and their teachers, Bernie Osgood and Mairead Conway. It is great

to have them here with us. I thank them for making the journey. I have no doubt some of the next politicians and leaders of the country are here today.

I very much welcome the motion before us, brought forward by the Labour Party. I also welcome the housing Minister here today. Housing is fundamental when it comes to child poverty. The rates of child poverty have doubled in the past year. One in five children across Ireland is below the poverty line. The rate is increasing every year. The Minister is no doubt aware that housing is one of the biggest contributors to this. The knock-on consequences for children waking up in a hotel room and going to school are immense.

As of July, 5,000 children are homeless, a 14% increase in the past year. What has the Minister done about it? I will tell him what happened in my constituency. The tenant in situ scheme was removed. A family was seeking to stay in a property and the council was willing to engage on this when the landlord wanted to sell, but because the scheme was removed the family ultimately entered homelessness. One tangible and practical thing that could be done would be to reinstate the tenant in situ scheme.

I also want to raise issues relating to housing in Mayo. There were only 103 housing commencements in Mayo in the first six months of this year. We must go back to 2016 figures, essentially recession-time levels, to see such a low number of commencements. The number of housing commencements was greater during the Covid years, when the construction sector was in and out of lockdown. This is a major issue. One of the biggest issues in my constituency at the moment is the residential development fee for construction. Families have to pay the local authority more than €4,000 to build their own home. What services do they get for it in rural Ireland? Nothing. That is the truth. Approximately one third of the cost of construction goes in tax in any case. That is one measure affecting home building that the Minister has also increased in the past year.

Deputy Michael Collins: The fact that more than 5,000 children are currently living in emergency accommodation is a national disgrace. It is 5,000 young lives disrupted, 5,000 children in crisis, and 5,000 futures being shaped by instability and hardship.

We in the Independent Ireland party believe the Government must go much further and much faster. It must declare a national housing emergency because that is what it is. The Government must use emergency powers to cut through the endless red tape that is choking delivery. We need modular and prefabricated homes that are modern and decent and that are rolled out in weeks not years. We must activate the thousands of vacant and derelict homes in towns and villages and turn emptiness into homes.

We urge the Government to invest in prevention. Too many families end up homeless because of arrears or eviction notices. The Government must help them early, provide supports for those in arrears, and mediation between tenants and landlords, so people can keep their homes in the first place. Let us use the tax system to cut rents because workers paying more than half their wages in rent have no chance of getting ahead.

Another issue that is related to child poverty is the hot school meals programme. It was meant to be a solution but, again, as we highlighted, it is deeply flawed. The scheme is riddled with bureaucracy and has become a form of discrimination against small rural schools. Unrealistic requirements such as architectural certification and mechanical ventilation are

pushing providers away and leaving children without a hot meal. Some children who are living in the right place can get it but others cannot. It is a case of tough luck. That is basically how the system the Government put in place works. We have proposed a practical community-based solution. We should use the existing meals-on-wheels network model to deliver hot meals to schools. These services are already on the road. They are already certified and trusted by the public.

While we agree with much of what is contained in the motion, we have difficulty with the Labour Party's intention of shifting money from the reduction in VAT on the hospitality sector. Deputy Paul Murphy gave out about people talking to Adrian Cummins. I do not care who we talk to. The cafes, hairdressers and restaurants in this country are closing their doors. They do not have a clue. They think we should just shift money, which would further destroy them.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am going to give the Minister the answer today to solving a lot of the problems. I am in business all my life, so I treat politics like business - delivery on budget and on time.

We are talking today about homelessness and child poverty. The overspend on the children's hospital is €853 million. I am the Chairperson of the Committee on Budgetary Oversight. We will have the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, before us today. All I hear from the committee, which has been looking at the budget for the past 12 months is that there has been an overspend on everything Departments are doing. There is no accountability. The Government wants to raise more taxes and put more people into poverty when it cannot manage the purse. Let us compare public versus private delivery. Public versus private is on budget and on time. I spoke to IBEC and different bodies across the board in recent weeks. We had a massive meeting with business owners in Whites of Askeaton this week. They cannot understand why each Department overspends by millions. This turns into an overspend of billions on the budget. Then they ask how they can raise taxes. The Government must stop the sloppiness of Departments overspending. If the Minister lets me get into the Department I will give him the help. I will show him where the overspends are. I will give him the power to make people accountable. The Government should use models from other countries where infrastructure projects are being delivered on time and on budget. Then it can hold the Departments to account. That is what I am about. I am not here to kick the Minister around the room. I am here to help him, if he will let me help him. I am pointing out faults in Departments, not only the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Minister is being told what is in front of him. Why does he not let people in this House help, who have enough experience to know that if a profit is not being made then they are not in business? In this House, if you lose all the profits, you are still in business and you get promoted. Let us stop the rot. The Minister must let us help him deliver.

I do not mind if he gets the praise for it. I will help him get the praise once he delivers.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is regrettable that Ireland, one of the richest countries in the world, has seen a significant rise in children living in consistent poverty. According to the Children's Rights Alliance, one in 12 children, or more than 100,000, is in this situation. Obviously, inflation has risen. There are various reasons for this, including the Ukraine and related issues, the fact that we live on an island, etc., but Ireland is still one of the richest countries in the world. Housing costs have risen as well. The big issue relates to children who

have no housing at all. If you are in that type of situation, you are impoverished from the start and the hidden costs add up. There are also situations where kids do not get a proper breakfast. I know one homeless hub where children were being given an apple and a muffin. If they left after 8 a.m. for whatever reason, they did not get anything at all. We need to invest more in the likes of breakfast clubs. I welcome the school meals initiative. I have issues with the quality of the food on offer, but that is a separate matter.

I want to focus mainly on vulnerable groups like lone parents and people with disabilities. I want to see more movement on housing. I raised an issue about families being allowed to build homes in their back gardens at the start of the year. We had some positive responses in that regard, but people are being forced out. I know of a lone parent who has a child with severe autism and who does not have space in the main house. They are being told to take down the structure in their back garden because it is unauthorised. That structure is a solution for the family in question. There are different needs. It is not the overall solution but it helps. We need movement on housing. As my colleagues in Independent Ireland said, we need to get moving on modular home provision. We are in a crisis, but we are not treating it like a crisis.

Deputy Michael Cahill: At the outset, I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this Private Members' motion on child poverty and homelessness. We are not by any means the poorest nation in the world, but poverty exists in our society. Poverty severely affects the very young, who are more vulnerable to ill-health because their bodies are not fully formed in comparison with those of teenagers and mature adults. Children are dependent on parents and guardians to look out for them and ensure they are well fed, kept warm, clean, healthy and are generally protected. However, many adults may have issues and obstacles to deal with, finding themselves in the poverty trap with children or elderly relatives to care for. Homelessness looms over them as a possible threat.

The upcoming budget will present the Government with an opportunity to put in place strong supports for these vulnerable members of our society by supporting families by means of the children's allowance, the fuel allowance, the back-to-school allowance, etc. I urge that the budget be used to improve our support for children and families by increasing the allowances that benefit them. I also ask that the hot meal scheme for schools be extended. It is a sad fact of modern life that the meals children receive via this scheme are the only hot meals many of them get. Extending it to all State schools would be a major development and would provide support and protection to society as a whole.

I further ask that the Government increase its support for all our children by investing in much increased respite care for the carers of our children who are physically or mentally less able than others in order that parents and guardians may cope with the stress of being full-time carers for their loved ones. Carers generosity in giving to these children is limited only by their ability to stay standing and carry on with what is a very tough task. They provide an invaluable service to the State, but they cannot continue to do so 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. Regular respite is vital to them being physically and mentally able to continue to care, despite many of them suffering illness themselves as they grow older. Our children are our future, so we must continue to increase our investment in their health, education and well-being generally. With intelligent investment from this budget, we can help all of our children to prosper and live in health and happiness. They can bring all of this forward to when they will be parents with children of their own.

I pay tribute to Foodlink in my county of Kerry, which is operated by south Kerry development group services and which provides food in Cahersiveen, Killorglin and Killarney and many other parts of the county. It is a regular occurrence to see children waiting at the front door for food. That is a very sad reflection on society today. Many people living in food poverty are living in remote rural areas and can quite easily go unnoticed. Every day, there are thousands of meals delivered. This is an issue that faces many families who will not go to the local community centre or the family resource centre because of pride. It is about getting to the homes of people who need help the most. There are other organisations that deliver food programmes in my county, including the South West Kerry Family Resource Centre in Cahersiveen, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, etc. They do tremendous work. Can we do more? We can always do more, no matter how difficult a situation might be. I call on the Government and the Minister to do everything humanely possible to rid our country of food poverty and homelessness.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. I have considered the Labour Party motion. The Government has presented its countermotion on child poverty and homelessness, which shows our determination to drive down the child poverty rates, increase supports for families and tackle family homelessness. We have outlined the significant progress we have made and reinforced our firm commitment to delivering more progress on these critical issues. Ireland has seen extraordinary social and economic progress over the previous four decades. Reductions in poverty, alongside improvements to living standards, have demonstrated the transformative potential of collective action. However, despite these schemes, poverty persists and inequalities remain. Many people struggle to make ends meet and remain one misfortune away from falling into poverty.

Strengthening the resilience of households and communities to prevent people descending into poverty is crucial. That is why the Government is determined to address poverty, and child poverty in particular. I recognise that while figures and statistics are crucial for measuring progress, they are certainly not the full picture. Behind the statistics, figures and percentages are real people with daily lived experiences of poverty, deprivation and exclusion. Indeed, the highly progressive Irish taxation system and social transfers are extremely effective at redistributing income and are recognised as one of the most effective at poverty alleviation in the EU. From an international perspective and according to Eurostat, Ireland's at-risk-of-poverty rate fell from 13.4% in 2022 to 12.3% in 2024. This remained below the EU 27 average of 16%, with Ireland's ranking improving from seventh in 2022 to fifth in 2024.

Ireland continued to be the best-performing country in the EU in the context of reducing poverty and inequality through social transfers in 2024. Social transfers reduced at the risk of poverty rate by 62.7% in Ireland, substantially higher than the EU average of 34.1%. While Ireland's system of social transfers is among the best performing across the EU, the Government and I are conscious that we must continue to strive to do more and assist those families who are in poverty. The latest poverty data from the Central Statistics Office is disappointing and shows us that investing in child poverty must be a continual process. We also must remember this data does not reflect the Government's full response to child poverty in 2024 and 2025 through budget and other measures. The Taoiseach spoken about the need to deal with child poverty holistically if we are to have a decisive impact. He has also reiterated

his determination that this Government would do everything it can to remove the hurdles facing too many children experiencing poverty, to make the rates fair and to give every child an equal start.

It is important to recognise that Ireland continues to make great progress in cross-national comparisons across EU member states in terms of addressing poverty and social inclusion. Reducing child poverty is not only crucial for our children, it is also important for our communities and country to ensure a fairer and more cohesive society.

Our determination to reduce child poverty is reflected in the delivery of our programme for Government commitments to date and the establishment of the child poverty and well-being programme office in the Department of the Taoiseach, the setting of a new and ambitious child poverty target, unprecedented increases in core social welfare rates and targeted payments that support families and children most in need and investment in key programmes and initiatives, such as the hot school meals and free schoolbooks programme. We are fully aware of the work that remains to be done over the lifetime of this Government and beyond to reduce child poverty, and we are committed to this.

In the context of budget 2026, the Government has made clear the importance of focusing investment and resources to families with children where it is most needed. In making our budgetary decisions, targeted measures aimed at tackling child poverty and reducing homelessness will be at the core.

In relation to income support, our key focus will be on existing targeted measures that we know work, such as the child support and working family payments. In line with our programme for Government commitments, we are continuing to explore a targeted child benefit payment, and, as the Minister, Deputy Calleary, said, while work is under way, a second-tier payment is complex and will take time to get right. As a result, it will not be announced as part of budget 2026.

In tackling child poverty, it is essential that we do so by means of a cross-government approach. For example, this includes focusing on targeted measures in relation to homelessness and housing. The additional €15 million that I allocated to my Department in the past few weeks for a second-hand acquisitions budget is a clear and unambiguous reflection of the Government's commitment in this regard. When I became Minister, there was €60 million available for second-hand acquisitions. It is now the middle of September, and that has increased to €375 million already. This additional funding complements a range of other measures to address long-term homelessness and will, as I said, be ring-fenced and targeted at acquisitions that support families, primarily those larger families with children, to exit long-term emergency accommodation into housing. Together with income supports and measures relating to homelessness and housing in budget 2026 and beyond, I will continue to concentrate on expanding the vital services in our communities. However, we cannot achieve everything in a single budget. Tackling child poverty and homelessness will require a concerted and continued effort over the lifetime of this Government. That is a firm commitment, as the Taoiseach outlined in the context of child poverty and well-being earlier this month. We know that we have work to do, and we are determined to do it.

On housing, in the national development plan that was recently announced, one in every three euro will now be spent on delivering housing. That money will go either into the

Department of housing or into Uisce Éireann to facilitate water to deliver housing. It is an extraordinary level of funding. I hear Opposition TDs saying that we are not spending enough money. Those same TDs now need to indicate what they would cut. Would they cut funding from education?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Value for money.

Deputy James Browne: Would they cut money from our hospitals or from the roads budget?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: VAT cuts.

Deputy James Browne: Where are they going to take the money from?

Deputy Ged Nash: How about VAT cuts?

Deputy James Browne: Where are you going to take the money from?

Deputy Ged Nash: How about your response on VAT cuts?

Deputy James Browne: You are not going to shut me down, so please let me say-----

Deputy Ged Nash: You were good at that before-----.

(Interruptions)

Deputy James Browne: I did not interrupt you, so let me-----

Deputy Ged Nash: -----you were a Minister.

(Interruptions)

Deputy James Browne: Look----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy James Browne: Thank you very much. We might look at the tenant in situ scheme. I am trying to square what Deputy Bacik said yesterday during Leaders' Questions, because the criteria in the circular I introduced earlier in the year put the focus on local authorities to prioritise families. The Deputy criticised that at the time. She said that single people were being singled out and left behind. Labour Party TDs did that. Yesterday, she demanded that I do what I did in my circular, which is to prioritise families. It is just bizarre, and I suspect she just did not actually read the circular that went out to local authorities, or what her own TDs said when it was announced-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We did.

Deputy James Browne: -----because that circular prioritises families, which she criticised me for doing.

In relation to the Labour Party's motion, we have a demand-led tenant in situ scheme, which is what the Deputy wants. We have nearly 60,000 HAP and RAS tenancies. The Labour Party is well north of €20 billion, yet it has not quantified its position or said where that money will come from. Once again, it is more magic numbers, like the 1 million houses it is going to build, and not a single acknowledgement of its record when last in government, when in five years it managed to turn a housing crisis of too many houses into one of too few.

Deputy Ged Nash: You destroyed the economy, pal.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ged Nash: You destroyed the economy. Listen to yourself.

Deputy James Browne: Those who warned the Labour Party about the mistakes it was making-----

Deputy Ged Nash: You ought to be ashamed of yourselves.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputies, you will have your chance-----

Deputy Ged Nash: You are set to be the worst housing Minister ever.

Deputy James Browne: Those who warned the Labour Party when it was in government of the crisis it was creating-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: You created the crisis.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ged Nash: Look at your ghost estates and policies on developments.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Read your history, Minister.

Deputy James Browne: -----in the context of turning too many houses into too few, what did it do? It criticised the likes of Peter McVerry instead of listening to those warnings. It did not realise what was happening. That is what it did-----

Deputy Ged Nash: You torched the country. You destroyed the country.

Deputy James Browne: It is absolutely extraordinary-----

Deputy Ged Nash: You should be wearing a sackcloth and ashes and apologising to the Irish people.

Deputy James Browne: Can I ask the Deputies to just read the circular that went out to the local authorities and realise what it does? It prioritises families. I know the Labour Party's motion does not talk about prioritising children because whichever of its researchers wrote probably did read it. I ask the Deputies to read it as well.

As I said, there has been €375 million for second-hand acquisitions already this year. That is what our focus is on, but we cannot solve the housing crisis and the homelessness crisis by buying up existing properties. The solution is building more homes and more social homes.

Deputy Ged Nash: I doubt it.

Deputy James Browne: That is what the Government and I are doing. We are also delivering more and more funding. Again, however, I ask the Deputies to put forward some numbers in the context of what they are proposing to do here. A few facts might actually help the situation.

This is a quick one for Sinn Féin. Its housing policy says to slash the tenant in situ scheme. The policy is available online. It is there in black and white. Sinn Féin wants to cut it down because it recognises what tenant situ was meant to be.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Speak directly to the 5,000 homeless kids, Minister. On you go.

Deputy James Browne: Tenant in situ was always meant to be a temporary measure, which is even recognised in Sinn Féin's housing policy.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There are 5,000 homeless children.

Deputy James Browne: It is extraordinary that as I try to speak for a few minutes-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are you not a bit ashamed?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am sorry, Deputy, allow the Minister-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are you not a bit ashamed?

Deputy James Browne: -----everybody has tried to shout me down.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Excuse me, a Chathaoirligh. The Minister addressed me directly. I am entitled to respond.

Deputy James Browne: -----because they do not want to hear facts. It does not suit the social media narrative pop-up to get the 30 seconds. They do not want to engage with the facts-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: How dare you.

Deputy James Browne: -----or the figures.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: How dare you.

Deputy James Browne: That is the problem.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: How about the facts and figures of 5,000 children who are homeless. That is only the tip of the iceberg.

Deputy James Browne: Look at your own housing policy-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is the tip of the iceberg. Shame on you.

Deputy James Browne: Look at your own housing policy.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are you not a bit ashamed?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): That concludes-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Look at all the facts and figures, Minister.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am sorry, Deputies-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are you proud of that figure, Minister?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputies, through the Chair.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Excuse me, a Chathaoirligh, the Minister asked me a direct question, and I am asking him one.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputies, let us-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are you proud of your record on child homelessness, Minister? "Yes" or "No".

Deputy Ged Nash: They are the figures that matter.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are you proud?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is 5,000.

Deputy Ged Nash: How do you sleep?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are you proud of your record on child homelessness?

Deputy Ged Nash: Literally, how do you sleep?

Deputy James Browne: I am very conscious of every one of those children-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: You are proud of your record, are you?

Deputy Ged Nash: How do you sleep?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Minister-----

Deputy James Browne: -----and I will do absolutely everything to end child homelessness in this country-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: You do not look at those kids in the eye, Minister.

Deputy James Browne: -----and I am going to get those children out of homelessness-----

Deputy Ged Nash: The invisible man.

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

Deputy James Browne: -----and what will do that are decisive decisions that I am making-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Decisive decisions.

Deputy James Browne: -----and not the rhetoric-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Are there other kinds of decisions?

Deputy James Browne: ----- from the likes of yourselves over there who do not want to engage in facts-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: What about the overspend, Minister?

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

Deputy James Browne: -----and who want to-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: You should be ashamed of yourself, Minister.

Deputy James Browne: -----promise people rainbows-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: You should be ashamed.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): That concludes-----

Deputy James Browne: -----and do not actually want to provide practical solutions.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is a waste of money.

Deputy Ged Nash: Chair-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I thank the Minister. That concludes-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: That is outrageous.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): That concludes the Government's response. I now ask the Labour Party, Deputies Bacik and Nash, to conclude the debate. They have ten minutes.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: What an extraordinary attempt at deliberate deflection that was by a Minister who has nothing of substance to say in response to our careful, thoughtful and constructive motion. The Minister asked us about figures from the Labour Party side. There is one very stark figure that should be uppermost in his mind and uppermost in the minds of all his Government colleagues, and that is the 5,000 children who are homeless.

Deputy Ged Nash: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is an utterly shameful figure. It represents a record high in the numbers of children who are without a home under the Minister's watch. He can deflect and seek to scapegoat others all he likes, but this is under his watch. He is the Minister for housing, and it is simply not good enough to say he will be taking decisive decisions to reduce and take children out of homelessness. How is he going to do it? We are proposing to him measures that would take children out of homelessness, patently, because all the people he just quoted to us are telling us all that what is driving children into homelessness are evictions from the private rental sector. Therefore, we are saying let us do something creative and constructive to help and support the children and families we are all hearing from all the time who are utterly

despairing. As I said yesterday, they see nothing from this Government; no safety. The Minister talks about tenant in situ, but there are no new acquisitions. We cannot make tenant in situ work for the families who come to us. The Minister knows this. Of course we criticised the Government's circular. We did so because it was rendering a scheme that was supposed to be a safety net utterly ineffective for the families we are seeking to support.

I will give the Minister another figure - €630 million. That is the amount the Government is apparently looking to spend on an untargeted VAT reduction for the hospitality sector. If the VAT cut is to be in respect of food and catering alone, that would be €630 million. For the entire hospitality sector, it would be closer to €800 million. That is a sum that we in Labour believe would be better spent on alleviating child poverty and tackling child homelessness. That is what the Government should be doing. The proposed VAT cut is a sledgehammer approach.

It is going to benefit the bigger companies, namely the McDonald's of this world. That is not effective. It is not effective to support the struggling independent cafés and restaurants which need targeted supports from the Government. It is certainly not enough to support the families who are desperate and at the end of their tether because they cannot see any way to secure a roof over their heads and those of their children this winter.

There are clear ideological choices for the Minister and his Government colleagues to make in respect of the budget. The Government is choosing to rely on market forces rather than adopting the active State policies and interventions that would make a difference. It is choosing not to invest in ensuring that the concept of tenant *in situ* becomes truly effective. It is choosing not to invest in a second tier of child benefit. Earlier, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, said that the Government will not create a new second tier of child benefit. That is regrettable. The Government has had two years to work on this. We all know it is complex, but there has been a great deal of research done and it is regrettable that the Government is not taking a targeted approach to addressing child poverty.

The Government's countermotion is derisory. I read the wording and could not believe it. It refers to the Government's priority of a reduction in child poverty. It lacks any ambition or sense of urgency. At the end of the countermotion, the Government says absolutely nothing. It says it is committed to further progress and will use the budget to prioritise measures to reduce child poverty and homelessness. What are these measures? If the Government is not introducing a second tier of child benefit or investing in the measures we have discussed, including the tenant in situ scheme, to ensure that families will be safe from homelessness, what is it going to do? What about a no-fault eviction ban, which would ensure that children are not affected? Let us end child evictions.

I commend Deputies Wall and Sherlock on putting forward the motion and my other colleagues for speaking to it. Our colleagues have put forward constructive measures. We have suggested that this could be the budget in which we see a Government take really serious measures to end child poverty, the eviction of children and child homelessness. Even the Government's stated ambition falls far short of that. We see nothing and have heard nothing from the Minister, Deputy Browne, or his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, today which suggests that the Government is going to adopt measures that would have a real impact on addressing the scourges of child poverty and homelessness in our in our society today. One

in five children, that is, 250,000, are living in poverty and 5,000 are homeless. This is a shameful record, and the budget should be serious about tackling it.

Deputy Ged Nash: There is a truism that abounds around this place at this time every year as we approach the budget. It goes something like "Show me your budget and I will show you my priorities". This is especially true of a budget that takes place at the start of a Government's term. We do not know a huge amount about the complexion of the budget that will be introduced on 7 October. However, we know from a very successful media campaign run by a sectoral interest and Fine Gael especially, which bent over backwards to accommodate it, that an enormous amount of money on an annual basis, totalling at least €630 million in one year, will be transferred from PAYE taxpayers to a small and narrow sectoral interest without justification. The Minister, Deputy Burke, who will be responsible for this, has refused to publish the data we know he possesses. He has been urged to publish it by the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council. He has refused to publish the data that would provide any evidence for such a significant cash transfer and tax relief for one sector over another. He will not publish it because he knows the evidence is thin.

All of this was because of a solemn promise made during the election campaign by the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, to mollify one economic sector and tell people that the Government would do something for them if they re-elected those who were then in government. He also made a solemn promise, as did Fianna Fáil, to introduce a living wage for workers in 2026 and to extend sick leave entitlements in order to bring us somewhere close to modern European norms. However, the Government has collectively stuck two fingers up to working people in this country.

One fifth of all Irish workers are low paid. Coincidentally, the same proportion of children in this country are in consistent poverty. Workers are being denied a living wage and, because of the way in which this budget will be managed in two weeks' time, the Government will again refuse to introduce a second tier of child benefit to move poor Irish children out of poverty and give them the chance the Government says Irish children should have in this Republic.

Frankly, the Government does not believe this. The information on how we do this has been available for years. My colleague, Deputy Sherlock, spoke articulately and eloquently earlier about the Commission on Taxation and Welfare on which she sat more than ten years ago, which clearly identified the principal thing we could do to declare war on and eradicate child poverty and give every child every chance. That was to introduce a second and targeted tier of child benefit. We have had many years of boom times to introduce such a payment but have simply refused to do so. We are now told that it is complex, which we know and understand.

There are complexities involved in introducing such a payment. We understand that. However, we have had ten years of Fine Gael, supported by Fianna Fáil in one fashion or another, and they have simply failed to do it because the political will is simply not there. The Government prefers to transfer taxpayers' money to certain economic sectors rather than focus on alleviating child poverty. They are the choices the Government will make. When it does that, workers will not benefit.

History has shown that this particular battle has not been to the benefit of workers and their pay, terms and conditions and has not been to the benefit of consumers. When this happens, the Government will declare victory and say there is nothing more it can do for the hospitality

sector. I am not callous enough to say that I am not concerned about businesses in the hospitality sector closing. Of course I am, but like child poverty running a business is complex and so are the demands and costs.

What is the Government going to do about energy costs? What is it going to do about reforming the way in which local government is funded and the overreliance on commercial rates? What is it going to do about training and professionalising the hospitality sector? It will do nothing because in the boom times, we simply take taxpayers' money and throw it at the people who shout the loudest without any justification whatsoever for doing so.

The Minister said it is complex to introduce a second tier of child benefit, and it is. We moved heaven and earth in early 2020 to make sure, justifiably and correctly, that businesses were supported to remain open in the heat of a global pandemic. We moved heaven and earth to introduce a wage subsidy scheme, complex and all as it was. A second tier of child benefit is achievable and can be done. All we are lacking is the political will of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Independents who support the Government.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Before we move on to Leaders' Questions, it has to be noted that I sat next to the Minister, Deputy Burke, during the debate. He offered full respect to each and every one of the Opposition speakers without interrupting once, yet in the single ten-minute slot in which he had to speak, he was interrupted and heckled. That is absolutely ridiculous. This is an ongoing trend and it has to be stopped because it is completely disrespectful.

Amendment put.

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

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we proceed to Leaders' Questions, I would like to read a short note to welcome Julie Lyons and her family to the Gallery. I would like to take a moment of colleagues' time and ask them to join me in saying farewell to Julie, a friend of ours. Julie is retiring on Friday after 34 years in the Houses of the Oireachtas. We all know Julie as our amazing head chef, the woman who keeps the kitchen going and our tummies full. Julie has been with us since 1991, starting as a *chef de partie*, before being promoted to second head chef in 2020 and finally becoming the first female head chef in the Houses of the Oireachtas in 2023. Julie has many a story to tell of her time here, dealing with eight cinn comhairle and nine taoisigh. We will have to wait for the book.

Julie is joined today by her family: her two children, Miranda and Dan; their partners, Ed and Lorraine; her lovely grandchildren, Ruby, Lily, Teddy and George; and her brother and sister, Eamon and Deirdre. I know Julie's partner Brendan was hoping to attend so I hope he has made it. Hands up if he is with you. He is not here yet. Julie, from all of us here and on

behalf of all of us who are missing, I would like to say wholeheartedly a massive thank you for your service. You are a treasure and everybody wishes you the very best.

Members applauded.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Under Standing Order 38 we move to Leaders' Questions. I call on Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I reiterate the Ceann Comhairle's words. Julie, you are an absolute legend and you know it. Thank you for everything. I know everybody sends nothing but the best of wishes to you and the family for the next chapter of what I have no doubt will be an interesting and delicious story. Thank you for looking after us.

Last night the Israelis attacked a peaceful flotilla that includes a Member of the Oireachtas, our colleague Senator Chris Andrews. This is a serious development and I have submitted a request under Standing Order 44 which I hope will be looked upon favourably. This flotilla is in imminent danger. I think there are over 20 Irish citizens on it, including Senator Andrews.

Yesterday I raised with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, the pressure households are under to keep up with out-of-control prices, stretched to the limit just to get by. I raised the fact the price of groceries has gone through the roof, increasing sharply in the past 12 weeks, and that four energy companies have announced big electricity price hikes. These hikes will hit households hard.

As an example, I was talking to one father yesterday. He has two children. He and his partner work hard all week but he is already borrowing from his parents just to pay his bills. His savings have been wiped out and he does not know where he would find the money to pay for even higher bills. That is how tight things are and he is not on his own.

Workers and families are at a loss as to how the Government stands back and refuses to take direct action to tackle this crisis. I said to the Minister yesterday the budget has to be about ending the rip-off, getting costs under control and supporting workers and families, and I told him that withdrawing energy credits in the budget is a terrible decision. I repeat that today. Instead of recognising the pressure people are under, the Minister chose to stand up and boast that he will not intervene or give way to what he chose to describe as "populist outrage". That is one for the books. How is this for populist outrage? Flogas electricity prices and student fees are already up; on 1 October, VHI charges go up; on 8 October, petrol and diesel prices go up; on 9 October, Energia electricity goes up; on 12 October, Bord Gais electricity prices go up; on 13 October, Pinergy electricity goes up; on 20 October, SSE Airtricity goes up; and on 1 November, local property tax charges go up. There you have it, Minister. Those are some of the body blows households will take literally days after the budget.

Here is the big shock - the electric shock, if you like. Almost 1 million households will see their electricity bills go up because of these price hikes. How is that for populist outrage?

People have a right to be angry; as a matter of fact, they have a right to be furious because they see a Government that has done nothing to stop energy companies ripping them off and

now it wants to cancel the energy credits. Yesterday, in an attempt to justify that out-of-touch decision, the Minister said credits were introduced at a time of very high energy prices. That remark left people shaking their heads because their electricity bills are getting higher and higher and they are being pushed closer to the edge. Tá ardaithe móra ar phraghsanna ag teacht d'oibrithe agus do theaghlaigh sna seachtainí atá romhainn, go háirithe ar phraghsanna leictreachais a bheidh mar bhuille ollmhór do theaghlaigh. Ní féidir leis an Rialtas neamhaird a thabhairt ar an mbrú atá ar dhaoine. Caithfidh creidiúintí fuinneamh a bheith sa bhuiséad. The barrage of electricity price hikes facing households must be an eye-opener for Government. Surely to goodness, it cannot leave people high and dry. I tried yesterday, and will try again today, to ask that Government reverse the crazy decision to withdraw energy credits in the forthcoming budget.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist. On behalf of myself and the Government parties, I would also like to wish Julie Lyons all the best in her retirement. I thank her for the excellent service she has provided to Members over 34 years. There is an expression in politics: "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." That certainly never applied to Julie. She served us loyally and I have been instructed by colleagues to say they will very much miss her Christmas puddings once she departs. I thank her for her service.

I want to express concern for my former constituency colleague, Senator Andrews. Deputy McDonald mentioned how the flotilla of people lawfully protesting the slaughter in Gaza was attacked last night by Israeli forces. This seems to show the Israeli Government is prepared to attack non-combatants whether they are in Gaza or in international waters. On behalf of the Irish Government, I condemn the actions of the Israeli Government in unlawfully attacking a lawful flotilla that is seeking to engage in peaceful activity on international waters.

I was not being flippant yesterday when I responded to the issues Deputy McDonald raised. I assure her the Government takes extremely seriously the issues concerning the cost of living and the pressures they put on families. The Deputy recounted a series of increases that will take place. The Government is well aware of those increases and the pressures they will put on families, whether the increases are in energy costs or in the area of health insurance. However, it is important to note the reason the energy credits were introduced a number of years ago was the extraordinary rate of inflation in the country and throughout the world in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this country, inflation was in the region of 10% but since then because of measures taken by Government, for which no credit is given by the Deputy, inflation has been brought under control and is at reasonable levels.

When it comes to the budget that will be announced in 13 days by the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers, I assure Deputy McDonald that concern for the cost of living and hard-pressed families will be at the centre.

The Deputy mentioned a number of items she highlighted yesterday. Similarly, I want to remind her of the protections provided by the Government in the last budget.

She will be aware that there was an increased payment in respect of the rent tax credit for 2024 from €1,000 to €2,000. She will be aware that there was the extension of the 9% reduced VAT rate for gas and electricity. That is a very real measure that was introduced and maintained by the Government for the purpose of trying to protect consumers from increasing costs in the

energy sector. She will also be aware of the extension of the mortgage interest relief until the end of 2025 and a €300 lump sum payment in respect of the fuel allowance. That is leaving aside other social welfare protections that were introduced in the previous budget and that I know will also be introduced in this budget.

I ask the Deputy to await the outcome of the budget. She seems fixated on the fact that the Government has announced that it is not going reintroduce the energy credits that it introduced over the past number of years. They were measures that were not met with favour by Sinn Féin when they were introduced here.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That was because they were too low.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: They were part of a Government proposal that was sneered at by Sinn Féin at the time. Let us wait to see what the Ministers, Deputies Chambers and Donohoe, and the rest of the Government come up with. I assure the Deputy that the cost-of-living issue will be at the forefront of their consideration and Government consideration.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister should be aware that, despite the fact of inflation coming down, the prices are still very high. He is surely aware, because I have told him repeatedly and he would have known, that energy companies are announcing hikes in electricity prices. We have not seen the budget yet, but what the Government has made very clear - it has really dug in on this point - is that there will not be a cost-of-living package. The Government said that clearly and that the energy credits were off the table. I am simply putting it to the Minister at a time when families are struggling. I gave him one instance of one young father from a double-income household that is borrowing from their parents. They are at their limit now. They are not alone. Hundreds of thousands of people and families across the State now are at that limit. I am simply asking the Government, given that it has not managed to stop gauging by the big energy companies, which we will come to again, to give those families and workers the reassurance that there will be energy credits in the forthcoming budget at an adequate level. We have suggested €450.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Every Government TD, and indeed every TD who is not in Sinn Féin, is aware of the pressures that people are under when it comes to the cost of living. The Deputy does not have a monopoly in terms of understanding that. We are fully aware of it. We have introduced measures in the past that the Deputy has acknowledged have ameliorated the cost-of-living pressures on people. She is acknowledging that by giving us credit for the energy credits that were introduced in the past. The fact that we have done this in the past is indicative that it will be done again in the future. Measures will be available to ensure that-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So, what does that mean?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----families are at the centre of the budget package that will be introduced 13 days from now. The Deputy spoke about the cost of energy. She also has to be aware of the other measures that have been introduced by the Government to alleviate costs on

families. For instance, if we look at the retrofitting that is going on, over €558 million has been allocated for residential and community energy schemes in 2025. A total of €280 million has been specifically allocated to the warmer homes scheme, which provides free retrofits to households in energy poverty.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will I tell that to the young father? That is great. I am delighted.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: A lot has been done and the Deputy should not ignore it.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I wish to start by joining in the tributes to Julie Lyons. We wish her and her family well on her well-deserved retirement after 34 years and seeing off nine taoisigh. We will miss her. My colleagues have reminded me just how kind and generous she has always been, particularly to the children who visit this House regularly. That has been really appreciated, and also the way she brought fun to our food - Christmas dinners in September and the legendary Markievicz trifles. I thank her very much for everything. She will be missed.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I wish to express my condemnation of the attacks last night on the global flotilla for Gaza. Our former constituency colleague Senator Chris Andrews is among the Irish citizens on the flotilla. I urge the Minister to work with EU colleagues to ensure the safety of all those on that flotilla. It is appalling to see attacks in this way, and it is yet another example of Israel feeling it can apparently act with impunity against international law.

This week, a stark warning on climate was issued to the Government. Research by Met Éireann and Maynooth University shows that Ireland experienced extraordinarily high temperatures during the summer of 2025 with average night-time temperatures beating all previous records. This is a terrifying finding. We are seeing catastrophic effects of climate change around the world – forest fires, mudslides and floods. Despite this, certain political leaders internationally are tragically turning away from the science and are embracing climate denial and conspiracy theories. We scoff at Trump's appalling rhetoric on climate, but here at home since the Green Party left government, we have also seen a shift. The Government is not taking climate change seriously enough. This is having real impact on people's lives. Hard-pressed households are facing impossible choices this winter while struggling to cover home heating bills due to huge hikes in fossil fuel costs. A total of 300,000 households are in arrears on their electricity bills. There is no sign of a winter moratorium on disconnections. There are still people impacted by the worst effects of climate change, such as Storm Éowyn and other storms. People are continuing to struggle with the cost of repairs. There are no big ideas on climate forthcoming from the Government. We saw the climate targets retained in the programme for Government. That was welcome. However, there was no pathway to achieve them. At the outset of the formation of this Government, there was the slashing of funds for sustainable travel, public transport, and cycling and active travel in favour of building more and more roads. The Government's policy continues to turn a blind eye to the impact of data centres on emissions, household bills and energy security. Retrofitting too often remains the preserve of the wealthy.

What we are asking for today is that the Government will give a commitment that this budget will take climate seriously and we will see serious measures adopted to invest in meeting our climate targets, making our communities more secure. We want to see the warmer homes scheme fixed so retrofitting can work for everyone. We want to see real State investment in developing renewables and rolling out offshore wind. Will the Government take climate seriously in this budget? Will the Minister give us a commitment today that it will do so?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I should have pointed out when I was responding to Deputy McDonald that my understanding is that Deputy Barry Heneghan is on that flotilla as well. I extend my best wishes to him. I express my concern and the concern of the wider Government for his safety as well as that of Senator Andrews.

Deputy Bacik is being unfair. It is inappropriate to compare the response of the Irish Government to climate change to that of the response of the current American Government. That is inappropriate and it is not based among any factual understanding. It is not a fair assessment of the work that is being done by this Government since it came into office. There is no doubt but that this Government recognises that climate change is probably the most pressing challenge for our society. There is full recognition within the Government that the impacts of climate change are still to be seen on a continuous basis. If we look at the excessive temperatures we are experiencing, not just in Ireland but throughout Europe, and if we look at the extreme weather events that seem to be more frequent now, that is the evidence of what is happening as a result of climate change.

I know the Minister, Darragh O'Brien, takes his role extremely seriously when it comes to combating climate change. If we look at what has happened from the data, we can see that the 2024 data from the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, shows that Ireland's emissions continue to fall for the third year in a row and are at their lowest level in three decades compared with 1990 levels. Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions decreased by 2% in 2024 compared with 2023 and decreased by 10.6% from 2021 to 2024 while the economy grew strongly. It is important to note that there has been considerable success achieved in the area of climate change. It is a demanding target to meet our emissions, but they are targets that the Government is committed to meeting and is making its best endeavours to ensure that we do meet them. Ireland is in a slightly different position to many European countries where they have not seen the same level of economic expansion and growth that we have. We have been able to combine that expansion while at the same time ensuring that we take our climate obligations seriously.

The Deputy highlighted data centres. It is important that we do not start targeting one aspect of our economy for the purpose of presenting it as being the villain in terms of the cause of climate change. We need to recognise that climate change and the response to it will only be achieved through a co-ordinated agreed response from the Government in which society takes its part in and business plays its part as well.

The Deputy also mentioned the issue of retrofitting.

In my answer to Deputy McDonald, I highlighted the money that is available for retrofitting. That is a scheme that needs to be availed of by members of the public. The Government is backing it with money to ensure we can save on energy consumption.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I acknowledge Deputy Heneghan, who is on the flotilla along with other Irish citizens. We wish them all well and hope for their safety.

This Government's response to me on climate is another classic exercise in deflection. We heard it earlier during the Government's response to the motion on child poverty and child homelessness. It was deflection and side stepping. Of course this Government is not as bad as Trump on climate but there has been a noticeable shift away from taking climate seriously. I mentioned the road building issue. Let us look at LNG as well. This summer, the Minister for climate wrote to the planning regulator giving a green light to LNG, a light that is green in the metaphorical sense only because it is a policy U-turn at a time when this country faces up to €26 billion in fines for failing to achieve our legally binding climate targets. With respect, we know Minister O'Brien has form for missing targets. He was the housing Minister in the previous Government and the approach to climate targets in this Government reminds me of Fianna Fáil's reliance on inflated home delivery targets during the last general election campaign.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I think it is a fair critique to make. The Government is not taking climate seriously-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----and we need commitments in this budget that will reassure us and ensure we meet our targets.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy is ignoring the great work being done on securing renewable energy in this country. As of last February, 48% of Ireland's power was powered by onshore wind. They are facts the Deputy simply cannot ignore. The Deputy also talked about how we need to ensure there is no LNG plant. We have to provide people in this country with energy security.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is absolutely essential we have a secure form of energy for them. The Deputy is aware of what is happening as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the consequence of that from a European perspective. We cannot continue to fund President Putin and Europe cannot continue to fund President Putin by purchasing his fossil oil.

A huge amount is being done. Minister O'Brien takes it extremely seriously. In terms of retrofitting, last year we hit an average of 1,000 retrofits per week. It is a huge achievement. In terms of greenways, there are many fine greenways around the country and more will be developed by Minister O'Brien. We are responding to the energy crisis. We are taking it extremely seriously and the fruits of our work are becoming apparent to the Irish public.

Deputy Holly Cairns: On behalf of all of the Social Democrats team I also want to thank Julie for everything. I wish her huge congratulations on her retirement.

Before I begin, I want to say my thoughts are also with all those on the Global Sumud Flotilla, including Members of the Oireachtas, who were hit by drone strikes overnight. This is just another example of Israel operating in blatant breach of international law. There has to be consequences.

My question for the Minister is quite simple. What is he doing about large supermarkets that refuse to report their profits? Increases in grocery prices have been rapid and relentless. I know that, the Minister knows that and everybody who is doing their weekly shop knows that. I think we all have a fairly good idea why. Large supermarket chains are gouging their customers but we cannot prove it. Why? It is because they refuse to declare their profits and the Government refuses to make them.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has stated that nearly half of calls to it this year were about a single issue, namely, groceries. According to Barnardos, four in ten parents are skipping meals or eating less themselves to feed their children. Ireland is a wealthy country; it should not be such a struggle just to survive, because that is what we are talking about. We are talking about the cost of simply existing in this country - putting a roof over your head, keeping the lights on and putting food on the table. More and more people are finding life completely unaffordable.

The grocery market in Ireland is worth at least €10 billion per year and yet there is little to no transparency about its profits. Today, it was announced that Dunnes Stores in the North increased its profits last year by a whopping 44%. That is a staggering increase at a time when so many people are struggling. We do not know what the profit margins are in this jurisdiction because Dunnes Stores does not have to tell us. It does not have to file annual accounts and the Government refuses to do anything about it.

Many of us have long suspected the consumers in Ireland are being gouged by large supermarket chains but without full transparency on profit levels it is very difficult to prove this. The profits announced by Dunnes Stores in the North today do tell us one thing though, that business for it is booming but for its customers it is another story.

The Social Democrats have now been highlighting this issue for years. We have asked the Government to force large supermarket chains to publish their profits and to give more powers to the food regulator and consumer regulator so they can investigate and prevent supermarkets from ripping off their customers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Holly Cairns: However, the Government has done nothing.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Holly Cairns: What will the Minister do to address this issue?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for her question. Her statement that the Government is doing nothing is not in fact correct. The Minister of State who has responsibility for this area and who has been engaging with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, is Minister Dillon, and he met representatives of the CCPC in June and has asked it to conduct an analysis of the Irish grocery retail sector with a view to determining whether there is evidence of excessive pricing. The CCPC is expected to report back in the coming weeks.

This week, we saw another example of the work of the CCPC in protecting consumers. A warning letter was issued to the motor industry. We feel the powers of the CCPC should be strengthened further. If the Deputy knows the programme for Government she will see that we committed in it to giving more powers to the CCPC. I know this has been prioritised in the Department of enterprise by Minister Burke and Ministers of State Dillon and Troy.

The measures the Government is taking are designed to reduce the cost of groceries in Ireland. However, I have to say we have a very competitive grocery sector in Ireland. We will try to ensure through Government interaction with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission that prices are brought down and that the most competitive prices are available. We also need to recognise that people can get cheaper prices elsewhere and I urge people to engage in a competitive assessment of the prices that are available.

In terms of the proposals the Deputy puts forward, she said the Social Democrats have been advocating that we require the grocery sector to publish profits. Bring forward legislation and the Government will examine it. Obviously, there are reasons certain companies are not required to publish profits, predominantly because they are private companies that are not required to publish information such as that. If the Social Democrats believe that should be changed, bring forward legislation in terms of what should be set out in the Companies Act and the Government will give consideration to it.

It is obviously a complicated issue in terms of trying to intervene and impose obligations on certain companies that are involved in the grocery business as opposed to other companies that are involved elsewhere. It is obviously and necessarily going to be the case that whatever company their legislative proposal would engage with would have to apply across the board to all private companies.

I will speak again to the relevant Ministers in respect of this. I am aware of the profits being made in the grocery sector but the Government is working on it issue and has engaged with the CCPC and will continue to do so. If the Deputy wants a legislative change I urge her and the Social Democrats to put forward amending legislation and the Government will give consideration to it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The fact of the matter is that the Dunnes Stores operation in the North has recorded a 44% increase in profits. Let that sink in. The Minister cannot tell me what Dunnes Stores' increase in profits is in this jurisdiction because Dunnes Stores, the country's biggest supermarket chain, does not have to be transparent here.

In an interview with the *Sunday Independent* in July, Simon Harris said that supermarkets should publish their profits. He said, "The more transparency, the better. Why wouldn't they be transparent? What do they have to hide?". He said this just a few days after voting against

the Social Democrats' motion calling for just that. The hypocrisy is staggering. The Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, are in government, so they can do more than have meetings and narrate the situation; they can intervene. They can change the law, they can empower the regulators and they can force supermarkets to publish their profits. The question is: why are they acting like a Cabinet of bystanders-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----narrating the problem instead of actually doing something about it?

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

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I should point out that in order for this to happen, the law in the country has to change. The law can be changed-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: You are the Government.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The entity that changes the law is the Oireachtas. Government proposes laws and has the advantage of the majority in the Houses of the Oireachtas but there is nothing stopping Opposition parties from bringing forward legislation that they believe will change the law. Motions are-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Government voted down our proposals on this.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----easy to bring forward and they get covered-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Why did the Government vote against it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Callaghan, your leader has posed the question.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----but the hard work is done when it comes to drafting legislation.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Work which the Government is not doing.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: If a Member believes legislation should be introduced to change the law, they should come forward with that legislation. We need to be careful about vilifying grocers. There are a lot of grocers in Ireland that provide a lot of employment to people. Of course, they make profits. It is our job to ensure that their profits are not excessive and that we curtail them. The best way to do that is through the CCPC and engagement with the consumer protection entity. The more competition there is in the business, the more prices come down. Prices coming down benefits the consumer.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: On behalf of Independent Ireland, I wish to be associated with the remarks wishing Julie Lyons and her family the very best. I wish her a long and successful retirement and a happy future. Julie has been keeping the group of Independent Ireland well-rounded over the last number of years.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That is a change of heart there.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: So it is Julie's fault, not mine.

Free primary education is guaranteed under Article 42.4 of the Constitution. Today, in my constituency of Cork North-Central and across Ireland, it is anything but free. A coalition of every majority education body, school managers, principals, teachers and staff has written to the Minister for education and the Government to say that schools are now in financial crisis. The facts are stark. An analysis of 707 schools shows that heating costs have gone up 83% since 2019. Water and refuse bills are up 51%. Utility costs have nearly doubled in expenditure from 3.3% to 6.1%. Accounting and auditing costs have gone up 58%. School management systems have gone up by a staggering 199%. This seems outrageous. The average primary school now faces a €17,000 deficit on day-to-day running costs. This is not weekly, but daily.

The Minister and his Government have increased the basic capitation grant to €224 per pupil this September but principals say the real costs of running a school are far closer to €300 per pupil. This is why this coalition of educators calling for an immediate increase to at least €299 has come together. It is also looking for supports for ICT, minor works and ancillary services. In schools in Glanmire, Ballyvolane, Mayfield, Knocknaheeny, Ballincollig, Mallow and Blarney in my constituency, and I sure across the Minister's constituency too, we have people raising funds not for extras but for essentials. They are raising funds to keep the lights and the heating on and to cover cleaning costs. Cash-strapped parents are running raffles and bake sales and are being asked for large voluntary contributions while inflation eats away at their pay packets. To my mind, that is not free education; it is a breach of the Constitution. Will the Minister commit to raise the capitation grant to €299 per child in the forthcoming budget, thereby ensuring that principals can focus on teaching instead of begging families to keep their classrooms open?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy O'Flynn for his question. As the budget approaches, many sectors in society will be anxious to ensure their sector gets taken care of in the budget. As I am sure the Deputy will appreciate, the Government has a limited cake and that amount has to be spread out equitably across the different sectors. Regarding school funding and capitation, since 2020 schools have benefited from significant increases in capitation funding, additional teaching and SNA posts and enhanced school leadership supports. I know the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is doing her best to ensure the capitation improvement will increase. The Minister is doing a review of costs in schools to see whether we can bring them down. It is important to point out that a huge amount has been done to date and over previous budgets. Budget 2025 delivered a permanent €30 million increase in capitation funding, which was a 12% rise on current standard and enhanced rates. That was on top of the 9.2% increase secured the previous year and the Minister is anxious to see that further

supports are provided in this budget. From this September, this has brought capitation to €224 per primary pupil, as the Deputy said. Of course, there are secondary pupils as well. The capitation is €386 per post-primary student, with enhanced rates for pupils with special education needs and Traveller pupils. Schools received a €45 million cost-of-living payment in November 2024 to tackle rising energy and day-to-day running costs. The Department of education works very closely with schools that are in financial difficulty. If a school is in financial difficulty, it should contact the Department of education. The financial support services unit within the Department will play a critical role in guiding schools through any financial difficulties. We have to take into account that the Government has in recent years provided free schoolbooks for children in primary schools and, indeed, in secondary schools now. That has been an extraordinary game-changer, if I can use a word that has been used with some frequency recently.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is a great word.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It has been a game-changer for parents of schoolchildren. It has had a considerable role in reducing the pressures on them. I am conscious, as I know the Minister, Deputy McEntee is, that schools can face financial difficulties and that there are further financial burdens placed upon them. The capitation grant has increased, and we hope it will increase again. There are mechanisms through which schools in financial difficulty can get support by engaging with the financial support services unit within the Department. If schools in the Deputy's constituency of Cork North-Central have issues in terms of financial difficulty, I am sure they have already been in contact. If they have not, they should be in contact with the Department of education.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Minister for his reply and his very warm words but unfortunately warm words do not heat classrooms. It is not just one Deputy raising this concern; it is an entire education community speaking with one voice. The INTO, Educate Together, school managers, Fórsa and the IPPN are all saying the same thing. They all cannot be wrong. Schools are running on a deficit and parents are trying to fill the gap. The Minister referred to the books scheme but is he aware that a number of schools have told people to buy electronic devices such as iPads or equivalent tablets, which is costing parents an additional €600? This is an expense they certainly did not see coming. That is happening throughout the country. The promises of reviews will not cover the deficit of €17,000 per school. Parents should not have to sell cakes in bake sales to keep the classroom warm and lit. I remind the Minister again-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Deputy O'Flynn.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----of the constitutional promise of free education.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: That constitutional obligation on the State is being complied with.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is not.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is being complied with-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is not.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: What about the other resources that the Deputy has not mentioned?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is not. The Minister is misleading the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Government has put €200 million into ICT in schools. The minor works programme can be availed of for the purposes of works in schools. The summer works programme, which is very popular, ensures works can be done over a short period of time while schools are out on holiday.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Is every educator in Ireland an idiot?

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy allow the Minister to answer?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As I stated, the free books scheme has not been mentioned by him. There is the hot meals scheme as well in schools.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: That is another disgrace.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There are huge advantages that have been introduced into the education sector in schools by this Government and its predecessor and they need to be acknowledged by the Deputy. We acknowledge that there are schools that are under financial pressures but there is a mechanism for them to engage with the Department in respect of that. If there are schools that need to engage with the Department, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the unit in the Department will engage with them. They will provide schools with advice and support, if that support is available, to ensure the schools get through it.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhalkaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Michael Murphy: I raise the national challenge of vacancy and dereliction in our towns and villages. In my own constituency of Tipperary South we see it clearly.

Towns like Clonmel, Tipperary town and Carrick-on-Suir are three of our key towns and all have prime retail streets with empty or derelict properties. Unfortunately, this is replicated right across the country. These are proud places with strong employment bases, great community spirit, and real potential but vacancy and dereliction are holding them back. The Taoiseach has said on many occasions that everything is on the table when it comes to addressing our housing and investment challenges, and particularly the role private investment

can play in delivering apartments and mixed-use developments. This must include and be linked to tackling vacancy and dereliction. I believe there is a real opportunity for reform of the current regulatory and grant framework to address this challenge more effectively.

While I am aware of the understandable caution regarding tax incentives as a policy tool, I would ask the Government to consider a tightly targeted measure in this very specific context. Tax relief would be linked exclusively to the redevelopment of the derelict or vacant property in question and not to any other property holdings of the developer. Should relief, for example, be applied to future rental income from the redeveloped property ensuring any benefit is directly tied to the productive use of the asset? These properties currently generate no economic return for their owners, for the local economy or for the Exchequer. In the midst of a housing shortage returning them to productive use, whether for commercial or residential purposes, is a clear public good. If nothing is done then vacancy will remain stubbornly high, eroding the economic and social vitality of our towns and villages. By contrast, a focused and time-bound intervention confined to prime retail areas could trigger significant private investment, deliver new housing, and revitalise the very heart of our towns without creating a long-term financial risk. Will the Minister commit to reforming the regulatory and grant framework and consider new targeted measures so we can finally turn vacancy and dereliction into an opportunity?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Murphy very much for his question. I very much share his concerns about the impact that vacancy and dereliction can have on our towns and cities throughout the country. It can create the impression of a downturn in that area and this has an impact not just on the local community but in terms of the development of business in the area. I commend Deputy Murphy on coming forward with proposals in respect of tax reliefs and issues such as that. I cannot give the Deputy any assurance today on his proposals, and I know he would not expect me to, but I certainly will pass them on to the Ministers Donohoe and Browne, who are the relevant Ministers and who can appraise the Deputy's suggestion.

It is important to point out that we got new data today from the Central Statistics Office on vacancy and dereliction for the years 2022 and 2023. I am pleased to say they indicate a national vacancy rate of 3.3% at the end of 2023. This is a drop from what it was in 2022 when it was 3.6%. Vacancy appears to be declining based on the statistics that are available from the Central Statistics Office.

I want the Deputy to be aware, and I know he is, that there are already a range of measures being taken by the Government to address vacancy and dereliction. It is my belief, and that of the Government, that they are having real success. The type of measures I am talking about are the vacant property refurbishment grant; the repair and leasing scheme; the €150 million urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, which is a revolving fund, for local authorities; the planning exemptions for conversion of vacant commercial properties; and full-time vacant home officers in every local authority across the country. From what the Deputy is saying about the towns and villages in his constituency, such as Clonmel and other towns and villages, it may not be the case that all those schemes have been availed of. I ask the Deputy to give consideration, or rather that the local authority in Tipperary give consideration, to availing of those schemes because they are very important. They are very useful and effective in responding to dereliction.

At the end of June over 13,700 vacant property refurbishments grant applications were received, there were almost 10,000 approvals, and over 2,800 grants were issued as refurbishment works were completed. This amounts to approximately €155 million paid out to support people in bringing empty dwellings back into use as homes. These are just some of the measures that are being effected at present.

I will report back to the Ministers Donohoe and Browne the Deputy's proposal in respect of tax reliefs. Obviously these can be difficult to craft and sculpt for the purpose of legislation. I note the Deputy's suggestion that it should be limited to the specific property that needs to be brought back into use but it is something that will be given consideration by the Government.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister for his reply but the reality is that despite these existing schemes vacancy and dereliction remains stubbornly high. Failure to act now will mean that these empty buildings continue to blight our main streets year after year while a housing crisis deepens. I am calling for a specific ring-fenced approach, reform of the existing regulatory and grant system, and a targeted relief that applies where a building is actually brought back into use. In the midst of a housing shortage, returning them to productive use is a public good. This is also about restoring our towns, creating houses, creating jobs and giving our communities the confidence they deserve.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We certainly do need to return all derelict properties to use, and preferably residential use. We all know the time it takes to construct new dwellings. If we have derelict dwellings in our towns and cities we need to get them back into use as quickly as possible. I cannot give a commitment in respect of the proposals the Deputy is making here this afternoon but, as I said, I will raise it with the relevant Ministers. It is, however, important to note some of the areas that have had the benefit of regeneration. A regeneration revamp on the Main Street of Carrick-on-Suir is expected to start at the end of 2026. It will also be a beneficiary of the €14.39 million under the town and village renewal fund. There is work being done. The Government recognises the importance of ensuring we have renewal within our towns and cities. We will certainly take into account the proposals the Deputy has put forward. Ultimately, however, there has to be an obligation as well on the owner of the property to put the property back into use. Too many people have property that is derelict. They should put them back into use for the public.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to return to the issue of the global flotilla. I spoke this morning with Senator Chris Andrews, our colleague. His boat, the *Spectre*, was hit by four Israeli drones. I understand that 11 devices hit that and other boats on the flotilla. These are clearly acts of intimidation, of menace, and of threat. They represent yet another brazen violation of international law. It is simply a symptom of the impunity gifted to Netanyahu and gifted to Israel, to their apartheid, to their occupation and now to their ongoing acts of genocide. As the Minister has acknowledged, the flotilla is a mission of mercy and humanity to break the blockade of Gaza and to deliver aid, and more broadly to put pressure on Israel to stop the genocide and to put pressure on the international community to punish Israel. I appreciate the

Minister's earlier words but will he amplify what the Government will concretely do to protect Irish citizens and others on the flotilla?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am pleased to hear the Deputy spoke to Senator Andrews. It is obviously a very traumatic event for him and all other persons who are on the flotilla. As I said in my earlier comments, this is a reflection of the contempt Israel has for people who are non-combatants, whether they are in Gaza or on international waters. Having engaged with the Tánaiste's Department this morning I am aware that the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach are very concerned about the overnight attacks on the flotilla and reiterate that no unlawful or violent acts should be taken against the flotilla. I would urge Israel to respect international law and international humanitarian law.

Officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are closely monitoring the situation and will provide whatever assistance that Senator Andrews, Deputy Heneghan or anyone else on the boat requires. That is the current situation but obviously it is a concern that the Government will keep a close eye on.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I will add that all our thoughts are with those on the flotilla. It is hugely important that Ireland does all it can on the world stage to ensure the safety of those on board.

This week, we saw the US President and health secretary coming out with bizarre and unfounded assertions about links between paracetamol and autism. I want to share the horror of AsIAm CEO Adam Harris, who said that the risk of harmful tropes could set us back decades with regard to understanding autism. He said it is dangerous to make these sorts of claims because it stigmatises autistic people and poses a danger to public health. I am concerned about the impact those remarks in the US may have on autistic people here, not least because of the disgraceful remarks made about autism here just last week by a Member of this Chamber, Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. I ask the Minister if he and his Government will stand firm against these bizarre theories that have no basis in science. Will the Government call out anti-science rhetoric, particularly where it pertains to autistic people, and will it commit to seeing services installed, particularly in this budget, to allow autistic people in Ireland to live with dignity and have access to the services that are so desperately needed?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Government policy on any health issue has to be guided by science. It cannot be guided by politics. I recall 20 years ago there was a theory put out that there was a link between autism and the MMR vaccine. It got a lot of traction in very respectable organs. Ultimately, it was completely disproven. The Irish Government will certainly not be taking any stances in respect of causes of diseases without any proof in place to indicate what the source of them is. Science has to dictate this, not political convenience.

Deputy Gary Gannon: In the *Irish Examiner* this morning, Cormac O'Keeffe gave voice to what many of us working in the area already know. Throughout Dublin city, even youth workers are starting to feel scared as they go about their work, such are the levels of increased violence and intimidation. I find that extraordinary. What is more extraordinary is that the Minister's Government has, over the last two terms, initiated two separate task forces for Dublin city centre in different ways. One amounted to basically a couple of press releases and nothing

more. The other completely misunderstood the community it was asked to serve. Has the Minister run out of ideas when it comes to tackling antisocial behaviour and crime in our communities?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: No. I thank the Deputy for the question. Like him, I am a Deputy for Dublin city centre. It is a great city. I am concerned about a narrative that keeps stating that it is a dangerous place to go into.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Are they wrong?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There are tens of thousands of people walking around the streets of Dublin today as the Deputy and I will do later. They feel safe, and they are right to feel safe.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There are always going to be circumstances where there are criminal acts. It is a city and county that has 1.2 million people in it. As Minister for justice, I cannot come to the Deputy and say there will be no criminal activity in Dublin. It is a large international capital city. What we have to do as Deputies representing the city centre is be more positive about it. There are obviously aspects-----

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will tell the people-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There are parts of Dublin city that can be unsafe, particularly for somebody who has been attacked, but predominantly it is a safe city. Look at the crime statistics; they are down. Look at the knife statistics; they are down. The Garda is doing a good job and the Deputy should get behind his city rather than denigrating it.

Deputy Charles Ward: I have written to the Minister, Deputy Heydon, regarding the closure of the ISPCA's animal centre in Donegal, a devastating decision that has detrimental animal welfare effects in the north-west region. Just over a week ago in Donegal, we saw 14 dogs rescued from horrific conditions but these dogs have nowhere to go. They will travel a considerable distance to reach the nearest facility, which means longer transport times for distressed, injured and abandoned animals, raising serious questions about their welfare and the capacity of other centres to absorb the additional demand. I also raised questions about the cost it will involve, given that the Donegal centre was closed because of serious financial challenges. Surely it does not make financial sense to close a centre. With the arrangements that have been made to ensure the animals in Donegal continue to receive the appropriate care needed and transport to distances that do not compromise their welfare, I have written to the Minister, Deputy Heydon, asking if he can intervene and stop this centre being closed immediately.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ward. I was not aware there was a closure of the ISPCA centre in Donegal. It is obviously a concern for people and for the animals of Donegal. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Heydon. I do not have an answer for the Deputy. I do not know where it is proposed that the closest centre will be for people in Donegal. I hope there will be one in Donegal or the surrounding counties. I will come back to the Deputy in respect of that having spoken to the Minister, Deputy Heydon.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Across the country, parents are alarmed at the attempt to slip gender ideology into the new primary school curriculum under the label of "well-being". They have spoken in their thousands in forums and yet the Government presses on. At a time when children face many challenges in growing up, it is reckless to add confusion and division into the classroom. Schools are meant to give stability, not be a laboratory for ideology. With regard to the reality of biology, it is a fact, to my mind, that a male is a male and a female is a female. Parents want clarity on this, not ideology. Let me put the question very plainly and simply to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and her Government: what is a woman?

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): I was really pleased to launch the new primary school curriculum this week, something that has been developed for many years in consultation with schools, teachers, parents and also with young people. There is no miscommunication or confusion. We are very clear as to what is in the curriculum. There is a greater emphasis on physical health but there is an emphasis on making sure we support young people's well-being. We want to make sure that we support young people to be resilient but that we also have classrooms that are warm, welcoming and safe.

I am very clear on what is in the curriculum. I wish to be clear on this because there is no confusion other than what the Deputy has just said, which is completely inaccurate. We will talk to young children about puberty. What they have told us is that we are talking to them too late - that it has already happened and there is no point in talking to them in sixth class. That will happen at an earlier stage. We have talked to young people about issues like sexual orientation. We voted for marriage equality ten years ago. We are very clear that we recognise, as we should, same-sex couples and relationships and that is what we will be speaking to young people about.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Permanent anaphylaxis is not currently listed as a qualifying condition under the long-term illness scheme, even though it is a long-term condition and requires lifelong management and access to emergency medication. The long-term illness scheme has not been updated since the 1970s. I ask the Minister of State if permanent anaphylaxis would be considered but also if the Government plans on reviewing the scheme, considering it has not been reviewed in such a long period.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy very much for his question on the long-term illness scheme, where many illnesses are listed. The Department of Health, in conjunction with the HSE, keeps this under review at all times. I will bring the Deputy's concerns back to the Department.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I sat in my office in Carlow town last night until almost 9.30 p.m. with two primary school principals who tell me they lie awake at night wondering how they are going to pay the constantly increasing costs of running their schools. They, along with the multiple emails and calls I have received from across Carlow and Kilkenny from teachers and parents alike, have four simple asks: to increase the capitation fee for primary school principals; to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio; to roll out the small-school projects that we all agree have been a huge success in small schools nationally, such as Glynn National School in County Carlow; and to make the SEN co-ordinator a role in its own right. They are all asks that are included in the programme for Government. Can the Minister please ensure that sufficient funding is provided in budget 2026 to the Minister for education to ensure she can implement these measures in line with the programme for Government?

Deputy Helen McEntee: At the outset, I acknowledge the unbelievable work our principals do in our schools, the teaching they provide and the way in which they manage their schools. Of course I want to see more funding invested in education. Every cent we spend on a young person is not only an investment in their future but also an investment in our future. We have increased the capitation over the last number of budgets but of course I am currently, as we all are, engaging with the Ministers, Deputies Chambers and Donohoe, to ensure I can secure as much money as possible. What I am also doing, and what I think is really important, is taking a look at exactly what the costs are for schools. Whether it is electricity, heating, insurance costs or hidden costs we are not aware of, I want to understand exactly what the costs are on a day-to-day, weekly and monthly basis in our schools and then see how we can support them but also how we can bring those costs down.

1 o'clock

That will feed into a wider piece of work I am doing. When it comes to the budget I will advocate, as we all are, for as much money as possible.

Deputy Ann Graves: I have been contacted by parents and SNAs in schools throughout Fingal East. They have real concerns about the recently published SNA review process of the 2025-2026 guidelines by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. The guidelines could risk serious harm to children with special education needs and I share their concerns. Any effort to tighten timelines or restrict criteria has the potential to deny children access to the supports that they need to grow, develop and thrive. The proposal for unification and redeployment risks the protection autism classes resources have. It will also set it up for internal conflict between autism classes within the mainstream schools. Sinn Féin will continue to support the SNAs and the children they serve. I will continue to raise their concerns with the Minister and the NCSE. Will the Minister review or suspend the guidelines until there can be proper consultation with the schools, the SNAs, the parents and the unions?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I welcome an opportunity to provide clarity for people in this regard. Three things are happening at the moment. First, myself and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, have made very clear that we will change the timelines by which SNAs are allocated. It is not good enough that on the day before they start school, children do not know whether they have an SNA or not. We are making it very clear that timelines will align with teacher allocations. Schools will still have time at the beginning of the year to identify whether

there is an additional need and to make that further appeal. However, at any time throughout the year, if a dynamic in a school changes and if a child comes to the school with an additional need, there will always be an opportunity for a school to make that appeal.

Second, we want to ensure a redeployment scheme is put in place. It has always been the case that SNAs are redeployed. If the need is not in a school for a particular SNA, they move to other schools. Unfortunately, at the moment they have to resign and are made unemployed. They then have to reapply to school. It is not efficient and it is not fair on SNAs. We are changing that to have a more efficient redeployment scheme.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. She will have to write to Deputy.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The third thing is around actual SNA allocation. No changes are being made to the criteria. The way in which they are applied now is the way in which they will be applied in the year ahead. I want to be really clear on that.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: The programme for Government is supportive of the provision of family resource centres which provide community development and family support services in towns throughout the country. Longford town has a population of 10,000. It has the highest truancy levels in the State by population. It has the highest number of referrals to Tusla and it has the most diverse population in the country. Yet, in the recent application, we were unsuccessful in securing funding despite putting together a needs assessment with all the organisations working on the ground in Longford to highlight the need. The need we have for a family resource centre was shown. We have a building and we have a board but we do not have the money. We were not successful despite the highest need across all those levels in the country.

I am looking for a commitment that in budget 2026 we will provide money for additional family resource centres and that Longford, which has the highest need in the country, and that need is factual, will be successful in what it needs, namely a family resource centre based in the town.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for the question. I agree with him that family resource centres do outstanding work. I have them in my own constituency. I would say every Member of this House is aware of the excellent work they do. I am informed that the Minister, Deputy Foley, has announced the opening of five new family resource centres this year. There are many applications for funding in respect of the resource centres throughout the country. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Foley, in respect of the issue the Deputy raised in his constituency. I do not have a detailed response at present but I will try to come back to the Deputy on that. I can understand his desire to ensure the family resource centre, which has a board and a building, continues and that it needs money.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I plead with the Minister to use his power urgently to end the industrial and reformatory school survivors' hunger strike by immediately awarding a health amendment Act, HAA, card to all survivors as they deserve access to comprehensive healthcare to deal with the lasting effects of these institutions and by awarding a full contributory State pension for the unpaid work done by them many years ago. These survivors worked long

hours, unpaid, saving the State and religious orders a significant amount of money. The survivors are owed fair financial recognition for their forced, unpaid labour. They did in fact receive State apologies from the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and former President, Mary McAleese, but that will not pay their bills. I know some of these survivors personally and I am aware they are not for turning. They will not change their minds unless they get what both they and I believe they are entitled to. I wish to put on the record of the House that I fully support the survivors. I implore the Minister to act decisively on this most urgent matter to avoid any further unnecessary suffering. Survivors of the Magdalen laundries are receiving an extra pension for the work they did while these survivors, who spent years in these institutions, are getting nothing.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have been given a note in respect to that matter. I am very concerned that people have taken the extreme step of going on hunger strike. Like the Deputy, I urge them to reflect upon the potential damage they are doing to themselves by engaging in this. I will certainly speak to the relevant Ministers for the purpose of seeing whether a resolution can be obtained. From what Deputy Cahill says, the demands are relatively limited. However, there is an opportunity for people to discuss this and to seek to get agreement and resolution without the extreme action that is being taken at present.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I want to return to the attacks on the global summit flotilla that occurred last night. This was actually the second attack on this flotilla. It includes more than 20 Irish citizens, including my colleague, Senator Chris Andrews, who told me this morning that his boat was attacked four times last night. Those attacks are a wilful intimidation and an act of aggression against a humanitarian mission. This was a direct assault on boats carrying baby food and rice, aid that can and should reach those who are in absolutely desperate need in Gaza. Palestinians do not need another statement. Statements will not end this genocide, just as concerns and observations will not ensure the safety of those on the flotilla. We need to see meaningful action to protect those Irish citizens.

My question to the Minister is: what action does the Government intend to take today to protect the Irish citizens on that flotilla?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have to be aware of the limits of Irish influence and Irish powers. We are not a strong military power. I cannot direct marines or members of the Irish Rangers to rescue people on that ship. We are not in that type of business. When it comes to what action are we going to take, the Deputy knows as well as I do that the only action we can take is through the power of our influence, by condemning this behaviour and by trying to bring to the attention of the international community the totally unacceptable behaviour of the Israeli Government. We have been quite effective in doing that. However, that is all we can do. We are not a military power. We do not get involved in military engagements with other countries.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have a specific question on the external review into spinal care in Temple Street hospital which began in September 2023, nearly two years. I understand it is still at phase 1. That report was on top of all the reports we know about, such as the Boston review on spinal surgery for patients with spina bifida; the HIQA review on the use of surgical implants in September 2023; and the Developmental Dysplasia of the Hip published in 2025.

This is the fourth report, not to mention all the internal reports. Where is this report at? The Minister knows the disquiet on the ground and that people are asking for an independent inquiry. We know what inquiries lead to. Can we have a date for the report? Has part of it gone to the Minister and has part of it gone relevant Minister? Where are we with the status of that report?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In fairness, the Deputy asked a straightforward question. I do not have that information. I will ask the Minister for Health to give me the specific information in respect of it. However, there was an announcement today that it is the Minister's intention to fully integrate CHI into the HSE, which is a positive development. There has been a number of reviews recently focused on the paediatric services in CHI. The Nayagam review is also under way-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is the one I am interested in.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----phase two of which is reviewing the service, including the governance being provided by the paediatric surgery service at Temple Street. I cannot tell the Deputy when it will be finished.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister and the Deputy can correspond further.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is it part of the report already?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: No.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not a back-and-forth.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: My instruction is that it is not yet with the Minister. I will ask the Minister when it will be available.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh míle maith agat.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister, Deputy Wall. I mean Deputy Wall.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I appreciate the promotion. I raise the importance of the housing aid and housing adaption grants that are administered by the local authorities. In particular, I refer to a letter recently received by all public representatives in County Kildare stating that the grants have been paused. My office is aware of more than 20 applicants who have been told to apply again next year. Those application forms have been returned to the constituents in question. I am sure the Minister will be aware of the importance of these grants and the great work that is done through them. As a result of their being paused, many people are going through trauma and concern about the quality of their lives. Will the Minister raise this issue with the Minister for housing? Kildare County Council needs additional funding. I understand it is not the only local authority involved, but at a time when

people need them most, we should go back and ensure these grants are readily available. There should be no pause in any local authority area.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. I agree that housing aid and housing adaption grants are vital. They are hugely important and the Government is supporting them. I do not have the details required to reply to the Deputy's question, and I apologise for that. However, I will engage with the Minister, Deputy Browne, try to get the information and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Barry Ward: Last week's "RTÉ Investigates" programme on data sharing and the sharing of personal geolocation data by individuals through the downloading of apps was shocking and disquieting. People the length and breadth of this country are downloading apps and making consents, which are not real or informed, to allow third parties not only to gather hugely personal and invasive information about them but then to sell it to third parties without the knowledge of the person who has downloaded the app. Does the Minister agree that it cannot possibly be in compliance with the general data protection regulation or with our own data protection laws? If there is not informed consent and people do not understand they are giving that consent, it cannot be in accordance with data protection. What is the Government going to do to ensure that the providers of these apps are required to get informed and real consent from the people using them?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I know he featured in the programme. I had a walk-on part as well. The Data Protection Commission is treating this matter seriously and is investigating it. The officials in my Department are engaging with the commission, which is required by law to ensure that it investigates matters such as this if it believes what is involved infringes upon the data rights of individuals. Part of the problem, as the Deputy identified, is that there is not sufficient awareness on the part of individuals that when they link to certain apps, they are providing ongoing information in respect of their movements. I want the Data Protection Commission to investigate the issue and I want a report from it in respect of what it identifies. I share the Deputy's concern.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I am speaking today on behalf of the Wade family in my constituency. They had great success in the European kickboxing championships in Italy last year. The three Wade siblings, three unique young people, are Abbie, who is 13 years old and won two bronze medals; Ryan, who is 16 years old and won one bronze medal; and Amy, who won two gold medals and was named as the fighter of the tournament. They represented their country with pride and distinction against other national teams from across Europe and around the world. However, unlike those other national teams, the Wades and others like them representing Ireland in martial arts championships did not receive any support from the State even as they donned the green jersey on behalf of the country and represented it in a sport they love. Teams from other countries receive that support. In that context, it is important for the Government to consider how we incentivise and encourage elite performance at juvenile level in the lesser recognised sports. I encourage the Minister to take up the matter with the Minister for sport.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for informing and educating me about the success of the Wade family in kickboxing. As the Deputy knows, Sport Ireland is the entity that allocates funding directly to the relevant national governing bodies. I am concerned to hear that they received no funding whatsoever. This is an issue that I will raise with my colleague the Minister for sport. The way we decide how funding should be allocated is on the basis that Sport Ireland has the significant say in the distribution of funding. I thank the Deputy for bringing the matter to my attention. I will raise the matter with the Minister for sport.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I, too, raise the Global Sumud Flotilla because to be quite honest, the Minister's answers so far have been weak and inadequate. The flotilla was attacked in European waters last night. It is a humanitarian fleet of over 500 civilians, among them our colleague and my friend Deputy Chris Andrews, my friend and comrade Tadgh Hickey, and 20 more brave Irish citizens, who are doing the work that the world's governments should be doing by trying to deliver humanitarian aid to our brothers and sisters in Palestine. This is psychological warfare and distraction because the terror state of Israel knows it will get away with it. This is just the beginning. What usually happens when our flotillas are attacked is that the destruction and slaughter in Gaza and the West Bank increases. I do not want more words of condemnation or concern. We need action. Our Government needs to act now. What is it going to do?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy, time is up.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: We need to ensure the safe passage of this flotilla-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to answer, Deputy.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: -----and keep our citizens safe.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Ireland has provided significant humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza. The amount is in the region of €90 million. I ask the Deputy to tell me what she wants the Irish Government to do.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Ensure that our citizens are safe. Place sanctions on Israel.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am telling you both-----

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Make sure that Israel does not get away with this any more.

An Ceann Comhairle: -----that is not how this debate works.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Keep your eyes on the flotilla.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Keep your eyes on Gaza and the West Bank. Right now, the slaughter is increasing and we have not put in place any sanctions.

An Ceann Comhairle: Minister, do you have an answer?

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: He has no answer and there are no sanctions.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We are keeping our eyes on what is happening in Gaza. We are condemning the actions of the Israeli Government.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Condemnation.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We are leading by example in the European Union, and other countries are following our example by recognising the State of Palestine. We are leading by example in ensuring that the issue of the EU-Israel trade agreement is coming under consideration. People are coming around to the Irish point of view. We are doing a lot.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Sanction the terror state.

Deputy Michael Collins: Today marked the close of nominations of candidates for the Presidency. Only three people will go forward for the Presidency of this country, which has a population of 5 million. Some very genuine people, one of them being Maria Steen, put their name forward only to be blocked by what can only be called a big party rigged system. This age-old-age process must be scrapped. Independent Ireland will bring forward a Bill in the weeks ahead to not only allow Oireachtas Members to vote for a candidate but that will also include our MEPs and give stronger opportunities to councils to nominate with the backing of 75 councillors. It will also include a preliminary round of voting similar to the French presidential model. That would allow a wider and fairer field of candidates. It is obvious to the tens of thousands of people out there that the process we have is wrong. Will the Minister commit to working with Independent Ireland to bring forward a Bill to put in a change to the effect that genuine candidates will face some regulation but will not be blocked by the bigger parties if they put their names forward for the Presidency?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy says there are only three candidates for the Presidency of Ireland when there are 5.5 million people here. In the United States of America, which has a population of approximately 400 million, there are only two candidates.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: That is not right.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I ask the Deputy to bring forward legislation.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputies, we are out of time. Perhaps they would listen to the answer and show some respect.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I ask the Deputy to bring forward legislation and it can be considered. I must point out that it will require a constitutional amendment. My view is that when you look at the provisions contained within the Constitution, they are probably correct. Twenty Members of the Oireachtas and-or four local authorities are required. Much consideration went into drafting that. If the Deputy wants to change that, he must bring forward a Bill proposing how the Constitution should be amended. I would be cautious as to whether or not the Irish public would support it.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I look forward to supporting the campaign of Deputy Catherine Connolly, who did get the required signatures.

I have spoken to many parents in Kildare about a lack of childcare facilities. I have a question. In many new housing developments in Kildare, we are seeing empty-shell units of childcare facilities. It is no problem if the Minister does not have an answer now because I can follow up later. However, what are the Government's intentions in this regard? If and when a private unit is left empty for a significant period, whether that is 12 or 18 months, and it is not going to be a financially feasible private enterprise, how is the Government going to intervene to roll out its programme for Government commitments regarding a public model of childcare?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of childcare facilities in Kildare. If a premises is left vacant for a lengthy period, it is, in the first instance, an issue for the local authority in Kildare to assess what can be done. The Government has invested a considerable amount of money to fund childcare.

I am conscious that one of the issues is trying to identify appropriate properties for the provision of childcare facilities. I will certainly speak to the relevant Minister, Deputy Foley, in respect of it and on whether anything is available for Kildare. However, the local authority also has a big role to play in respect of it.

Criminal Justice (Trespass on Land) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Carol Nolan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 and to provide for related matters.

At the outset, let me express my sincere thanks to Karen O'Brien in the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers and Owen Garvey, assistant parliamentary counsel, for their invaluable research and drafting assistance. Also, my thanks to Luke Norton in the Bills Office for his assistance, as well as Jill Gray in the Ceann Comhairle's office. I also sincerely thank my own PA, David Mullins, for his research and very hard work on this Bill.

I am delighted to introduce this Bill here today. It is aimed at addressing the offence of trespassing on farm and agricultural land. The Criminal Justice (Trespass on Land) Bill 2025

will seek to amend section 13 of the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994. The current wording of the section states:

It shall be an offence for a person, without reasonable excuse, to trespass on any building or the curtilage thereof in such a manner as causes or is likely to cause fear in another person.

Curtilage is any land immediately surrounding a house or other building which forms an enclosure around the house or building, but it does not refer to land beyond that, such as farmland. However, my Bill, if it clears all Stages, will amend the section to include the important substitution to the effect that it shall be an offence for a person, without reasonable excuse, to trespass on any building or other land or the curtilage thereof in such a manner as causes or is likely to cause fear in another person. In that sense, this Bill simply seeks to broaden the scope of existing legislation to capture not just the land on which the farm buildings and curtilage of the buildings are situated but also all farm and agricultural land. If accepted, it would introduce a greater level of legal clarity for farmers and landowners. It would also significantly expand the scope of the physical area that would be captured within the law of trespass. This is urgently required of us all as legislators.

It is vital to remember that trespass affects not only farmers and landowners but also entire rural communities, on whose agricultural land activities such as lurching or the unsanctioned use of quads, scramblers and motorcycles take place frequently. This is a huge problem, as we know from the IFA's 2024 survey, which reported trespassing as a top concern. This was expressed by approximately 50% of 1,500 surveyed farmers, with 25% having experienced civil trespass, where there would have been walkers and unauthorised hunters. We are aware that issues such as dog attacks on livestock often blur civil and criminal lines, but the 2024 survey found that 48% of 800 respondents reported civil trespass cases outnumbering criminal cases. It is also worth pointing out that the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994 was introduced at a time when there was perhaps a far greater level of respect for the rights of farmers and when we did not see such contemptuous disregard among a substantial number of people for the right of farmers or landowners to simply say a person cannot trespass on their land. There is now a sense among many people that they simply have a divine right to go where they like when they like and to do what they like on farm land and other agricultural land. We have to counter that with all the legislative tools at our disposal, in addition to having increased Garda numbers for enforcement.

I am aware that trespassing is also a problem on State lands, such as Coillte forests in the Slieve Bloom Mountains, close to my own home, where there is a huge problem with the reckless use of quads and motorbikes. This is causing great damage to public recreational amenities. These sports and activities are perfectly legitimate – let me make that clear – but they must take place in properly sanctioned areas, not on farm land or other agricultural land without permission from the landowner. It is regrettable that we have to restate such simple, basic facts, but here we are.

This Bill is a modest but important contribution to the ongoing work of assisting farmers and landowners in dealing with the scourge of trespassing, which is continuing to make a misery of so many people's lives. I commend it to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): 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 Carol Nolan: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Statement of Estimates for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission: Motion

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I move:

That Dáil Éireann take note of the Statement of Estimates of moneys required in respect of ongoing expenditure for the period beginning on 1st January, 2026, and ending on 31st December, 2026, prepared and published by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission in accordance with the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 to 2024, which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 24th September, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.26 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.26 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.26 p.m. and resumed at 2.26 p.m.

Auto-Enrolment: Statements

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, to make his statement under Standing Order 56.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Thank you for your patience. The Government has prioritised the introduction of the automatic enrolment retirement savings fund, which will be known by its brand name, My Future Fund. It is one of our key reform commitments to support workers and has been a key priority for me personally as Minister for Social Protection.

The scheme is necessary to address the pension coverage gap that exists in Ireland, where it is estimated that only 35% of private sector workers are in pension schemes. This pension coverage gap exists despite the fact that successive Governments, over many decades, have provided significant incentivisation through tax relief. If not addressed now, this low level of coverage means that a large cohort of people will, in their retirement, be fully dependent on the State pension and whatever assets they may have otherwise accumulated. For many, this will result in a significant drop in living standards. As well as a pension coverage gap, there is the ongoing challenge of pension adequacy in this country because even where people may be in a pension scheme, many of them are not saving enough to ensure an adequate income in retirement commensurate with their lifestyles.

It is important to note at the outset that the State pension will remain the bedrock of the Irish State pension system, providing retirees with a basic level of income and protecting them against pensioner poverty. I cannot emphasise that enough. In that context, My Future Fund will complement the State pension fund and will provide additional income to future retirees to help secure their standard of living in retirement.

Many milestones have already been reached on this journey. The legislation to underpin this new system, the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Act, became law in 2024. Following an extensive procurement exercise, Tata Consultancy Services, TCS, based in Letterkenny, has been appointed as the managed service provider of the scheme's administrative services and is busy building, configuring and testing its systems in line with the scheme's requirements. Three investment managers - Irish Life Investment Managers, Amundi and BlackRock - have been selected following an extensive public procurement exercise. These companies are busy readying their funds and developing and testing integration with TCS. My departmental officials are currently working closely with in excess of 60 payroll product developers across a range of payroll providers, through the Payroll Software Developers Association, to assist them with the changes they need to make to their software to facilitate the calculation and collection of My Future Fund contributions.

Testing work is in progress with the Revenue Commissioners, which will be providing the vital payslip data. I recently announced the recruitment of a chief executive officer of the new National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA, as well as the chair and members of its board. Further staff recruitment is at an advanced stage.

Members of this House will no doubt have seen the eye-catching advertising campaign over the summer that featured scoops of ice-cream with a cherry on top. This was a continuation of the communications work that has been taking place over the past couple of years, which is shifting from direct employer and other stakeholder outreach through webinars and in-person conferences to a paid public awareness campaign. This will continue and intensify over the coming months. A key central point in the communications strategy is the auto-enrolment information hub that is available at [www.gov.ie/autoenrolment]. This resource has lots of information, including explanatory videos, to explain the scheme to all types of stakeholders. The system was branded "My Future Fund" as this reflects the purpose of the scheme, namely, to save and invest for the future, while highlighting that these savings will remain the personal property of the participants. This is not a State fund. NAERSA will do the vast bulk of the administration of this scheme. There will be little or nothing for employers to do and there will be no administrative costs for them. The authority, which has statutory independence, will determine who will be enrolled, electronically issue notifications to payroll systems, collect the contributions and pool them for onward investment with investment managers. It will provide online portals for employees, employers and agents to access accounts and services. It will provide a customer support service and ensure compliance with the scheme by following up where contributions are not collected and remitted up to and including the imposition of sanctions, penalties and even prosecutions.

I recently moved the launch date from the end of this month to 1 January 2026 to allow payroll providers and small employers more time to prepare and to align the system with the normal tax year. The design of the scheme is straightforward and easy to understand. For example, from an investment perspective, there is a default strategy whereby participants'

savings are moved from a higher-risk fund to a medium-risk fund to a lower-risk fund as they get closer to the retirement age of 66. The scheme facilitates choice between these three risk levels but does not require a choice to be made by the participant. In addition, the scheme has a "pot-follows-member" approach, which means that where an employee moves from employment to employment over their working lives, they can maintain the same My Future Fund account at all times. Furthermore, the system is automated through payroll software to minimise the administrative burden for employers, especially those who do not have expertise in operating pension schemes. These design features have come about from studying what other countries have done both well and badly with a view to doing everything better here. This is perhaps the main advantage of being the last country in the OECD to adopt such a system.

In terms of the eligibility criteria, those earning in excess of €20,000 per annum across any number of employments who are aged over 23 and under 60 and not already contributing to an occupational or private pension scheme through payroll will be automatically enrolled. It is expected that about 750,000 workers will be enrolled in this way. Participants will be able to opt out after six months of mandatory participation at which time they will get their own contributions back but the employer and State contributions will remain invested in their account. They will also be able to suspend their participation for up to two years. In all cases, where a person opts out or suspends, they will be automatically re-enrolled after two years after which opt-out and suspension options will be available again. Anybody who is outside of these age and income thresholds may voluntarily opt in to the scheme and where they do, their employer and the State will be compelled by the legislation to contribute as if they had been automatically enrolled. Contributions will be made equally by employees and employers with the State providing a top-up of €1 for every €3 saved by an employee. So, in short, every €3 saved by an employee will automatically become €7. Contributions will start at 1.5% of gross pay increasing to 3% after three years of operation to 4.5% after a further three years of operation and finally to 6% in year ten and from then on. This will, in effect, add up to 14% of an employee's gross earnings and is the very least that international evidence suggests is an adequate rate of saving. This incremental implementation of the contribution rates will allow employees and employers to adjust over time. This money will then be invested as I already mentioned. While NAERSA will ensure all investments will be in line with the prudent person principle and in the best long-term interests of the participants, each of the contracted-for-investment services will be required to have environmental, social and governance, ESG, principles applied to them in accordance with section 74 of the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Act 2024.

At the end of this investment period, each participant will be able to access their savings pot once they reach the State pension age of 66. In the first few years of the scheme, drawdown products will be limited to a simple lump sum payment because savings pots will be relatively small. Taxation arrangements are being provided for separately in the forthcoming finance Bill and will broadly align with the tax treatment of PRSAs, including the application of the tax treatment of trivial pensions. Further drawdown options may be developed over the coming years alongside the annuity and ARF options that are already available from the pensions market but this will be for NAERSA, which is statutorily independent, to consider and make recommendations on in the future. I have gone through the policy rationale for introducing My Future Fund to try to ensure that everybody has a clear understanding of its key features before

contributing to these statements. I truly believe that My Future Fund will be a transformative scheme for this country and will bear great fruit, particularly for our younger generations. I look forward to the statements and to working with Deputies over the coming weeks and months as we roll this scheme out.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to speak this afternoon about auto-enrolment pensions. I acknowledge my dad in the Public Gallery. Both of us have spent a large chunk of our working lives working hard to improve the situation for workers. I genuinely wish I could support the Government's auto-enrolment proposals. Although I am someone who fundamentally believes in decent pensions, I think this is a missed opportunity. One reason is the way the Minister has constructed it while another relates to the current situation. I am sure it is not lost on the Minister that we recently had Private Members' debates on energy costs and child poverty, and on child homelessness. One in five children in this country is growing up in poverty. When housing costs are taken into account, one third of households cannot afford to pay their electricity bills. Poverty is at levels unseen or unheard of, particularly given the wealth within this State.

In the face of that, the Minister has made it very clear that there will be no cost-of-living supports. There will be none of the lifelines that were advanced to people in advance of last year's general election. A cynical person might wonder whether with the election behind us, they will be advanced to those same working people. The Minister needs to understand that notwithstanding the motivation he says is behind this, there are so many people who are literally that close to not being able to make it to the end of the week who will regard this as just another bill. It will be seen as just another thing that has to be paid out of a wage packet that already is not going far enough. That is a worry. People are worried and when they look at how this scheme is constructed, they are more worried.

As the Minister is aware, Sinn Féin proposed that we would use the NTMA to manage the fund on behalf of the State and do more than that and actually use the money in the fund to generate capital projects, invest in renewable energy and make a real difference to offset what people are going to have to put into this. Instead, people are going to have to pay more from wages they are finding it hard to make stretch to the end of the week. I am concerned about the children growing up in emergency accommodation now who will, when they start in the world of work, have to pay into this.

I wonder what the advantages will be beyond those the Minister's Government and his predecessor have mentioned. We know what the motivation behind that was because the former Minister, Heather Humphreys, received a confidential Government report on how prepared people were to continue to pay the eye-watering rents. The alarm bell sounded not because workers were not going to be comfortable, or indeed able to relax and enjoy their retirement. The alarm bell sounded because there was some question over whether or not they would be able to continue to pay the sky-high rents that are the hallmark of this Government. This Government does things like refusing to ban rent increases, starving the tenant in situ scheme of funds and ensuring the vulture funds making exorbitant profits do not have to pay tax. That is all very well, but the people who are on the business end of that will only view this as another cost. It is just another thing they have to pay for. It should be a good and positive thing to put money aside for your retirement, but the fact people cannot opt out of it is a mistake. The money that is being collected could and should be used to invest in projects that would make a

real and meaningful difference. We can look at what workers are having to stretch their wages to pay. Rent is number one for an awful lot of people and they see the motivation of the Government is not about them being comfortable in their retirement but about maintenance of current levels of discomfort. It is about the maintenance of the high rents. It is about ensuring people do not have the comfort in their retirement that they have worked for but that their landlord has the comfort of knowing there will be some money. That is what was motivating the Government.

A Leas-Cheann Comhairle: how much time have we got? Is it three minutes or five minutes each?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Your time is up.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is fine. I did not want to take any time from my colleagues. That is all.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: You are very considerate.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am indeed. It is something which is not spoken of often enough.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry Deputy O'Reilly, but your time is up now.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes, but I think there were more people on the list to speak.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yes. I will continue until six minutes are left and my colleagues will take three minutes each, if that is okay.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay, but it is five minutes and three each.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yes, but there are nine minutes left so we will have three each. I probably will not even take that. I want to use my words to conclude. I think there might have been too much time put up, but we can only go with what is on the clock.

In short, the Government's scheme for auto-enrolment is unfortunately and regrettably a missed opportunity. That it did not take our suggestion to task the NTMA with managing the fund is a missed opportunity. It would have been a chance to put in place secure renewable infrastructure that would make a real and meaningful difference to people who are paying some of the highest electricity bills in Europe. It would have been a chance to invest in social and affordable housing, which would have made a real difference to people who are paying some of the highest rents in Europe. It would have ensured that workers now would not have to pay into a fund they know will be a €1 billion-plus bonanza for the private sector.

The working poor in this State are already put to the pin of their collar. What they hear from the Government is they are going to have to pay more because it is putting up the carbon tax, meaning it will cost more to drive a car even though there is no bus coming. They are going to pay more just for the privilege of living in a house. They are going to have to pay more for

groceries, which have gone up by about 30% in the last number of years and now there is another bill. I am sure the Minister can appreciate that people who are on or close to minimum wage, whom we could refer to as the working poor - a phenomenon created by the policies of successive Governments and one which we should not, but do, see in a relatively wealthy state - wonder at the timing of this. They see the memo that went to Government, they know the motivation, they see big business will benefit and they scratch their heads and ask themselves what is in this for them, other than the capacity to maintain their status as people who are barely getting by in the face of exorbitant rents. There is a cost-of-living crisis. Workers need a hand up. They need a break and a cost-of-living package. They need to make provision for their retirement but this is not necessarily the right way to do that. I qualify my remarks, as I did at the start, by saying I am someone who believes in decent pensions and I am the daughter of somebody who believes in decent pensions, but that is not what this is.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Sinn Féin supports an auto-enrolment pension scheme. We believe it is the Government's responsibility to foster a retirement framework that ensures workers are financially secure in their retirement. However, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have a poor track record on retirement policy. While Sinn Féin believes workers should have the right to retire at 65 should they choose to, or continue to work if that is not their choice, the two Government parties would deny workers that right. Even after decades of backbreaking physical labour, those parties are comfortable with asking for more work out of workers who want to retire. While Sinn Féin supports an auto-enrolment pension scheme it is disappointing, though not surprising, that whether through intent, incompetence or through the efforts of the Minister's predecessor this pension scheme does not prioritise workers' financial well-being either today or in retirement. In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis workers will see their take-home pay go down and while the Government will allow them to opt out, it is bizarrely delaying their right to do so by six months.

At the same time workers continue to face a cost-of-living crisis that has not abated. There are spiralling rents, increased college fees and Government supports like the energy credit have been withdrawn. Now the Government is going to reach into workers' pockets and reduce their take-home pay. Instead of investing this money through the NTMA in things like green energy, which the State and wider society and communities could benefit from, private industry has to get its cut. Perhaps it is the Government's plan that Irish workers can benefit from institutional investment making a fortune on the back of the housing crisis. Of course, that benefit will accrue should the housing crisis continue to be unaddressed, which is a near-certainty under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Auto-enrolment is a good idea. The compulsory removal from ordinary workers' pockets today is not. Allowing Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to gift these funds to the private pension industry rather than investing them for the good of workers and the benefit of Irish citizens as a whole utterly exposes where those parties' priorities lie.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputies O'Reilly and Bennett have laid out our particular issues with auto-enrolment. We would all like to be here in support of an idea my party has always been in support of, but the system the Government is talking about is not that. I do not know how many debates there have been since the resumption about the fact people out there are absolutely suffering in a cost-of-living crisis, especially those who are at the middle, and even more so those at the lowest end, when it comes to earnings. We are talking about taking money from them.

For somebody earning €20,000, we could be taking €20 to €30 a month from them. To some people that does not sound like a lot of money but for those who do not have it, it is an absolutely huge amount. We know the inflationary pressures. Anybody who has been to a shopping centre in the last while or anybody who has had to shop for groceries knows exactly what you used to be able to get butter for and what it costs now. A lot of people know it on the basis of the absolutely extortionate levels of rent they pay due to the housing crisis. We have not been able to deal with and put a decent framework in place in relation to energy provision in this State. We have some of the dearest energy costs across Europe, and we know privatisation and many other factors have played a part. I accept not all of this is on the Minister, but it is due to multiple failures to deal with this over multiple years.

At this point in time, we are where we are. It is really difficult if we are going to take money from some of those who most need it. That is combined with the added pressures they are under at this time in relation to the cost-of-living crisis. This is a time when the Government has moved itself back from at least some of the mitigations that have been offered in previous budgets, such as the energy credits. We know the issue for those who have to pay third level fees, some of whom are looking at €1,000 more than for last year. If they have multiple children that could be a number of thousand more.

This is not a particularly good time for that. When we talk about putting frameworks in place and making sure we have a proper system that works, it is absolutely logical to have the State dealing with this money so it can invest in those capital projects that actually pay off in a really big way. We are talking about housing and the absolute mess that is the housing crisis. People have to live with unaffordable houses and unaffordable rents every day of the week. We will be taking money from some of these people without giving them the option fast enough to mitigate some of that pain, at the same time as the Government is set to hammer them in a budget when some of them are still expecting that there will be some element of reprieve. The Minister has to look at this and find a system that will work while also looking after those who are under severe pressure.

Deputy Mark Wall: I am glad to get the chance to speak on auto-enrolment which is a very important topic for workers in this country, as has been said by colleagues throughout the House. The Labour Party broadly welcomes the introduction of the auto-enrolment scheme which is very much needed. It will and should provide an uplift to the basic standard of living in the future for workers in this country who cannot afford to pay into a private pension or where their employers do not have an occupational pension scheme in place.

I welcome the appointment of Patricia King as chair of NAERSA. I wish her very well in her role. The Labour Party repeatedly made the case for ICTU representation on the board as the Bill passed through the Oireachtas. ICTU also asked for the Bill to go through as quickly as possible which is also very important for this scheme.

This is a significant policy development as without the scheme's implementation, Ireland would be the only OECD country not to operate an auto-enrolment or similar system as a means of promoting pension savings. We know that pension coverage is a particular concern among young workers, as the Minister mentioned. Figures from the CSO for last year show only 59% of those aged between 25 and 34, and more worryingly 27% of those aged between 20 and 25, have pension coverage. In a cost-of-living crisis, it is no wonder that future planning is not a

priority for many young people who are barely getting by. Further figures from the CSO show that 30% of young workers cannot afford that pension.

Auto-enrolment is a policy priority that the Labour Party has long called for and it is welcome to see it finally being introduced. Ireland's voluntary approach to pension savings has simply failed with far too many workers left without pension coverage. I consider the delay in implementing the scheme to be very disappointing. Workers have been waiting too long and already Ireland has to catch up with the rest of the world on this.

We need to be clear on how this scheme will relate to the State pension. We must have assurance that it will never be used to replace any State pension but simply complement it. Similarly, we need assurances that the Government remains committed to achieving a benchmark of 34% of gross average earnings for the contributory State pension as set out in the roadmap for pensions reform.

We need certainty and safeguards for workers that those contributing to the new scheme will not face a means test for the State pension in the future. I have serious concerns regarding the adequacy of the State pension as in this country we have an ageing demographic and the Government has been slow to act in addressing the adequacy of that payment. Figures from the CSO show that the at-risk-of-poverty rate is highest among older people living alone at nearly 26%. Previous one-off measures have masked Government inaction to tackle poverty among older people. When analysing the impact of these measures on reducing the at-risk-of-poverty rate for older people, the rate reduced from 21.1% to 13.3%.

The Minister will be familiar with the Labour Party motion earlier today that called for an end to the one-off measures for everyone in the audience that we have seen in the recent "The Late Late Show" budgets. We need targeted measures. Benchmarking of the State pension is one measure that the Government must take in budget 2026. The Labour Party believes that self-employed people should also be auto-enrolled. This is necessary to ensure that companies are not incentivised to place workers on bogus self-employment contracts in order to avoid the need to pay auto-enrolment contributions. We have seen the proliferation of such contracts in recent years, such as with RTÉ staff, leaving many without pension coverage. As we all know, coverage among self-employed people is already very low.

I have questions regarding the minimum age threshold for inclusion in the scheme, which is currently 23. The minimum age for PRSI contributions is 16. We know that young workers are some of the most exploited workers in society and are far more likely to be in precarious work without pension coverage. The seven years between 16 and 23 would be a significant amount of time during which that young person could be supported to save for a more secure retirement and pension.

When the Bill was being passed through the Oireachtas, the Labour Party repeatedly raised the importance of ensuring that the scheme cannot be sidestepped by employers or ensuring employers are not incentivised to wind up good workplace pension schemes. For example, the Labour Party proposed an amendment that would have stopped employers from winding up or freezing workplace pensions during the ten-year transition period while the scheme was coming into effect, but this was rejected by the Government. As the scheme is now being implemented, we need safeguards put in place to ensure it does not affect jobs for workers and does not create incentives for employers to scale back existing pension entitlements.

The seven-year deadline provided for in the Act for setting minimum contribution rates into existing pension schemes must be shortened. It would be simply wrong if workers were to find themselves with a lower or even no employer contribution all because they had proactively taken steps to save for their retirement prior to auto-enrolment. I call on the Minister to ask the Department of Social Protection to continue to promote this scheme. Just over three quarters, 78%, of employees who are aware of the planned Government retirement saving scheme and are now eligible for it would stay in the scheme if auto-enrolment was in it.

I am particularly concerned about awareness of the scheme among younger people given the figures I mentioned earlier, which show that 81% of those aged between 20 and 24 and not in an occupational scheme are not aware of earnings auto-enrolment, a figure I am sure the Minister would also have concerns about. The Department of Social Protection must target its communication at younger age cohorts; otherwise, the scheme will fail and will not help those who may need it most.

While I welcome the implementation of the scheme, the Labour Party has some concerns. I hope to work with the Minister on the implementation of the scheme. In the last Dáil, my colleague Deputy Ged Nash published legislation to address the lack of transparency on pension charges.

3 o'clock

Will the Minister consider that legislation?

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I have spoken on auto-enrolment previously, but I welcome these statements. I thank the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Dara Calleary, and his officials for getting this long-promised reform over the line.

My Future Fund is about one simple idea: if you work, you should build a pension automatically, with your employer and the State helping you every day. From 1 January 2026, every employee aged between 23 and 60 who earns €20,000 or more and who is not already in a scheme will be enrolled by default. Contributions will be phased in sensibly, starting at 1.5% both for workers and employers, and rising in steps to 6% over a decade. The State will make a top-up of €1 for every €3 the worker contributes. This means that every €3 a worker saves will become €7, and that is before it is invested. For workers, that is real money compounding quietly in the background while they get on with their lives. Compounding delivers real returns. The secret is to start as early as possible in order to maximise returns over time.

My Future Fund will tackle a very real gap. Too many private sector workers still do not have occupational pensions. We cannot leave people to face a sharp drop in living standards on retirement, reliant solely on the State pension or whatever savings they can scrape together. My Future Fund fixes the defaults. It is opt out rather than opt in, and the pot follows the member when he or she changes jobs. It involves simple, low-cost investment options with a lifecycle default, with light administration duties for employers via NAERSA. Employers will process payroll deductions and the authority will do the heavy lifting, including in respect of eligibility, enrolment, collection, investment and compliance.

Crucially, the scheme is fair and flexible. People can opt out after six months or pause later. If they do so, they get their contributions back but the employer and State contributions continue working for them. That is a powerful nudge to stay the course. We know this model

works. If we look at the United Kingdom, since auto-enrolment began in 2012, employee pension participation has climbed to approximately eight in ten workers, with fewer than one in ten opting out. Millions who were not saving are now saving, many with an employer match that simply did not exist before. Poland's pension scheme, PKK, shows similar momentum, especially when it comes to periodic re-enrolment. By contrast, Italy's one-off soft default in 2007 lifted coverage only modestly. The lesson is clear therefore: persistent, well-designed defaults beat one-off nudges.

I welcome the decision to align the start with the tax year and to give SMEs and payroll providers the time to get systems right from the get-go, which will deliver confidence from day one. This is a long-term, forward-thinking reform. It rewards work, shares responsibility between workers, employers and the State and builds household wealth steadily and fairly. If we stick to the plan, keep fees low and communication clear and periodically review adequacy, in ten years' time, hundreds of thousands more people will face retirement with security, dignity and choice.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo labhairt ar cheist na bpinsean agus an phleanáil fhadtéarmach atá taobh thiar de pholasaí dá leithéid seo le cinntiú go mbeidh slándáil agus cinnteacht airgeadais do dhaoine amach anseo nuair a éiríonn siad as obair.

At the outset, I pay tribute to the Minister for prioritising the introduction of My Future Fund as a landmark policy in terms of how we, as a country, prepare our citizens and population for achieving and ensuring security in retirement. When he took office, it was clear that he prioritised this. He made it clear and gave certainty to both businesses and workers that the introduction of PRSI from 1 January 2026 was a priority for him. I am happy that it is going to be implemented.

The context in which this scheme is being designed shows a need for it. At present, 35% of workers have access to private sector pensions. That represents something of a demographic time bomb for us and for the financial security of those people in the future. Auto-enrolment, while allowing participants to opt out, is a large step towards ensuring their financial security. The design of the scheme has much to recommend it, including its flexibility and the fact it travels with the worker, avoiding the need to switch or open new pension schemes if workers move to different jobs throughout their careers, which we know they do, especially in the private sector. The tenure for which people hold jobs is a lot shorter than was the case 20 or 30 years ago. It is important that there is portability and flexibility in the design of any pension product.

For small businesses and lower paid workers, the introduction of an auto-enrolment scheme like this, with the incentives that exist, such as State and employer support, shows that we are aware of and alive to many of the burdens that are being placed on small and medium businesses. It is important to recognise that while this is a worthwhile policy, we are making an ask of smaller businesses and lower paid workers to make sure it succeeds and provides them with financial security.

While the overall design of the scheme is something I am very much in favour of - it is put together very well - I encourage the Minister to ensure that he keeps an eye on the management fee structure relating to it. A decision will be made on the overall level of the management fees involved in the next seven to ten days. Currently, it is stated that the total cap will be 0.5%.

While that sounds very small to many of us, if someone were to take 0.5% of the value of a person's house over his or her lifetime, it would amount to a large amount of money. I encourage the Minister to look at models like the National Employment Savings Trust in the UK, which has a mandated pension fund fee of 0.3% in order to ensure that the burden we are asking of lower paid workers and employers is not necessarily made to allow for investment fund managers to make a lot of money on the back of the costs that we are asking those workers and the businesses to bear. That that should be taken into account. I encourage the putting in place of such a measure in order to make the scheme a sustainable and affordable option for people in the future and to ensure that their contributions to such a scheme are well registered and received and that fees are kept as low and competitive as possible. Ultimately, it is about making sure people keep the most amount of money they can as they enter into retirement. That must be reflected in the fees that are payable.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: We in Sinn Féin agree with the concept of an auto-enrolment pension scheme. There is no doubt that, with an ageing population, provision will have to be made for such a scheme in order to supplement the State pension. However, this is the wrong scheme at the wrong time. It is vital that any enrolment scheme is properly designed and managed for the benefit of the people when they retire. There may be a very good reason why people are not already signed up to the pension scheme. They simply may not be able to afford to do so. For the Government to decide that it can take the money from them at a time of a cost-of-living crisis is outrageous. In-work poverty remains a serious problem in this State and the Government's policy significantly contributes to this. There is an unacceptable risk that this auto-enrolment pension scheme will exacerbate that problem.

Throughout the State, there are pockets of persistent disadvantage, including in my constituency of County Clare. People are working hard but are still struggling to pay their bills. Rents and mortgages, food and fuel prices and the cost of everything else are increasing constantly. In late summer, there are extra expenses relating to back-to-school costs. During the winter, there are extra fuel costs. Taking a set amount of money from workers' wages every week could inflict suffering on families. Taking any proportion of their incomes would make their struggle even more difficult.

It is unacceptable that workers have to wait six months to opt out and must then wait for a refund of money they could not afford to pay in the first place. The Government will be inflicting significant hardship on low-paid workers. Perhaps €20 or €30 does not mean anything to the Minister of State, but it is a lot for the people I know. Workers must be allowed to decide for themselves whether they can afford to pay contributions to a pension scheme. Making it compulsory for any amount of time completely fails to take into account the stress low and middle income earners are under. This also comes at a time when the Government is rowing back on the cost-of-living supports that are vital to keeping people's heads above water.

Another problem with this legislation is that it would hand the money to the private pension industry, whose main priority is profit. It will be left in control of not only workers' pension contributions, but also those of the employers and the State. This is potentially a huge cash cow being handed to private companies for them to profit from. This will amount to nearly €1 billion in the first year alone and up to €2 billion in subsequent years. We believe that any contributions made by those who can afford to do make them should be invested by the State for the benefit of the people. For example, investment in renewable energy sources would

result in lower energy bills for everyone, which would offset the money people have to spend on their pension contributions.

We accept that an auto-enrolment scheme will be needed, but this is not the right scheme and, during a cost-of-living crisis, it is not the right time.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, for being here. The Social Democrats' views on the auto-enrolment system have been well articulated by my colleague Deputy Gannon in previous Dáil debates, particularly in April of last year. We very much welcome the concept but have concerns which I will go into in some detail.

Every worker should have access to a retirement income capable of providing them with a decent quality of life as they age. There are many positives to auto-enrolment. Certainly, a greater role for the State in ensuring workers can retire with dignity is inevitable and something we should all embrace.

One aspect of the auto-enrolment scheme which was never sorted out as the legislation passed through the Oireachtas and which I would like to raise again is where the funds from the scheme - which are the public's money - will be invested. I know that this issue was raised previously and that as the legislation went through the Houses, colleagues proposed amendments which would have restricted the scheme from, for example, investing in fossil fuels or the arms industry, but these were not accepted by the Minister at the time, Heather Humphreys. Those amendments should be reconsidered. Pension funds are among the largest investors in our financial system. They control vast sums of capital. Where they choose to invest has real consequences. By directing money away from polluting industries or companies that ignore workers' rights, pension funds can exert real pressure and help change corporate behaviour. For many years, there was growing recognition of this responsibility, with pension fund managers adopting ESG principles. However, there is now evidence that some funds are rowing back and are placing less emphasis on conscious investment and more on short-term returns. This is a worrying trend. Given their scale, pension funds should be a force for positive change, not contributors to environmental destruction or poor labour standards.

Quite likely influenced by Trump's "greed is good, regulation is bad" hypercapitalist mentality, there is growing evidence that some investment and pension fund managers are scaling back their commitments to ESG principles. Certain large US institutions have reduced emphasis on climate commitments and some European pension funds are revising their exclusions to include companies with defence business. In addition, proposals under the EU's corporate sustainability reporting directive could, if adopted, remove a significant proportion of companies — potentially up to 80% — from mandatory sustainability reporting. Taken together, these developments show we cannot rely solely on the discretion of investment and pension managers to ensure that funds are directed responsibly, avoiding companies that pollute, disregard workers' rights or are involved in the arms industry. Strong regulatory oversight and clear ethical commitments are essential to protect people and our natural world.

The joint Oireachtas committee on social protection's pre-legislative scrutiny report from 2023 recommended that the forthcoming auto-enrolment retirement savings scheme — dubbed My Future Fund — would prohibit investments in fossil fuels and the arms industry. Additionally, the committee suggested allocating a minimum percentage of funds to Irish renewable energy developments to support the nation's climate action goals. In response, the

then Minister, Heather Humphreys, introduced an amendment requiring NAERSA to produce statistical data on the types of investments held by investment management providers. While this amendment aims to enhance transparency, it falls short of the committee's recommendation for explicit investment restrictions. This approach is insufficient. Given the scale of the fund and its potential impact, we need robust safeguards to ensure public money is not invested in companies that contribute to environmental degradation or engage in activities contrary to our ethical standards.

In 2018, Ireland became the first country globally to commit to divesting public funds from fossil fuel companies, marking a significant milestone in our environmental policy. It is imperative that we uphold this commitment and ensure that My Future Fund aligns with our climate and ethical objectives.

I urge the Government to revisit discussions from the passage of the pensions Bill concerning the expansion of the pension scheme to include individuals not initially covered. A particularly significant group to consider is family carers. According to the 2021 census, approximately 300,000 people in Ireland provide unpaid care. This marks a notable increase over the past six years. These carers often face challenges in maintaining consistent employment due to their caregiving responsibilities, leading to gaps in their pension entitlements. This situation disproportionately affects women, who are more likely to take on caregiving roles, thereby aggravating gender inequalities in pension provision.

On Committee Stage of the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Bill in the Seanad, Senator Higgins tabled an amendment advocating for a report outlining measures to ensure that individuals engaged in care work outside the formal labour market are supported by the new pension system and have equitable access to its entitlements. Although this amendment was not accepted at the time, I urge the Government to reconsider its merits. Addressing this issue is crucial to ensuring that family carers, who play an essential role in our society, are not left financially vulnerable in their later years. I urge the Minister of State to address these aspects of the pension auto-enrolment system, which are clear ethical shortcomings in what is overall a welcome initiative.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I endorse everything my colleague Deputy Quaide said. My secondary school history teacher is a wonderful man named Mr. Burke. He ignited in me a passion for history and politics. In his class, I learned about the invention of much of the welfare state in Germany in the late 19th century. It is hard for a society to imagine what things were like in previous eras but one of the welfare state's greatest contributions to life in the past two centuries have been the lifting of the elderly from poverty.

Before addressing auto-enrolment, I want to acknowledge that at this very moment there are people outside this building on hunger strike. They were put to work as children in industrial and reformatory schools and have called for some pension recognition for their child labour. As dark and unconscionable as that chapter in our history is, they are right to call for financial security in old age after falling victims to the crimes of a State that was supposed to protect them. I urge the Minister of State to meet with them and to meet their demands.

I welcome the Government's taking wider pension provision for our population seriously. Auto-enrolment can be part of securing the financial future of our society, but it is not a panacea and I would like to outline some of the outstanding risks it presents and, in some cases, deepens.

First, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, reducing low-paid workers' take-home pay by between €300 and €1,200 per year may be devastating for many households. I do not need to remind the House of the devastating poverty figures we are already seeing. The number of children in consistent poverty has doubled in the past 12 months and 300,000 households are in energy arrears. What is the Government's plan to help those who, through the auto-enrolment scheme, will face issues in paying household bills or fall further into deprivation? It does not appear to have one, certainly not one that will keep up with inflation.

Second, another significant gap in the auto-enrolment scheme is the exemption of the self-employed on lower incomes. The gig economy workers, "solarpreneurs", the woman selling flowers on Grafton Street, the man with a van, the hard-working people delivering our meals — they deserve State support too and to exclude them from generous State subsidies in auto-enrolment seems grossly unfair and downright neglectful.

Auto-enrolment effectively State-mandates a permanent shift of the financial risk of old age from the State to the individual. As a constituent in Ranelagh asked me, if investment returns from their pension do not keep up with inflation, what do they do then? There are significant risks in using investments as the only vehicle for pension provision. I remember clearly the angry pensioners throwing eggs at the 2009 annual general meeting of AIB when they realised their hard-earned money had evaporated into the ether of the bank's recklessness and the financial crisis. Over the past 50 years, it has been fundamentally assumed that pension investments will in the long run generate returns beyond the rate of inflation, creating a good nest egg for those in old age. However, it is not certain this trend will always continue and there have been many examples in history where this has not been the case for investors, be they pensioners or otherwise. Is it prudent for us to believe the next 50 years will be like the last? I doubt it.

An opportunity to expand the investment capital of the State has been missed. We need domestic funding for home building. The Social Democrats have proposed such a fund, namely the homes for Ireland savings account, which would have invested in solving the largest problem our country faces - building homes. Why not put the additional savings toward such a worthy societal goal?

The greatest risk of auto-enrolment is it becomes an excuse to dismantle the welfare State in favour of major financial gains for pension funds and those who own them.

Will the fact that we have mandated every person in the country to fund their own pensions become an excuse to scrap the State pension all together? Our world before the welfare state was marked by a life that was cruel, brutish and short. Sometimes life is still like that, but the great contribution of the welfare state has been to temper its worst effects, especially for the most vulnerable. We would be the most unwise generation since the industrial revolution if we were to start dismantling it.

Deputy Joe Neville: The issue that we are here to speak about is something that has been a national topic for many of us who have stood outside schools recently. We saw the importance of pensions and what they mean to caretakers and school secretaries. What we are talking about here, however, is across the board; it represents a sea change in how we look at pensions for the nation. From a State perspective, we need to give out pensions where we can, but what we must also do is look beyond that. This is what we are trying to do here.

What is proposed represents a significant step. It was brought in by one of the candidates for in the presidential election, Heather Humphreys, when she was Minister. When it comes in, My Future Fund will provide the opportunity for 800,000 people to avail of pensions in a way that they have never done before. It is one of the most important social reforms of our generation and will give every worker in Ireland the security of a pension for the future. When I joined the workforce, I was one of those people who, after college that my 20s were going to last forever. When they hit their 30s, you think they will also last forever. Unfortunately, once you hit your 40s, you realise that this might not always last forever. It is not that you begin to see the finishing line, but you know that it is there. This is something I began to focus in on at that point. I say that as a trained accountant who should have known better. In such circumstances, we need to ensure that what is proposed becomes mandatory across the board.

For the first time, hundreds of thousands of people will be added. In the long run, this will help tackle inequality, especially for those lower and middle-income workers who might be outside the State net. These are people who need that help. What is going to happen will be simple, transparent and fair and will be done at the behest of the employer. That will be important. As the previous speaker so elegantly alluded to, this has not always been the opportunity down through the centuries. In the modern world of the 21st century, we now have the opportunity to ensure that poverty does not await as they finish their working lives. We hope not to see elderly people in Ireland working in McDonald's like their counterparts across the sea who, tragically, who worked all their lives and who have had to continue to work into their 70s. That is something we are trying to do away with.

Auto-enrolment will strengthen our economy by boosting savings and enabling people to look forward to the future. It will level the playing field so that all employers contribute. As someone who has worked with employers, I am conscious that they are concerned about costs. We need to allay their fears and ensure that we support companies in other ways. If we do this properly, we can support companies and employees. Ultimately, this is an investment in the State and its people. It is also an investment in their future and in fairness.

This is a balanced reform. It will protect and respect workers. More importantly, however, it will help to secure Ireland's future.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I welcome the auto-enrolment scheme. My Future Fund is a key aspect of the programme for Government. I commend the Minister on the work he has done to date on bringing it forward. If we look to our counterparts across Europe, the UK, for example, introduced auto-enrolment in 2012, Italy did so 2007 and Estonia in 2002. It is about time that we moved towards auto-enrolment. The thing about it is that it will ensure people's security in old age. For far too long, we have seen pensioners, particularly those on the State pension, struggling to heat their houses and pay for their groceries. Auto-enrolment expands pensions to the wider population. Only 35% of private sector workers have pensions. That is extremely worrying when we have a growing population and an ageing population. Having that security net of a pension in the future ensures that when people reach older age, they will be able to live in some comfort and not be worrying about when the next pay cheque is coming or from where the next few euro are coming.

When we look at the investment strategies, we can see that there are to be four strategies and one default strategy. What is critical is that those who have signed up to auto-enrolment

and employers are made aware of where their money is being invested. Many people will know that private pensions are spread throughout numerous equities and companies. When we speak about boycotting certain companies and the ethics of other companies as well, it is critical that the people who are enrolled in these pension schemes are aware of where their money is invested. They need to rest assured that it is not invested in unethical companies or in companies that do not align with their moral thinking. That is a key aspect of the investment strategy which needs to be considered if it has not been considered to date. I ask that the relevant information be given to everybody who is being auto-enrolled.

There is a natural fear among businesses in relation to auto-enrolment and the costs that come with it. However, there is an additional difficulty for the hospitality industry. We saw another restaurant announce closure in Dublin yesterday, namely Big Mike's in Blackrock. The challenges being faced by cafés and restaurants throughout the country are making it far more difficult to sustain the hospitality sector. The auto-enrolment scheme represents an additional cost for them. I ask the Minister of State that there be sustained involvement with the hospitality sector to ensure that it is insulated to ensure that this additional cost will not come at a greater cost to those in the sector in terms of the viability of their businesses.

This is a positive a step. I welcome it. As I said, it is about time it happened. However, two key aspects need to be considered in the context of auto-enrolment. The first relates to the public being made aware of where their money is being invested and the second is that the hospitality sector and businesses in general are listened to and considered, particularly in the context of the additional costs.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for taking this debate. The auto-enrolment scheme is very important. It will mean that Ireland will not longer be a laggard in the European Union. As Deputy Ó Cearúil said, many other countries have brought this in, some as far back as a decade ago. We are catching up. The introduction of this in the new year will see hundreds of thousands of people who are not on pension plans now being able to avail of something when they reach pensionable age. That is quite important.

I do, however, have something of a contrarian view on some aspects of what is proposed. There is not a week that goes by that the owner of some local small business comes to one of my clinics and talks about how difficult it is to do business. I have heard that during my six years as a TD but I probably hear it now more than every because of the multiple costs involved. TDs on both sides of the House are nodding because we are all hearing this at constituency level. There was an inevitability about auto-enrolment happening. It has to happen. In budget 2026, which is only a couple of weeks away, we have to include certain measures that loosen the collar for businesses and allow them to breathe again and flourish. In my home village, the shop and pub are gone. There is nothing to replace them. I see businesses closing on the high streets of Ennis, Shannon and Limerick city. There are too many vape and kebab shops. The type of businesses that were the stock of town centre streets seem to be either going out of business or are really struggling. We have to deal with that in budget 2026.

I have read all the detailed notes on auto-enrolment, but I have not seen sufficient clarity on where apprentices will stand in all of this. I think of the many 20- and 21-year-olds who are slogging it out doing difficult work, particularly in the wet trades. They are certainly not earning €20,000 per annum. Auto-enrolment will be optional for them. Everything is quite

uncertain for them. They are treated as tradesmen and tradeswomen. They are expected to go out and work as hard as everyone else, but they do not get the benefits of doing so.

I fear that some of this could be used as a bit of a carrot in the context of the school secretaries and caretakers dispute. This is not the way to deal with that.

If we were to look at it through one lens, we could say this offered a pathway to pension, but I would contend, as someone who spent 16 years as a school teacher and as the staff liaison person between secretaries, caretakers and the school body, this is not the way to solve their grievance. They are very worthy of a proper pension befitting the work they have carried out for years and will carry out for many years to come. This should not be the magic wand for that. Their ask is very specific. It is before the WRC and we cannot prejudice what is there but they ask that they be treated as civil servants. That is the campaign I support and this issue needs to be kept separate and outside the net of what auto-enrolment is.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: I apologise, as I have a frog in my throat. I come here today to bring something to the Minister's attention and, more importantly, to the attention of workers who have not yet been signed up to a company pension scheme. It has come to my attention that there are a number of brokers and pension providers who are approaching companies, particularly small ones, to advise them that they can avoid the auto-enrolment scheme by signing their workers up to a pension scheme now. I urge employers to reject those approaches. I would like the Minister to bring the matter to the attention of workers and their trade union representatives because anything these providers are offering now that will obviate the need to enrol workers into the auto-enrolment scheme will leave them infinitely worse off, in 99.9% of cases anyway.

Lower paid workers who are paying tax at the marginal rate of 20% will lose 5% on the tax side. Of course, it is the opposite case for people who are paying tax at the 40% rate, which represents about 30% of the people who will be auto-enrolled. What the people on the upper echelons will gain from that will be easily outweighed by two other fundamental differences between those private schemes and the auto-enrolment scheme as proposed by the Minister. First, the State scheme will be infinitely safer. There will be more flexibility. The scheme will be dealing with regulated funds and regulated companies and will be overseen by the Pensions Authority. Second, the question of the fees will be fundamentally different. The fees these private operators charge - usually about 1% per annum - will be infinitely greater than the fees the auto-enrolment organisation will charge those particular workers. Fees make a huge difference. It is estimated that some of the fees charged by these private providers in the past reduced the final value of the fund by 30% to 35%, which is enormous. I have seen numerous cases where people who contributed to their pension schemes all of their lives found the schemes were worth little or nothing at the end but the providers, who were taking commissions, got their commissions year in, year out as the funds depleted year in, year out. I say to workers that, if they are approached now in advance of 1 January to sign up to a pension scheme, beware those snake oil salesmen who, for short-term benefit for themselves, are trying to bring about a situation where workers will be much worse off in retirement than they would otherwise have been.

I wish the NTMA was operating this scheme. While I compliment the previous Minister, Heather Humphreys, and the present Minister, Dara Calleary, for bringing the scheme to its present level and finalising it after a 30-year delay-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The time is up.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: -----nevertheless, the former's reasons for not using the NTMA were contradictory.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The time is up.

Deputy Barry Ward: I was listening to this debate. I was watching it on the television in my office and had to come to the Chamber to make sure I was listening to the correct debate because some of the comments I have heard today seem to be entirely at variance with what is actually being proposed in this policy and this scheme. I have heard it described as "anti-worker" when in actual fact this is exactly the kind of measure we need to put in place, particularly for low-paid workers, who were the ones who, according to some Deputies, were being particularly disadvantaged. They are also the people who are outside the net where they might avail of a pension.

Contrary to the assertion by some TDs earlier that this was an attempt to dismantle the welfare state or that we were trying to shift the burden of pensions from the State to the individual, that is not what is happening here at all. In fact, what this is is an empowerment measure. It specifically targets those with lower incomes because they cannot avail of this in their own right. Instead of shifting that burden, it gives them power to deal with their own futures when they retire and it comes at a cost to the State as well.

The State is contributing a huge amount to this scheme and the workers benefit in that regard. People should not be afraid of this scheme. This measure will safeguard the future of workers in this country well into the future at a time when we are approaching a situation where we will have more and more people who are drawing pensions and fewer and fewer people who are working. We have to safeguard against that situation.

We have a situation where people are complaining and have the notion that we cannot depend on pension funds. Yes, regulation is an important part of this. Careful regulation and careful monitoring of the fees that go into the fund and where the moneys are invested must all come with this. Opposition TDs who are giving out about the scheme would have a situation where ordinary workers were dependent on the State to not cut pensions in the future or to increase pensions in line with inflation and the need for pensions, which has been a perennial problem in every state. Instead, what we are doing is creating an investment vehicle to safeguard the future of those people.

Far from being a measure that is anti-worker, auto-enrolment is a measure that is pro worker. It is a measure that is pro worker to the cost of employers. There is no doubt about that because, while the State contributes, so do employers. As somebody who has previously been an employer, I think that is the way it should be. I recognise there is a cost to business. I represent a constituency where Big Mike's closed. It is not the only restaurant in Blackrock to close in recent weeks. Fellini's in Deansgrange closed as well. I regret both closures. They did not

close because of auto-enrolment and no business will close because of this. It might be an extra cost, but what is costing small businesses are things such as the regulatory regime, insurance, VAT and the increased cost of the products they are selling. They are the challenges businesses really face, so let us be honest about this. Those people want to employ workers who will be safe into the future. That is what auto-enrolment is about. It is about ensuring that, when those people do come to retirement, step down and stop working, there will be a fund there to make sure they are well looked after. That is a good thing. It is not about politics. Credit is due to former Ministers, Willie O'Dea and Heather Humphreys, and those who have worked on the scheme in the past. It is due to them but it is not about politics. It is about workers' rights.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Today, I welcome the introduction of My Future Fund. This is Ireland's new system of automatic enrolment into pensions. This is one of the most important social reforms for a generation. For too long, too many workers, particularly in the private sector, have faced the prospect of reaching retirement with only the State pension. We know that only about a third of private sector workers currently have a supplementary pension. Auto-enrolment changes that and it does so in a way that is fair, simple and sustainable.

From January 2026, every employee aged between 23 and 60 who is earning over €20,000 a year and not already contributing to a scheme will be automatically enrolled. Employers will match what the worker puts in and on top of that, the State will add €1 for every €3 saved. That means that, for every €3 the worker contributes, the total becomes €7 before it is even invested. That is a powerful return that will grow steadily over the course of a career.

The contributions themselves will be phased in gradually, from 1.5% at the start, rising step by step to 6% by 2034. That phasing in is important because it gives households time to adjust and small businesses time to plan. It is reform done at a sensible pace with fairness at its core. The long-term benefits are enormous. Workers will build real financial security, employers will be contributing to a stronger and more resilient workforce and the State will be reducing future pressures on public finances. For society as a whole, it means fewer people facing hardship in older age and more people able to look to retirement with dignity and independence. This is also about simplicity. The "pot follows the member" model means that, as people change jobs, their pension pots go with them. There will be no more lost accounts or scattered small savings. Default investment options will de-risk over time but choice will remain for those who want it. Administration is being taken on by the new National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, which will make the process as light as possible for employers.

In the decades ahead, this reform will transform how people experience retirement in Ireland. It will lift the quality of life for future generations, give people confidence about their financial security and demonstrate, in a very practical way, the way of partnership between working, employer and State. Auto-enrolment is not just about pensions; it is about building a fairer, stronger Ireland where hard work is always rewarded and where people can look to the future with confidence.

Deputy Michael Collins: Let us speak plainly about the Government's new auto-enrolment pensions scheme, which is due to begin next year. On the surface, it is being sold as a measure to help people save for retirement but after a closer look, it has all the hallmarks of another USC in the making, a so-called temporary charge that workers are still paying 14 years later. Under the scheme, employees and employers will each be forced to contribute 3% of gross

wages. What will the Government contribute? A mere half of 1%. That is not a partnership. It is a raw deal. Workers and small business are being asked to shoulder the load while the State pays the least. Employers, particularly small and medium businesses already under pressure, will face major new costs with the present economic uncertainty. Is this really a wise decision? Employees will be automatically enrolled whether they like it or not. Yes, they can opt out after six months but only to be dragged back in every two years. That is not choice. That is entrapment. For employers, the consequences of slipping up are heavy. There are heavy fines, prosecutions and layers of red tape that make running a small business even harder.

The central question is if the scheme will replace the State pension. Ministers say it will not but these are the same politicians who promised to abolish the USC and we all know how that turned out. Workers are right to be sceptical unless there is a cast-iron guarantee that auto-enrolment is a top-up and not a replacement. People will rightly fear that the State pension is being hollowed out. Independent Ireland believes that, as a basic principle of new policy measures, people will need certainty, fairness and, above all, fairness. The scheme as I see it fails on all three counts. I call on the Government to come clean even at this late stage to put guarantees in place and stop shifting the burden onto the shoulders of workers and small businesses.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I have a number of questions regarding the auto-enrolment scheme. I welcome the broad thrust of the scheme. The idea of people starting from an early age making contributions towards their pensions as they reach retirement age is a good one in principle, as is the sense of making the employers contribute. However, as Deputy Collins said, there is an issue with the State not contributing enough. I see from the website for the scheme that the National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority will be the independent body set up. I would be grateful if during his contribution the Minister could elaborate on this independent body, what sort of oversight it will have and also who monitors it. I have had constituents mention to me in the past that some of their pensions were wiped out during the economic downturn. My main query or fear on behalf of constituents who raised this with me is what will stop this from happening again if at some stage we go into a downturn. People thought their money was set aside and was safe. Is there a copper-fastened guarantee to ensure this money will not be eaten into down the line and that it will be ring-fenced for what it is supposed to be? In this respect, I am curious as to why it is being called a saving scheme rather than a pension scheme. I know Members of the House on the Government side are calling it a pension but it is being called a saving scheme on the website and in that context I wonder why because it is contributing towards the pension.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the auto-enrolment scheme. It will be very positive for a lot of workers across the country. I question the delays in relation to it. It is such an important aspect for particularly middle- and low-income earners and I urge the Government to prioritise its roll-out. However, I have some concerns. These concerns relate to compliance and to SMEs. SMEs are already struggling with the cost of insurance, the cost of doing business, the cost of energy and all of that and I hope this would not be another cost for SMEs. There should be a careful analysis in the years ahead. I appreciate that this is a scheme that will be rolled out incrementally. That is a positive thing but I urge the Government to tread carefully. Also in respect of compliance and the setup costs, I urge the Government to ensure support is available for SMEs, particularly very small companies, to assist with the various elements of

compliance that will be necessary as regards an employee leaving a company, re-enrolment and employees opting out. All of that type of stuff should be led by the Government.

I will also highlight the self-employment sector. The self-employed individual is in many ways the forgotten citizen of this State. He or she is a second-class citizen of this State and the auto-enrolment scheme will do nothing for the self-employed person. I urge the Minister to develop a similar scheme that will assist a self-employed individual in this regard. I know this auto-enrolment scheme does not facilitate or give an opportunity for the self-employed person to receive a pension in this way. In that sense, it is unfair because the self-employed person is paying so much tax but does not receive the benefit of social welfare and so on when he or she falls on hard times in the same way that he or she would if an employee of a company. In this case, we could have examples where there is a very small company, that is, a self-employed person, who will not receive the matched funding that an employee can. That is unfair. I urge the Government to develop a scheme that facilitated the self-employed. There is no question that these self-employed individuals are second-class citizens in this State and this auto-enrolment is another example.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle and Minister. I welcome auto-enrolment. It has been a long time in the making but it is great to see that it is finally going on the blocks. I agree with Deputy Gogarty that it is really a saving scheme at this stage rather than a pension scheme. This is mainly because the pensions bit has probably not been worked out yet but the thrust is to get people contributing to the future, which is fair enough.

Regarding fees, I read the note the Department has on its site, which reads:

Charges will be set and fully explained nearer the launch date of 30th September 2025, but it is expected they will comprise -

- A modest weekly flat fee to cover the running of NAERSA's administrative costs, and
- An investment management charge based on a percentage of participants' savings ...

I do not think we should do that. We have an opportunity here. The Government has the opportunity to set this out for the future. A modest weekly flat fee is like the old charge on the meter for the ESB. It goes on forever and it builds in inefficiency. We should not do that. An investment management charge based on percentage of participant saving is a fee based on what is in the savings account. We should be encouraging fees based on performance. Whoever is managing the money, if they are making money for citizens of the State, we should be encouraging them based on those fees.

The site also reads: "The State is taking a number of steps to ensure that the money invested on your behalf stays as safe as possible". It sets out a kind of profile of low-risk investment and supervision. It is all quite flat in terms of profile and it is conservative. That is fair enough at one level for pensions, but for a 25-year-old construction worker who is contributing to a scheme like this for the first time and has a risk appetite, we really should be incentivising some level of investment performance rather than just leaving the money in place somewhere and having such low expectations for how the money would perform.

There are a couple of things about the scheme. I think it should be put online. Make it a big, centralised, standardised scheme with standard processes, standard interfaces for people

putting information into the scheme about themselves and employers, and standard reports coming out. Standardise everything, have minimum manpower running the scheme, and have it computerised and as efficient as possible. That is how it would run. I imagine it will be quite standardised.

With regard to the size of the fund, it will get very big because, over time, there will be a huge amount of savings invested and tied up in the scheme, and rightly so. That is the way it should be, but there could be temptations for those in the future to try to access it and use it as a rainy day fund. It is very important that we legislate so that the fund cannot be used for anything else but that it belongs to the punters who put the money in and, thankfully, the State that would have contributed.

My final point goes back to the point of savings. There is not a whole lot of detail on the benefit side. I can understand that in terms of where we are now, but it is important that we at least address this in some way so that punters will understand what they will see coming out once they put money in.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister for his statement. Like others, I welcome the scheme, which is going to give greater security to people entering into retirement. It is an important and necessary ambition. Too many people, particularly those in the private sector, risk reaching retirement age with only the State pension to rely on. In principle, I think the concept is good.

However, in my engagement with businesses right across east Galway, they have raised concerns. I have met many of business owners, including those running shops, cafés, garages and SMEs. While they are not opposed to the idea of pensions for their employees, they are deeply worried about how the scheme might impact on them financially. These are businesses that do not have the luxury of dedicated HR departments. They are family-run or community-run operations where the same person is managing stock, dealing with suppliers and, of course, serving customers. For them, the additional administrative burden of auto-enrolment feels a little bit daunting. Many tell me that they have little or no communication about what exactly is required of them.

Beyond the administration, the financial concern is even greater. As mentioned by other Deputies, many of them are operating on very tight margins and even a modest additional cost can tip the balance. Employers are asking if this new obligation will mean they have to cut back on hours, delay taking on new staff or reduce other forms of support for employees. They worry that what looks like a small percentage increase on paper could in reality be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

I know the Department has pointed to the phased introduction of the contributions, with a ten-year lead-in period, as evidence that businesses will have time to adapt. That is broadly welcome but from what I am hearing on the ground, the message is not really landing. The communication campaign, the buses, the adverts, and the online content are simply not reaching the many shopkeepers in rural Ireland and those micro business owners who are already juggling a dozen other responsibilities. What is needed is direct and targeted outreach to SMEs so they can be mindful of the unintended consequences that may emerge. Unless this is implemented with sensitivity to the realities facing both employers and employees, it risks breeding resentment rather than reassurance. Employees in certain circumstances say that they

would prefer extra take-home pay now over pension contributions, and they cite tight weekly budgets.

I thank the Minister because, overall, I think that people will have time to adapt and inform themselves. I welcome the concept in principle and I welcome the scheme.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the introduction of auto-enrolment and the new My Future Fund. This is an important reform, as too many workers today have no pension savings beyond the State pension. People deserve peace of mind that, when they retire, they will not face a big drop in their standard of living. With contributions from employees, employers and the State, auto-enrolment is a fair way to achieve that.

I wish to highlight the series of challenges for small- and medium-sized businesses. SMEs are the backbone of our economy. There are no employees without employers, yet in a short space of time, SMEs have faced an increase in the minimum wage, extra paid sick days and an extra bank holiday. Some workers see the extra sick days as extra holidays. There are also rising costs across the board. Each of these policies might be manageable on its own, but together, and introduced so quickly, they are putting huge pressure on small businesses. These are the very businesses that will now be asked to take on the extra cost of auto-enrolment.

The Government has tried to support businesses, and I welcome that, but I believe we need more targeted help for SMEs as auto-enrolment is rolled out. This could mean phasing in supports, temporary reliefs or other measures that give small employers the breathing space they need. I support My Future Fund. It is the right thing for workers but we must also protect small businesses that employ those workers. If they cannot survive, then the system has failed before it has even started.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome debate on this critical issue. It is a long time coming. The then Minister, Heather Humphreys, pointed out a number of years ago on Second Stage that auto-enrolment had been spoken about in Ireland for 25 years since the former Minister, Seamus Brennan, first raised it. That being said, I think that a lot of concerns remain around the new regime and how fair, costly or impactful it is actually going to be in practice. There are a number of issues around workers who are earning just over €20,000 losing money to mandatory contributions for the first six months without opt-out flexibility. Of course, this hits low-income families the hardest. Mr. Colm Fagan, former president of the Society of Actuaries in Ireland, has said that it means the administration fee for auto-enrolment for someone with €20 in his or her account would be the same for the person with €2,000 in his or her account. He described the regressive proposal as a disaster for low-paid and temporary workers. The Government's own website asks whether if a person's earnings go below €20,000 a year, will he or she stay in the scheme. The answer provided on the website is "Yes". If a person has been enrolled and his or her earnings subsequently go below €20,000 per year, he or she will stay in the scheme. We need to look further at this particular factor because it seems unfair.

There are the standard concerns around the administrative workload and burden for small businesses. As I understand it, even with minimal setup, employers must match contributions up to 6% of payroll by 2034. How will this not add to the burden of cash-strapped SMEs already trying to navigate energy costs? I also understand that there are ongoing concerns about the scheme and how it will deal with self-employed workers who earn under €20,000

and under-23s who will be sidelined, leaving freelancers without coverage. An additional concern raised during the debates last year - perhaps this could be clarified - is about how auto-enrolment may shift reliance from the universal State pension to private pots, with *pro rata* calculations under the total contributions approach risking lower payouts for part-time or career gap workers, particularly carers and women who fit into that bracket.

4 o'clock

Has that point been dealt with and is there a solution for that particular issue? I would be grateful if the Minister could revert to me with clarity and a reply on that specific point.

The last point I wish to make is that we know there will be no boost to overall retirement adequacy. It has been mentioned that despite the fanfare, the scheme does not raise the inadequate State pension baseline of €13,000 per year, leaving 20% of over-65s, especially renters, in poverty. That is another very real issue that exists.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I thank the Ceann Comhairle, the Business Committee and the Chief Whip, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for giving us the opportunity to discuss auto-enrolment today. There are specific worries I will engage with Deputies on over the coming days, to answer queries.

I welcome the support for the overall concept of a pensions auto-enrolment system. The aim of introducing auto-enrolment is to once and for all solve the pension coverage gap that exists in Ireland, and to provide for better retirement incomes for workers in the long term.

One of the key points raised today is the potential burden on employers that is being associated with auto-enrolment. First, the establishment of NAERSA ensures that the administrative burden will be minimised, particularly as the scheme rolls on. There will be some burden in the initial stages of inputting the information and giving it to NAERSA but those employers who have payroll providers who do that for them will be able to work with them. The work of NAERSA will then ensure that the ongoing administrative burden will be absolutely minimised.

Second, to come to a point raised by an Teachta Ó Muirí with regard to fees, one of the things we have found during the procurement process for the investment managers is that by going to the market with 800,000 potential pension holders, as opposed to each of those 800,000 potentially going individually, we have considerably reduced the administration fees that otherwise would have been charged. I also picked up the Deputy's points with regard to the excitement of the scheme or otherwise. There are high-risk options available to younger savers, with medium risk and lower risk as you advance in age and come closer to retirement. The option is there for people to go for higher-risk investments and that is one of the reasons we went to an open procurement system for investment advisers. Some people say this could have been done by the NTMA but giving options and lower fees to savers was a key issue.

I wish to remind Deputies that on the design of My Future Fund, which has been referred to, I will re-emphasise that the phasing-in of contribution rates will happen over the course of a decade, starting at a very low 1.5% of gross pay for the first three years and gradually rising to 6%. For the employer, this approach gives very clear certainty as to the rates that will be applicable so as to facilitate the gradual absorption of these labour costs, which will ease the burden on those employers in implementing this crucial return.

I understand about the costs. There is never a good time to add a cost but we have to grasp this nettle once and for all. We are the last country in the OECD to introduce an automatic enrolment scheme. Right now, we have four workers for every person over the age of 66 in this country. By the time we get to 2050, which is not that long away, we will have two workers for every person over the age of 66. I understand, and I want to re-emphasise to Deputy Nolan that the non-contributory State pension will still be the bedrock of our pension system. Auto-enrolment is not meant to displace those contributions and services. I will also respond with regard to her specific query.

Deputy Lawless mentioned the self-employed, and we have introduced pension options with extra contributions for the self-employed in recent years. We will continue to increase the supports available to self-employed people through the social protection system over the course of this Government and beyond.

I would also point out that for any employer who cannot offer an occupational pension at the moment, auto-enrolment and My Future Fund will create a more level playing field for them with regard to trying to attract good workers in what is a very tight jobs market. Moreover, employers will benefit from participating in My Future Fund by enhancing their employees' sense of well-being with regard to them having some security with respect to their post-employment retirement. ESRI research indicates that over the longer term, auto-enrolment will be good for the economy and retired people will have more disposable income than they would have had otherwise. In turn, this will sustain consumer demand and business revenue as that population ageing happens.

A number of Deputies have asked us about monitoring. This will be subject to monitoring by the Pensions Commission and the Financial Services Ombudsman, so there will be external monitoring. NAERSA is statutorily independent of the Oireachtas, and I have appointed a very strong and experienced board to ensure the initial stages of auto-enrolment are led by a board and executive team who have experience, strength and who, in particular, have experience of the introduction of complex projects. I think the board reflects that. The level of interest in being on the board and in applying for the staff positions in NAERSA gives Deputies an indication of the overall interest in auto-enrolment and, in particular, the overall interest in the success of auto-enrolment.

Many Deputies raised issues around the values of the investment portfolio. While all investments have to be made in accordance with the prudent person role and in the best long-term interests of each of the participants in the scheme, each investment strategy will have specific environmental, social and governance, ESG, requirements. That is laid out in sections 74 and 75 of the Act. Section 74 requires the investment management providers to take into account the long-term impact of investment decisions on environmental, social and governance factors. Section 75 of the legislation is also of particular note, as it provides for a number of provisions that must be included in the contracts we are currently concluding with the investment management providers. These include that any investment management service providers must make a provision in their risk management system to take account of the risks that arise through environmental, social and governance factors; that they must conduct, at intervals of not more than three years, an assessment of the risks that arise from environmental, social and governance factors, and report to NAERSA on that assessment; and prepare, and from time to time revise, a statement describing how considerations arising from ESG factors

would affect the investment decisions. In the future, consideration may be given by the board of NAERSA to expand investment options as part of the review of the system, which is required by section 43 of the legislation. This is in line with the typical trajectory of how retirement savings providers develop, whereby they generally start off with a limited number of investment options and gradually expand to alternative offerings once their asset base is sufficiently developed.

Much of this, a Cheann Comhairle, is technical. Much of it might seem inaccessible but it is a hugely important policy. Over the coming weeks and months we will be ramming home the communications on this. I have picked up from many Deputies today the concerns that many employers are saying they have not heard. We will work with NAERSA, Revenue and colleagues in payroll across the system to ensure that communication gets in, and that it will get to workers. Yes, there will be a deduction in their take-home wages but that is a deduction that is being made in the best interests of their future, a future post retirement, and their living standards post retirement. By taking part in My Future Fund they are making an investment in that future, which will pay back to them in the years to come.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. We will suspend for five minutes.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 4.09 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.14 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.09 p.m. and resumed at 4.14 p.m.

Use of Vapes and Nicotine Products by Young People and Adolescents: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, to make a statement under Standing Order 56.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I am pleased to address the House as Minister of State with special responsibility for public health, well-being and the national drugs strategy. I will talk about vaping and the use of other nicotine products by our young people and what the Government is doing about this public health challenge. Every day, I hear from parents, teachers and coaches who worry about how many of our children are vaping. Residents and Tidy Towns organisations also see the proliferation of vape shops in our towns and villages and the litter caused by disposable vapes. Before we discuss newer products such as vapes, we must remember that the nicotine product that remains the biggest single health threat to our young people is combustible tobacco. Cigarette smoking is both addictive and lethal. According to international analysis, it remains the biggest single risk factor driving disability. In our country the life expectancy of a smoker is on average ten years shorter than that of a person who has never smoked. Our own data tells us that smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke kills more than 12 of our people every day. Smoking during childhood and adolescence causes reduced lung function. There is evidence it increases the risk of developing psychoactive disorders in later life.

There is a long and proud tradition in Ireland across all political parties of introducing strong tobacco control measures. That started with our world-famous workplace smoking ban, introduced in 2004 by the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin. Successive Governments have

built on that and achieved a further driving down of our smoking rates. Our most recent measures include a ban on the sale of cigarettes at events aimed at children, from vending machines and from pop-up shops. We have also increased to 21 the minimum legal age of sale of tobacco products. This will come into effect in 2028. We have made much progress but we cannot rest on our laurels. The prevalence of smoking among children was a frightening 19% in 2002 but it is now less than 5% according to the 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study. This reduction is very welcome. However, we want that figure to be zero. Our children should be free from a future blighted by the harms of tobacco.

The data on our adolescents is more worrying. The European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs survey assesses the health behaviours of our 15- and 16-year-olds. The 2024 survey showed that one in eight in that age group reported that they are smokers. The objective of our national tobacco control policy, Tobacco Free Ireland, is to reduce our smoking rates to less than 5% of our population. The principles underpinning that policy are that this is not a normal activity and that we should not have this for our children. This is about the protection of our children.

We are currently revising that policy to examine further measures we can take finally to eliminate the enormous burden on our health system caused by tobacco. A Bill that is currently being brought through the UK Parliament will create a smoke-free generation by banning the sale of tobacco to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009. We will examine all possible options, including groundbreaking measures like the UK approach. In the context of the devastation caused by smoking, e-cigarettes and other nicotine products represent a reduction. There is a general scientific consensus that they are less harmful than smoking. It is important to stress that outside of the possible benefits for a smoker, there is nothing good about these products. For our young people, these products do nothing other than deliver nicotine and addictive drugs. The primary risk of these products is that the use of nicotine may become an addiction that will result in tobacco smoking and the harm that can cause people.

Since 2014, the World Health Organization has recommended that the sale of e-cigarettes to minors be prohibited. This is because of the evidence of potential long-term consequences for brain development in adolescents caused by nicotine exposure. Our own Health Research Board evidence review from 2020 found that adolescents who vape are more likely to smoke. E-cigarettes or vapes have been regulated at EU level since 2014 under the EU tobacco products directive, which was transposed into Irish law by regulation in 2016. These regulations imposed many restrictions on vapes. Health warnings advertising that e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which is a highly addictive substance, are mandatory on packaging.

The regulations also include a limit on the maximum nicotine concentration allowed for vapes containing nicotine and require manufacturers or importers to notify the HSE of all products that they place on the market. The advertisement of e-cigarettes on television, radio and online is also prohibited. These are some of the measures in EU law and we have since added to that with our own laws to further strengthen the regulation of vapes.

I acknowledge the work of my colleague, the former Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, who also played a role in this. The Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Act 2023 introduced a range of measures to further protect our young people. The most important was a ban on the sale of nicotine vapes to under-18s. That law also prohibited their sale by retail workers under the age of 18, with an exception for small family-run

businesses. The Act banned the advertising of these products in cinemas, in or within 200 m of a school, on public transport and in taxis. These measures were designed to further limit children's exposure to messages normalising or glamorising the use of vapes and to support the ban on their sale to under-18s. The Act also reduced the types of outlets that could sell these products. From next week, vapes will no longer be sold from vending machines, which is important. It is a big step for us to ensure that happens. The sale of these products at events that are aimed at children is banned and their sale from pop-up shops or stalls that might appear at festivals will be banned from 2026. It is critical that we break the link between the sale of these products and events that our young people enjoy.

The annual licence system for the retail sale of vapes and tobacco products under the Act reflects the seriousness of these products. It will provide our enforcement authority, the national environmental health service, with up-to-date information on businesses in operation. That requirement will come into effect for all retailers of these products in February 2026. A minimum suspension period will apply to retailers that are convicted of offences.

On the use of nicotine vapes, the 2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study found that 19% of 12- to 17-year-olds had used one and 13% reported that they had used one in the past 30 days. These responses date from before the ban on their sale to minors was introduced so that measure will likely reduce the number. However, we must be realistic. There are other ways that our children can access these products. The European schools project on alcohol and drugs, dating from 2024, demonstrates this. Some 32% of our 15- and 16-year-olds have tried vapes. Some 16% stated they are current users and 7% reported daily use. These numbers are unacceptable and one of my priorities, as the Minister of State with responsibility for public health, is to take whatever action we can to bring them down to zero. The Government is determined to tackle this issue. We do not want our children using nicotine.

We can all understand how a child might be attracted to vapes, with their colourful appearance, attractive flavours, flavour names and the variety on display in our ordinary grocery shops and newsagents. I do not think it is an overstatement to say that these products are the revenge of the tobacco industry. That is why I look forward to bringing forward legislation with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, which we are currently working on, to address the aspects of vapes that can be attractive to young people. That law will be in two Bills on the advice of Office of the Attorney General. The public health (single-use vapes) Bill will ban the sale of all single-use or disposable vapes. That Bill is at an advanced stage of drafting and is prioritised for publication in this term. The removal of these low-price products should reduce their availability for our children, as well as addressing the huge environmental issue caused by their disposal.

The public health (tobacco products and nicotine-inhaling products) (amendment) Bill will restrict the colours and imagery on the packaging and on the devices themselves to make them less attractive to our children. It will also ban devices resembling products such as toys to ensure that the Irish market does not see the evolution of vapes into a multiuse device that specifically attracts our children. The Bill will also restrict the flavours for sale and prohibit all flavour descriptors other than the basic names so as to eliminate the marketing potential of child-friendly flavours. The Bill will ban the point-of-sale display and advertising of these products in our shops so that our children are not exposed to vapes in their everyday life and they are not seen as ordinary grocery goods. This Bill is also at an advanced stage of drafting

and prioritised for publication in this term. These measures cannot come quickly enough and I looking forward to doing my part to ensure that this legislation is enacted as soon as possible and to have the support of this House.

Nicotine pouches are a relatively new product. The evidence is not clear yet on their potential health harms but we know that they contain nicotine, which is an addictive substance. However, they have become very visible here in the past two years and are marketed heavily. The use of these products remains low, with an overall 1% of adults currently using them, but I acknowledge that use is highest among the cohort of those aged from 15 to 24, at 3%. They are used by 3% of current smokers and 2% of former smokers. The results from the European school project on alcohol and other drugs in 2024 show that 3.7% of 15- to 16-year-olds are currently using nicotine pouches, with 7.6% having used them at some point. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is giving ongoing consideration to the possible approaches to the regulation of nicotine pouches. Introducing laws on these products has already been discussed at EU level in the context of discussions on a revised tobacco products directive.

An EU-wide public consultation was carried out in 2023 to gain views on regulations on novel products, such as nicotine pouches. The range of tobacco products is always expanding and this is a problem for us. We must be effective, and the Minister is working on this, in ensuring we introduce a revised tobacco products directive as soon as possible and for that proposal to cover all new nicotine products, such as pouches, in order to protect our young people.

I will take the opportunity to address the issue of HHC, which is a significant problem. Many Deputies were in touch with me about the HHC content of vapes being sold nationwide. HHC was classified as a controlled drug through an order of the Government on 29 July last. HHC is now incorporated into the misuse of drugs legislation framework as a schedule 1 controlled drug, which is the strictest level of control. A lot of work is being done. As a result of the use of HHC, we have seen hospitalisations and psychotic episodes. Many people are struggling with addiction as a result of this and similar drugs. As the Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy, I would like to reassure parents who may be worried about their children and the impact of HHC. Help and support are available. I urge parents to use the HSE's excellent resource on *drugs.ie*, the parents' guide to alcohol and drugs. It provides factual information and advice on talking to children about the risks associated with illicit drugs. The HSE will also host a webinar in the coming weeks entitled, "Vaping products and psychoactive substances: what you should know as a parent." This event will provide information on HHC and is designed to support parents and guardians who are concerned about vaping and emerging drug trends among young people.

It will also provide information on prevention strategies and discuss the role of parents in guiding healthy decisions. These are really important to me. In the budget negotiations, I will be seeking funding for programmes targeted specifically at children on the dangers of vaping and nicotine use and that can be controlled nationwide and run through sports and youth clubs and local authorities. I will give an example. In my own area, I attended the launch of the Not Around Us campaign, which was developed by schoolchildren in Carlow–Kilkenny alongside the local councils and through the Sláintecare Healthy Communities programme. The message of the children was clear. They want to people to consider the impact of their smoking and vaping on them as children. It is also a matter of second-hand smoking. Smoking should not

be normalised. What we are really saying about vaping is that it should not to be seen as glamorous or normal. I want to see campaigns similar to the one I have mentioned rolled out across the country so the voices of children are heard and the normalisation of vapes among them is tackled.

I also want to address the issue of nicotine pouches, which we spoke about earlier. I thank everyone for being here today. Vaping is a very serious issue. From working with the Department officials and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, I am aware that a lot of work is being done. I assure Members that we intend to do a lot more. Our priority now is to get the two Bills into the House as soon as possible. Like the Minister, I will be looking for Members' full support.

Deputy Ann Graves: Our young people have to be given the best opportunity we can offer them. Although we cannot dictate to or lecture them, we can, of course, introduce legislation that will protect them and help them make positive decisions on their health and well-being. It would be hypocritical of me to stand up here and lecture anybody - I was that smoker; I was that vaper - but we must not bury our heads in the sand and pretend the challenges and consequences for young people will simply go away.

People are rightly very concerned about the prevalence of vaping and smoking among our younger people. According to the Institute of Public Health, 39% of 15- and 16-year-olds, which is nearly four in every ten, have tried vapes, and almost 18% of them are regular users. The need for legislation has never been more urgent. Legislation can work. Between the ban on indoor smoking in 2004 and 2023, the smoking rate in Ireland decreased from 27% to 18%. This represents approximately 800,000 fewer smokers and a substantial reduction in overall tobacco consumption. This decrease can be attributed to the Public Health (Tobacco) (Amendment) Act 2004, which banned smoking in workplaces, bars and restaurants, along with ongoing public health measures to combat smoking. This has benefited the health and well-being of our population greatly.

Since 2000, rates of nicotine smoking among young people in Ireland have significantly decreased, but unfortunately recent evidence shows there has been an increase in overall nicotine use, particularly since 2019. This was clearly driven by the rise in e-cigarettes and dual tobacco and e-cigarette use among those aged between 15 and 24. Key surveys like that of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children and the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs show a welcome decline between 1998 and 2018.

While I would of course welcome legislation, this is an issue on which we have had years of statements from several Ministers. The fact the Government is filling time with statements instead of real action and real legislation is concerning. The lack of legislation is an indictment of the Government's *laissez-faire* approach to our young people's health. It is time that the Government brought forward robust and future-proof legislation on nicotine products. We are already behind the curve on this. The Government has yet to address the serious issues of disposable vapes and nicotine products. HHC vapes have been covered. We have taken a very positive approach. I urge the Minister of State to seize the opportunity to put the legislation in place as soon as possible.

Deputy Mark Ward: I acknowledge that the Minister of State mentioned legislation is coming down the line. This is really welcome but it cannot come soon enough. If it is sensible and gets to the core of the issue, the Minister of State will receive support on it. Again, as Deputy Graves said, we are again having statements. There is a vacuum, and when there is a vacuum it is like the Wild West when it comes to vape shops. They are popping up all over the place. There is nothing to stop them from popping up outside schools. I walk through Clondalkin village and have noted there are vape shops throughout. With their bright lights and colours, they are lit up like Christmas trees. They are enticing young people to come in, and this is a deliberate marketing ploy. The colours are vibrant and attractive. Residents have contacted me about young people who are regularly seen going into the shops in their uniforms to buy vapes. There seems to be no regulation or policing of these issues. Vapes are definitely being sold to underage people.

The Minister of State mentioned the flavours of vapes. You have to look at the flavours. They are like something out of a sweetshop or in a cocktail, not what you would find in a tobacco shop. They include blueberry, sour raspberry, pineapple ice, lemon and lime, banana ice, menthol, and pink lemonade. I could go on and on. This is another thing that does not happen by accident; it is a deliberate marketing ploy by the vape shops.

There is also an issue in that vape shops argue vapes are a cessation method. What they are actually doing is encouraging the next generation of vapers or smokers. We have statistics and the Minister of State mentioned some herself. One in four people between 15 and 16 has vaped. One in five between 15 and 16 is currently using. We know the dangers of smoking. They have been well researched and have been known for a long time, but we do not know the long-term effects of vaping because the relevant studies have not been done yet.

The legislation the Minister of State talked about needs to be introduced as soon as possible to stop the vapers of today becoming the smokers of the future.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I also welcome the tightening of the legislation but we do need to see it. We need to see it implemented. Everybody has a concern about vaping, particularly among young people. Adults have a choice and free will, and if their vaping is part of smoking cessation I absolutely welcome it and believe it to be important; however, as we have already heard, the manner in which vapes are marketed and sold is an issue. I have noted flavours other than those mentioned, including cherry cola and Skittles. If these are not directed at children, I do not know what is.

Unfortunately, there are very few inspections happening. A report produced by *The Journal* states 3,500 vapes have been seized from shops by the HSE for breaching regulations since the start of 2024. That is an absolute drop in the ocean. It probably reflects the sales of one shop in a week, given the number of sales at the moment. Unfortunately, we need regulation. When you read in the report what is in the vapes, it is really shocking. One vape claimed to be nicotine free was found to contain nicotine. In this regard, we talk about HHC. It is really worrying that young people are getting their hands on these vapes. To be honest, nobody knows what is in them or their long-term effects. There is no doubt but that the packaging, colours and flavours of vapes are designed to target young people. There is absolutely no doubt about it because we see them. Anybody who walks will see children in school uniforms vaping. To me, that is deeply worrying.

In 2013, the Government said the target for smoking cessation was to reduce the proportion of smokers to 5%.

Unfortunately, in 2024, which was when the most recent report was compiled, and Deputy Graves talked about a figure of 18%, the rate was 17%. That neatly correlates with the time we saw a surge in vapes. The question we need to ask is whether these vapes are really contributing to a reduction in smoking or is it that we are just creating a new generation of people who are being enticed into it?

As I said, when it comes to adults, they can make the choice. If it is their choice, vapes have a place in smoking cessation, but we do not need to have them in such flavours and in packaging that is encouraging others. We need one other thing, similar to cigarettes. Any number of times you walk into a shop, you will see a counter of cigarettes at the back. There will be no advertisement, the person will take your money, press a button and the cigarettes will come out, yet right in front of you, where the sweets are, you will see vapes. They are right where the sweets are. Again, if that is not targeted at children, then I do not know what is. We need new legislation but we also need inspections. We need the HSE to clamp down on these.

The other part of it is the HSE does not have any vaping cessation programmes. None. There is no funding and there is no capacity within the HSE. Somebody who is addicted to nicotine through vapes has nowhere to go and has no supports. At the moment, the HSE has no funding for that. I encourage the Minister of State to look specifically at vaping. We are talking about young people in particular, but there are also older people who want to get off nicotine. They may have successfully weaned themselves off cigarettes but they are still addicted to nicotine through vapes. Let us give them the support to be able to come off those products as well.

I will raise a matter that is very worrying. I see this because lobbies from tobacco companies come in regarding some of this legislation. They are using vapes as a product alongside cigarettes. They are looking at a reduction in the number of people smoking and are seeing this new product as a way of keeping in business. I really worry about that. These are very powerful, strong and profitable companies. It is something we need to keep an eye on.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I will also highlight the growing concern about vaping and nicotine use among young people. While vapes are often marketed as safer alternatives to smoking, the reality is far more troubling. Vapes and similar products, such as nicotine pouches, pose a very serious health risk, particularly for young people whose brains are still developing.

This scourge of modern society, as we could call it, is nearly everywhere. They are sold in every local shop, as previous contributors mentioned. In my constituency, there are dedicated vape shops in Gorey and Arklow. Vapes pose serious health risks. They can lead to nicotine addiction affecting brain development, mood, concentration and memory. They contribute to health issues, mental health issues and a transition to smoke and tobacco products. Companies are manipulating young people, as mentioned, through clever marketing tactics, having vapes cheaper than cigarettes and as my colleague, Deputy Ward, said, in appealing flavours, designs and colours, and a very strong social media presence, especially on TikTok and other platforms. Irish research showed that 23% of 15- to 17-year-olds vape regularly and teenagers who vape are three to five times more likely to start smoking compared with those who never vaped.

Vapes are also harmful to the environment. In the UK, 5 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week, so we then have plastic, heavy metals, nicotine, salts and lithium batteries in the environment. As I said, most of the popular vape brands are owned by the big tobacco companies. In Ireland, an estimated 12.5 million disposable vapes were sold in 2022, most of which ended up in landfill as plastic waste.

Vaping is far from harmless. It poses serious health and environmental risks. Of course, as always, the same industries that profited from tobacco addiction for decades, going back to the fifties when they told us how great smoking was for us, are now aggressively targeting a new generation of customers. We must take action. We need to protect youth through education, regulation and awareness. Sinn Féin wants to see legislation introduced in this Chamber to regulate the marketing of vapes and ban disposable vapes, which are basically the equivalent of smoking a battery. They are in the most dangerous form, both for children's health and the environment.

Let us ensure that the next generation is informed, supported and safeguarded from the dangers of nicotine addiction, which is orchestrated in a very manipulative way by the tobacco industry. I would appreciate whatever the Minister of State can do on this issue.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I very much welcome today's statements. There is an irony that so much effort has gone into trying to reduce smoking rates in this country over the past two decades. We proudly talk about the smoking ban in commercial places. A lot of money has been spent by the HSE. There is a target for 2025 of a rate of less than 5% of the population smoking, but we know approximately 18% are still smoking. All the while, when the focus has been on that, the Government has taken its eye off the ball regarding a very serious and worrying trend over the past number of years, which is vaping. To see that the figure has grown from 3% of the population in 2015 to 8.5% in 2023 is something in itself, but to see that it is now up as far as almost 30% of young people vaping on a regular basis is cause for alarm.

The reality is we do not really know the full health impact of vaping. We heard from Professor Des Cox, a paediatric respiratory consultant at CHI, this week, who said that teenage vapers are three to five times more likely to take up smoking. We have heard others talking about issues with memory loss and concentration. The reality is, however, just like tobacco, that it may take a few decades to understand what the full impact of vaping is. We do know hazardous chemicals are contained within vaping. It will take some time to fully understand what they are. There is a horrible reality that we are now seeing a new generation of people with an addiction to a nicotine product. While tobacco is obviously a much more dangerous product relative to vaping, and vaping perhaps has its place in helping people wean themselves off smoking, nicotine is not a problem-free product in itself.

We need to see urgent action by this Government, not only in terms of the legislation on single-use vapes, but also on the very aggressive marketing we have seen. Others have spoken about the flavours and colours. At a number of the music festivals this summer, including Electric Picnic and All Together Now, nicotine companies were out in full force handing out nicotine pouches. The aggressive marketing tactics by these companies are having an impact. We have seen that in the take-up of vaping by young people. We need to see an end to that very quickly.

The other critical thing is we need to future-proof the legislation. It may be vaping now, but nicotine pouches are something that are a bit more novel in Ireland. In some ways, they have been around for decades and centuries, but are newer in how they are currently packaged and marketed. There may be some other products in the future. We need legislation that is future-proofed with regard to the marketing and regulation of those products or any products that, effectively, contain nicotine. Countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium have effectively set down the template or precedent to future-proof legislation so that any future products developed with nicotine will come under existing regulations with regard to how they are marketed.

Legislation will only go so far. Regardless of the substance, the lesson is that prohibition will only ever do so much. It is the health supports that are critical. When we submitted a parliamentary question to the HSE earlier this month regarding supports for those who wish to wean themselves off vaping, we learned that there are no resources. While we have a very well-resourced smoking cessation programme, the HSE effectively told us that it has not been directed or funded by the Department of Health to develop a "stop vaping" service. There is a critical need for that. We have to make sure members of this young generation who are vaping do not become the addicted smokers of the future albeit it is a slightly different substance from tobacco. It is critical that supports are put in place to promote awareness and help those who wish to come off vaping.

There will always be substances that pique the interest of young people. We have all been young. The need for legislation is urgent and it needs to look ahead as opposed to just being reactionary regarding the trend we have seen over the past number of years. The Labour Party will not be found wanting regarding ensuring the swift passage of legislation through this House.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the Government's proposals to protect young people from the harms of vaping and nicotine addiction. As the party that delivered the first workplace smoking ban in the world, Fianna Fáil knows that smart, proportionate regulation saves lives. We have already raised the age of sale to 18 and tightened advertising near schools, on public transport and in cinemas. Now we must go further because the evidence is clear. Brightly coloured devices, confectionery flavours and cheap disposables are hooking a new generation on nicotine. The package before us does exactly what parents, teachers and clinicians have asked for. First, it involves a complete ban on single-use, disposable vapes. These products drive youth uptake and create a toxic waste stream of plastics and lithium batteries. It also involves a crackdown on child appeal. It involves standardised packaging and sensible limits on colours and imagery for devices - no toys, games or novelty shapes and a clear simple approach to flavours with basic descriptors only. Point-of-sale display and advertising will be removed from general retail in line with what we know works for tobacco. Specialist shops will be able to serve adult consumers, including smokers trying to quit. That balance matters. This builds on measures already enacted, including a licensing system for retailers from early 2026, a ban on vending machine sales and pop-up premises and serious investment by the HSE in youth-focused information, school guidance and cessation supports such as Quit 4 Youth.

We are not just restricting supply; we are supporting healthier choices. We should also be clear that Ireland is moving in step with our neighbours. Across Great Britain and the North, single-use vapes are being taken off the shelves, marketing routes have been sharply curtailed

and strict product limits apply. Aligning with that direction of travel reduces cross-Border leakage from Northern Ireland and sends a consistent message that these products are not for children. I accept some elements require EU technical notification and a short standstill period, etc., but that should not delay Oireachtas scrutiny or preparedness. Retailers will need time to adapt store layouts, Revenue and the HSE will need time to bed in licensing and enforcement and producers will need to rework packaging and flavour descriptors but let us give them clarity and a fair, firm timeline and then hold the line. Our objective is simple - fewer children starting, more adults stopping and less litter on our streets. If this legislation means no more bubblegum "unicorn" vapes at the till, that is a positive outcome and not a problem. I commend the Minister of State and officials on a measured, evidence-led approach and I look forward to supporting swift passage of these Bills.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: This is a very important debate. Like other speakers, it needs to be acknowledged on the record of the Dáil that it was Fianna Fáil in government that brought in the world's first ever national ban on smoking in the workplace. It was ahead of its time and many other countries have followed suit since. This debate is very timely. I wrote to the Department of Health recently. Like many Deputies, I get emails about many issues. I received an email from a man in County Clare two weeks ago. His wife has profound asthma. He cited an evening where they were in a restaurant. The meal was ruined anyway because of a cloud of horrible fruity vapour being blown their way all the time but she had an asthmatic episode afterwards and ended up in hospital, which she attributed to the fact that vaping had happened alongside them. There is no structure of rules regarding this. I know there are certain guidelines and a policy direction being taken by the Department but if one goes into restaurants, bars and other places, one will see that it is hit and miss. It requires national regulation. Some bars do not allow it while others do. Some barmen take an easier approach and some are a bit lax. The Joe Duffy show - I think we have to call it "Liveline" these days to give it its official name - featured a singer a week or two ago whose name I did not get. I do not think he is particularly famous but he is someone who has done the pub circuit in Dublin over many years singing ballads and sitting on a stool in the corner keeping people entertained. He said that in the worst of days when there were clouds of smoke billowing across the bar and the lounge, he would go home with his jacket smelling and he might have had to hang it out to refresh it but he certainly never found himself overwhelmed by smoke. He said that when he sings in a bar where someone is vaping, he goes home feeling rotten. He knows from his vocal chords that he has been subjected to it all evening. I very much think that this needs to be dealt with.

We need to get to a point where there is prohibition in public spaces. I often bring my young children to a playground or go some place that is nice for them but the moment can be ruined very quickly when that cloud of fruity vapour billows across you. It just consumes you. It is probably worse. From a health point of view, it is not as bad as nicotine but from the point of view of being nauseated, I find it far worse.

My next point is on a slight tangent but it is relevant to the debate we are having today. I sit on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and attend its meetings religiously. Last year before the general election, we did a body of work on drivers who might be under the influence of alcohol or drugs, something that is an issue that is increasing. There is a lacuna in the legislation. If I am sitting at a bar and someone across from me is drinking pints all evening, I will not passively become drunk by any stretch of the imagination. If someone is smoking, I

might get a chesty cough and the odour of smoke on my clothes but that is it. An Garda Síochána made the point that somebody in the presence of a person who is smoking cannabis will be passively inhaling that all evening and that it has come across instances where people have then failed the oral fluids test and must be brought to a Garda station for a blood test, which goes to the Medical Bureau of Road Safety for laboratory analysis, so there is a bit of a legal lacuna here. If someone is in a room where he or she is a passive smoker - I do not know if that is the correct term to use anymore but certainly he or she could be sitting 10 yd or 12 yd away from someone smoking cannabis all night - the following morning, he or she could find himself or herself being stopped by gardaí, checked and ultimately going through our judicial system so we need to look at that. We cannot have ambiguity insofar as enforcement is concerned.

Deputy Barry Ward: I put on record my support for the smoking ban. Ireland showed its mettle in terms of being ahead of the pack and dealing with smoking in a really serious way about 20 years ago. I have friends who gave up smoking the day the smoking ban came in and they have stayed off cigarettes ever since. It has undoubtedly saved lives and I pay tribute to the Ministers for Health who have contributed to attacking smoking over a long number of years.

I remember working in pubs as a teenager and going home reeking of smoke. It is such a great thing that this is no longer happens to workers in their work environment.

5 o'clock

That is great and the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts and the legislation we brought forward were a really positive force for dealing with this public health issue, but let us be under no illusions, because vapes, electronic cigarettes and nicotine products also pose a public health risk. While it may not be possible to show the direct causal link we have established with tobacco products there is no doubt the toxic substances used in these nicotine products cause harm and no doubt whatsoever that they are highly addictive, because there is scientific evidence for it. The notion, therefore, we would be supporting a regime that allows people to engage in addictive behaviour that is going to become worse and worse is highly regrettable. In that regard I welcome some progress on banning the sale of them to under-18s. I welcome the proposed legislation, which I understand is going to ban disposable vapes, though we are still behind the curve on that as it has already been done in Belgium, France and the United Kingdom. I agree with the bans on the point of sale displays, making them look like toys and the colours and flavours.

All this makes sense but given we have been through this experience already, we need to be serious about this and essentially substitute the word “nicotine” for the word “tobacco” in the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts. All these products contain nicotine but they do not seem to have the same recognition within the State apparatus for helping people quit smoking, and vapes can be a gateway to cigarettes rather than a means to get away from them for many people as well. I hear people saying the quit programme, which has shown some success in helping people leave the fags behind, does not extend to these nicotine products. It should, and we should be providing the funding in the coming budget to ensure the programme is allowed to operate for e-cigarettes, nicotine products and vapes. The easiest way to do that is to essentially deal with them as if they were tobacco products, the same as cigarettes or other tobacco, and substitute

the word “nicotine” into the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts so all the restrictions that apply to smoking indoors, purchasing cigarettes, advertising cigarettes to making them available to or to targeting them at children can be dealt with in one fell swoop. Rather than reinventing the wheel in the form of the legislation the Minister of State is proposing, which I am absolutely behind, let us do it across the board and ensure they are treated in the same way we treated cigarettes 20 years ago.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is another of these circumstances where we are going to have agreement there are absolute dangers with vapes. You do not ever have to go very far to find them. At times I probably do not even have to leave my own house, and that is the thing. We have seen the prevalence of vape use among young people, as well as other nicotine-related products such as nicotine pouches. We have also seen something that is far more nefarious, which is HHC vapes. It is like synthetic THC. We have seen the huge damage that happens. We are talking sometimes about very young children who have engaged in this sort of behaviour and that is a gateway to a really bad place. These synthetic-type drugs can also have real detrimental impacts.

We need to move beyond having statements. Statements are fine but we need to see legislative action on this. I do not know how many times we have been in here talking about vapes and how it is pretty obvious tobacco companies have looked for alternatives to what they used to be able to sell, like cigarettes and other products, which have obviously caused abject harm to a huge number of people and families throughout this State and the world. We have seen the huge money these companies have put into fighting legislation, including some of the legislation that has been introduced in this jurisdiction. I have no issue with stating we have seen some decent action taken on cigarettes, but we are where we are in relation to dealing with what we are dealing with at the minute and we know there are particular products that are aimed at younger and younger children. That needs to be dealt with. We need legislation on that.

Going back to the issue with HHC in vapes, no more than dealing with nitrous oxide and all the rest of it, we have really harmful gateway drugs. We have a huge issue with addiction. Even in the last few days we had an event in the audiovisual room where the North Eastern Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force alongside the Coalition for Better Alcohol Policy said they needed money first of all, as well as a national alcohol strategy and for us to tie it all together. I will be honest that with addiction, drugs and alcohol and some of the accoutrements we are talking about there, we are not having a holistic conversation about how we deal with this. There is an overlap with crime. I am not just talking about organised crime but also about disorganised crime, which people sometimes term antisocial behaviour. We need to have a real conversation. We need rules, regulations and the supports for people to get beyond their addiction as well and to deal with the reality of what we have, rather than just dealing with very simplistic statements.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: My colleagues will talk about the wider issue of vapes. I will take this opportunity to talk about another product that in a very similar vein is causing huge problems for teenagers, namely, nicotine pouches. I do not know whether the Minister of State is familiar with them. They are small white pouches you can buy in any corner shop. You put them on your gum, underneath your lip, and they directly and very quickly give you a very strong hit of nicotine. They can be bought in packs for I think €5 or €7. They are very colourful

and really marketed towards children. It is very similar to the vapes in that they have different flavours and the marketing is very eye-catching.

These pouches are prevalent in many of our secondary schools because there is no regulation of them in Ireland, meaning there is no age restrictions, no restrictions on the sale of them, the packaging or anything like that. As governments controlled how tobacco was marketed, especially to under-18s, and are now going towards vapes, the industry is coming up with a new technique of making money and the nicotine pouches are that technique. Unfortunately, as I said, many teenagers are now using them and are addicted to them. The principals' association has twice called on the HSE to provide guidance on these but this has not yet happened. This is a product that is causing huge problems for our teens, and health problems as well, and we are just too reactive in dealing with it. It is taking too long to deal with this. I started raising the issue of nicotine pouches nearly two years ago now when Stephen Donnelly was the Minister and I have repeatedly asked for them to be regulated. Now is the opportunity to deal with these, rather than waiting a number of years or until Europe deals with them. We need to take control of this and provide the regulation. They should not be for sale to under-18s. They should not be marketed to children. They should not be flavoured. We should not be allowing a company or different companies to give them away free. You can sign up on their websites and get them free. You can go to concerts and get them free there. They are heavily promoted towards teenagers. I ask the Minister of State and the Government to deal with this now and not to wait for two or three years, when the problem is too big to deal with and we have a whole generation of children addicted to these products. I also ask the Minister of State to ensure the HSE urgently provides the guidance the school principals have requested, because schools are finding it difficult to deal with this issue and it is a big problem for them as well.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this topic this evening, but like others I am frustrated, because it is another instance where we discuss something yet the regulatory vacuum still exists. This is our generation's version of big tobacco and it is preying on our children. Big tobacco is marketing to children on purpose and it is no secret the sale of e-cigarettes or vapes has boomed in recent years. Far from the original branding, which positioned these products as a way to quit smoking, they are now branded with bright colours, sweet flavours and stronger and stronger hits of nicotine. Why do these products come in blue raspberry, strawberry kiwi, watermelon and pineapple ice flavours? The answer is because they are marketed at the younger generations, including under-18s.

We know from young people, parents and teachers that the use of nicotine and tobacco products by children has not gone away. I know sometimes the Government recoils when I use terms like "big tobacco", similar to when I use the term "big tech", but I think it is important to do so and I feel that this is part of the problem. We know that these companies have endless piles of money that they use to lobby for their interests and subvert the common good. It is up to us to lead in standing up for that common good against these corporate interests.

A World Health Organization report from 2024 detailed how big tobacco is crassly using language of harm reduction while it gets a generation of children addicted to vaping. This, paired with the lack of enforcement of what little protection we have, means that youth vape use is higher than ever and continues to rise. Tá níos mó páistí ag úsáid galtoitíní ná riamh, but we are not resourcing the HSE to help people quit vaping. The HSE says it does not have

capacity to deliver stop-vaping care and is not resourced to do so. A woman in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown contacted me recently to highlight how vaping products were being displayed and sold alongside toys like fidget spinners in a shop in her local shopping centre. Níl sé sách maith go bhfuil sé seo ag tarlú in 2025. I appreciate the proposed legislative fixes the Minister of State outlined at the start of today's discussion but we are currently operating in a regulatory vacuum, so this problem is urgent. We need regulation on the packaging of vapes, on their flavouring and on their points of sale. We need to future-proof against an industry that does not care about our children.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The Minister of State and her predecessors have shown a shocking lack of urgency when it comes to vapes. Under the watch of successive Ministers, youth vaping rates have skyrocketed. Is this any wonder with flavours like cotton candy, cherry cola and bubble gum readily available in any corner shop or indeed with stores showcasing vapes like pick and mix rather than the display of highly addictive products? The numbers speak for themselves. In June, a study by *The Lancet* into Irish nicotine use found that, between 2015 and 2023, vaping had more than doubled across all age groups going from 3% to 8%. The dual-use of vapes and cigarettes also more than doubled, increasing from 1% to 3% while vaping among 15- to 24-year-olds went from 19% to 30%.

During the same period, the only real action taken by the Government was to ban the sale of vapes to under-18s, something most people thought was already the case. That 2023 legislation should have been the vehicle used to ban disposable vapes and restrict flavours, packaging and advertising. In 2022, the previous health committee recommended regulating flavours and marketing in that Bill but it was ignored. Two public consultations on single-use vapes had to be held before the Government finally accepted that action should be taken.

Now with the end of 2025 in sight, we are still none the wiser on the regulation and banning of vapes. I accept that there is an EU notification process which must be adhered to, but that cannot even be initiated until we have draft legislation. This needs to be a priority. We should not be here making statements; we should be dealing with the necessary legislation. It is time for action. The time for talk is truly over. We need decisive action here. I raised this point with the senior Minister previously. Time and time again, we have statements in this House on health issues instead of dealing with health legislation. All the time we call for more productivity in the health service. We need more productivity from Parliament and more productivity from the Department of Health in particular on health legislation.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Vapes and nicotine products are the absolute bane of parents' lives. I have been contacted many times by parents asking what can be done about vapes, their contents, how they look and how they are sold. I am speaking not only as a TD but as a mother and somebody who has worked with children and young people for many decades. As previous contributors have said, school principals and school communities are really looking for guidance on this.

What galls me most is that vapes are being targeted at young people. I know from talking to young people that they can get a vape that matches their outfit when they go to a party. Companies are absolutely marketing then so that young people will buy them. They go to a party and have a fantastic time. They are wearing whatever it is and their vape matches it. If I was young person now, I would probably be doing the same. Companies are very smart in

how they are doing this, but we have to protect young people. They are not allowed to be sold under-18s. I genuinely want to know if anyone has ever been prosecuted over that. Has anybody ever come before the courts for selling nicotine vapes to young people who are under 18?

HHC, hexahydrocannabinol, is a controlled substance and illegal. I was contacted by a parent in my constituency asking why her 14-year-old child and the child's friends were able to buy that. Why is she catching them using this? If that is illegal, they are not supposed to be buying vapes in the first place and we have legislation, why is it not being acted on?

I agree with previous speakers about having statements here. As a legislator, I would much rather be in here making sure that we are creating legislation that is not just sitting on a shelf but is actually able to be enacted so that we prevent young people from being taken advantage of by these big companies that want to make money over the health of our young people.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I am delighted to be here today for statements on the use of vapes and nicotine products by young people. Fianna Fáil is the party that introduced the smoking ban. We have a steadfast commitment to improving public health but we have to go further. I know this legislation will tackle the rise in the use of vapes by children and young people by reducing their attractiveness and availability but I just want to make three points in my few minutes here.

The first point relates to the product placement of vapes. It is absolutely unbelievable that sweets, bars of chocolate and vapes can all be side by side in a shop. We see it right across the country. We see it in Carlow-Kilkenny. Every single day when I go into shops, I see these vapes with their strong branded colours and flavours. That cannot be allowed to continue and has to be changed. Some of these products look very attractive and that has to be changed.

In relation to vaping in schools, I spoke to a young student recently and he told me that, in his school, people were able to get access to vapes in various manners. In the bathrooms of the school, they are actually selling drags of a vape for €1 or €2 a drag, which is absolutely unbelievable. We need to work extra hard with our younger people to make sure they are aware of the consequences of vapes.

I welcome the Not Around Us campaign, a joint initiative between Kilkenny County Council and Carlow County Council, which is hugely successful. Younger people are coming together to promote smoke-free and vape-free zones. We need more of these kinds of initiatives. It has worked really well in Carlow and Kilkenny in promoting awareness.

My final point is on accessibility. It is too easy for a young person to get access to vapes in 2025. I spoke to a 15-year-old transition year student who, as part of a project, went to 20 vape shops right across the constituency to see if that student could purchase vapes. In 17 of the shops, it was absolutely no problem and no questions were asked even though this person was under age. Three shops asked if the student had ID and when the student said they did not have ID on them, the shops still sold vapes anyway. Such easy accessibility is a huge issue. If there are restrictions there and if people are not allowed to be served until they are over 18, there have to be strong penalties in place for shops that sell vapes people who are under age.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome that the Minister of State is here to take this debate. However, why are we having statements on this issue and not a debate on the legislation? During my time in the Seanad when we debated the legislation on the prohibition of sales to under-18s, there was promise at that time that we would move on legislation to deal with the issue of flavoured nicotine-inhaling products and that we would deal with some of the marketing issues, yet it has not happened. I really have to ask the question: why are we having statements on this? We have talked about this. Everybody knows and every colleague here has highlighted the problems. They have been highlighted by youth organisations.

FDYS in County Wexford did an extensive study around young people. Young people themselves want action to be taken. Even the use of the term "vapes" is wrong. These are nicotine-inhaling devices and it is a public health crisis. While I respect that the Minister of State is relatively new in the post, I am not convinced that her Department is taking this sufficiently seriously.

We know the damage nicotine causes. Many of these nicotine-inhaling companies are the cigarette companies of old and we are allowing them to market products, as we have heard already, in an attractive way to young and vulnerable people. People who had never smoked before are taking up vapes. I really question why the Minister of State is in here responding to statements. When the Minister of State responds, will we hear her say that legislation will be introduced on this issue before Christmas and that it is a public health emergency? I am quite happy to sit as late as we need to some evening to fast-track this legislation. There is cross-party agreement on the need to address this. We know that this issue is at crisis point in all of our communities.

I was very struck by a survey of approximately 1,400 young people from the Wicklow, Carlow and Wexford areas that two students from FCJ Secondary School, Bunclody carried out nearly four years ago. The Minister of State knows that school and area very well. A total of 10% of the young people involved in the survey had never smoked previously but now regarded themselves as regular vape users and effectively addicted to it. The problem is that nothing has happened in that four-year period. I am not convinced that the Minister of State's Department is treating this as a public health emergency. I will be very disappointed if the Minister of State does not stand up in her concluding remarks – and I will tune in – to give a clear commitment that, as the Minister of State with responsibility in this area, she will introduce legislation before Christmas that will address the issues of packaging and marketing.

We do not have a department of public health in this country. Rather, we have a Department of illness and sickness. This is a public health crisis. I know the Minister of State is a serious person who is deeply committed to her role, but we need to move on legislation as soon as possible.

Deputy Colm Burke: It is amazing how the market changes. One issue that is now on the market is high puff count vaping devices. They have exploded onto the Irish market in a short period. They are known as carousel or click-on vape devices, but they are commonly known as "big puff". While they do not breach existing laws because their tanks contain 2 ml of vape liquid, big puff disposable vapes are in clear breach of the spirit of existing legislation as they have supplementary tanks. It just goes to show how the market responds where there is legislation or regulation and how it is able to sideline that.

We should look closely at what the Irish Heart Foundation has set out in its recommendations. It recommends that any product containing nicotine should first have to be granted approval by the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HRP, before being placed on the market; future-proof legislation that prohibits the marketing, selling and distribution of disposable vapes and prevents any novel disposable vapes circumventing the rules to enter the market; a complete prohibition of the marketing, selling and distribution of nicotine pouches and any novel nicotine products, nicotine gummies or nicotine strips; a ban on all e-cigarette flavours, bar tobacco, by restricting the permitted flavouring ingredients to a limited few e-liquids with a tobacco flavour, as has been introduced in the Netherlands; an immediate ban on all e-cigarette products advertising through all communication media, including outdoor arenas, billboards, buses, at points of sale and online; the introduction of plain packaging for all e-cigarettes; a ban on the online sale of e-cigarettes and nicotine products; and an increase to the legal age of the sale of e-cigarettes from 18 to 21, as has been done in the USA. Basically, this is what the Irish Heart Foundation has set out because it has a lot of experience in dealing with the effects and use of tobacco.

We have clear evidence that when people start off with vapes, they tend to go on to tobacco products and then suffer the health consequences as a result. Even with vapes, there is growing evidence that they have adverse effects on people's health. We need, therefore, to ensure those products are not allowed on the market. The problem we have with the people who produce these products is that they are not worried about the negative effects they may have on people; they are only interested in profit. They will use any mechanism they can to sell the product, and the easiest market to get at is young people. That is why we need to ensure we have the required legislation in place that not only prevents these products from coming onto the market, but also the sidelining of regulations and legislation. It is therefore extremely important that we bring in robust and comprehensive legislation that cannot be sidestepped in any way.

I agree with my colleague, Deputy Byrne, that we need to urgently bring forward the legislation so that we can bring in the necessary controls and regulations.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: The Government has been caught napping when it comes to vapes. We all knew this was coming down the line and yet the Government failed to take adequate action to prevent the problems we are now witnessing. I am even after hearing the Minister of State's Government colleagues calling this out. The rate of vape use among 15 to 16-year-olds is at 18%, with 39% of them having tried it at some stage. This should be a serious concern for all of us. Many vape shop owners share those concerns, some of whom have contacted me in County Clare to express their worries. Responsible shop owners want robust legislation as much as we do. Future-proof legislation is needed as a matter of urgency. The delay in bringing forward legislation before now means that much of what is being proposed is already out of date. To be meaningful, any legislation needs to include disposable vapes, nicotine pouches and HHC vapes. The legislation also needs to be broad enough to include new, alternative products which will become available to replace any products that will be restricted. Such alternative products are already available. We cannot be left trying to catch up again.

According to the Health Research Board, we have a situation where young people are reporting for treatment for the effects of HHC vapes at a rate of approximately ten per month. This is absolutely unacceptable and an indication of the lack of Government action. There

have been calls from the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland for HHC to be banned because of the addiction and serious mental health issues it is seeing in young patients.

A number of steps need to be taken to reduce the number of children accessing these products and to reduce the harm they cause. An anti-vaping service for young people needs to be established to inform, advise and assist them to quit or, better still, abstain from using such products in the first place. An awareness campaign needs to be brought forward so that everyone is aware of the dangers these products can cause. Parents in Clare have been in touch to say that they are left dealing with their children suffering from addiction because of vape use. According to Clare Parenting's guide on vapes, e-cigarettes and disposables for teenagers, using these products can have an impact on a person's physical and mental health, concentration in school, activities and hobbies, relationships with family and friends and finances. The current support system services around tobacco and smoking should be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Single-use vapes are banned in the North and should be banned here without delay. The Irish Heart Foundation called on the Government to do this when the ban came into effect in the North in order to protect the health of our young people. Vapes are marketed to our young people through the use of catchy product names, imaginative flavour names and strategic packaging. All of these aspects of vapes need to be regulated by the Government. The Government's record on this issue is one of failure to act promptly. Government Ministers have been issuing statements and expressing intent, but to date we have not seen the necessary legislation enacted. That needs to change. I call on the Minister of State to reassure the House that it will.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am extremely frustrated that we are here on the cusp of October making statements in the Dáil when the election was last November. It is outrageous that the Government has not got its act together to produce a number of Bills over the summer. Even the Minister of State's party colleague is taking her to task on this issue. We are talking about this important health issue for young people but no legislation is forthcoming; we are just making statements. We need to hear what the proposal for action is. Major companies are now targeting young people with these so-called vapes. They are also posing for older people as a gateway to give up smoking.

It is ludicrous we are only having a little chat about it, with nothing actually worked out.

I want to mention the health issues for young people. Research was done by the RCSI in Dublin recently and a few of the comments made were very important. For example, it was suggested that it "is plausible that we are on the cusp of a new wave of chronic diseases that will emerge 15 to 20 years from now due to these exposures." It was also suggested that "without comprehensive regulation [and laws], as we try to treat the nicotine addictions of older tobacco smokers, there is a substantial risk of transferring new health issues to younger generations." This is very serious. It is not a bit surprising that the companies behind the tobacco industry are moving into this to make profits. Flavour like cotton candy and cherry cola are deliberately targeted at children, not at adults trying to quit smoking which is the so-called justification for allowing the vaping industry to operate. In the study, 180 vape flavours were tested from a huge range of products. It would take decades to test every product, as there are so many chemicals within them. They were found to contain 127 acutely toxic chemicals

with 153 health hazards and 225 irritants. Loads of evidence is emerging about the dangers of these and the fact that young people whose lungs are still developing are using these nicotine products and will damage their health in the long term. We really need action from the Government.

Another study on vaping and young people's lungs did fitness tests on young people who smoked, vaped and did neither. Vapers and smokers were less able to take in oxygen. Vapers had an average peak exercise capacity of 186 watts, similar to smokers. That is extremely worrying. The evidence is right in front of us. It adds to growing evidence that long-term vaping is harmful and challenges the idea it could be a healthier alternative to smoking.

The statistics on young people using e-cigarettes, tobacco products and vapes show the figure has increased from 20% in 2015 to 30% now, with 17% of 15- to 24-year-olds using e-cigarettes. Meanwhile, 13% of under-18s had used vapes in the previous 30 days. Three quarters of the children in the studies had never smoked. A new market and a new cohort of young people who had not smoked were vaping, much as happened in the 1970s and previous decades. We know the colourful packaging is designed to go with outfits, handbags or whatever. It is happening.

It should be noted the vaping industry makes really spurious claims. One claim is this is the biggest way people get off cigarettes. To be clear, the biggest way people quit smoking is by quitting smoking. There is no scientific evidence that more people quit smoking by using vapes than just quit smoking. These things have to be tested out. The literature shows young people who use vapes are at increased risk of anxiety, mood disorders and sleep disturbance.

I want to mention the companies that are marketing the vaping industry. Big tobacco has shifted to this industry. Philip Morris is the world's biggest tobacco company and it is looking to make two thirds of its profits from non-smoke products by 2030. BAT, another big tobacco company, wants to be 50% reliant on vapes by 2035. PJ Carroll doubled its profits in 2023 from vaping. The other two major players, JTI Ireland and John Player and Sons, have also moved to vaping products to increase profits. Lobbying records show all those companies have lobbied governments around legislation and around not making this restrictive. It is extremely worrying that tobacco companies who lied through their teeth for decades about the effects of smoking on people's health are now involved in this. That should be a major red flag.

I will finish up on solutions. Thus far the Government has banned vaping products being sold to under-18s. Unfortunately, 66% of children and young people said they would find it easy to access vaping products so that ban will not be enough. We need to do other things straight away: a ban on disposable vapes, because they are too cheap; the introduction of plain packaging; and a ban on all flavours apart from tobacco, in order to stop this targeting of children and young people. We also need to look at the creation of addiction services because people are addicted to these products and this habit and have no way of getting off them. At least the HSE provides quit-smoking healthcare, etc. We need services for people to quit vaping. There needs to be action now and an end to just talk.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: When I was in college in Maynooth, a while ago now, I started smoking. I was 19 and playing hurling for Kildare and the university but fell into a bad habit and it took me a long time to quit smoking - about 12 years. I was on and off but managed to quit cold turkey and then eventually found a vape on a night out and become dependent on

vapes in social settings and then in normal day-to-day settings. To this day, I am on and off a vape - not a disposable vape but a vape you fill up. Much has been said about disposable vapes. I agree with the criticism of them and think they should be banned. The vape liquid is even cheaper. If you have a vape you can refill, the e-liquid for it works out far cheaper in the long run and even in the short term, given we see young people using two or three disposable vapes per day and we see the impact that has.

Other speakers have spoken of the packaging and flavours involved with vapes. That is a key problem. Watermelon ice, pineapple crush or whatever it may be is clearly an attempt to market to younger people and to target children. We are seeing younger and younger people starting to vape. When I was in secondary school, there were some people who smoked at a younger age but now far more teenagers vape than ever smoked. At school, there were always people at the back of the shed or wherever it may be who smoked, but now teenagers are walking home from school and droves of them have plumes following them. There are multiple issues causing that. One is the marketing of this to young people; another is the packaging. Legislation needs to be introduced for plain packaging and to eliminate flavours. We eliminated menthol cigarettes and the tobacco industry came in with clickies to bring it in the back door. They were removed through legislation as well and we need to do the same with plain packaging for vapes and vape products. Flavours need to be removed so only tobacco is available.

It is not just vapes. The tobacco industry is expanding its reach as it sees traditional cigarettes are not in vogue. There are also snus products, little tobacco pouches that go under the lip at the gum and provide high dosages of nicotine. We are seeing significant impacts on the oral and general health of young and older people. These need to be regulated as they are causing serious issues. Friends of mine were at Electric Picnic recently and these were being handed out for free, which completely shocked me. Handing out nicotine products for free to festivalgoers was clearly an attempt to get more people addicted to those products.

Imagine if there were tobacco companies handing out boxes of free cigarettes. There would be absolute uproar. We should have the same response in relation to handing out the likes of snus, vapes or whatever it may be. That needs to be something that is not permitted in any way, shape or form because it is trying to encourage more young people and people of all ages. Let us be honest; it is not just young people, and it is unfair to put it down to just young people. There are older people like myself who started vaping at an older age to try to stop smoking. Unfortunately, that is now what other people and I are relying on as well to deal with the nicotine addiction that is there.

There are multiple issues around vaping, but it needs to be tackled. It needs to be tackled quickly because we will see health implications further down the line, as we have seen with cigarettes. There have been studies into vaping. We have seen a lot of studies that show there are significant health impacts from vaping, but we are going to see even more of that over the next five, ten or 20 years as we have seen with smoking. We need to get ahead of it. I implore the Minister of State to focus on the packaging and flavours, and to ensure the likes of snus and vaping products are not being handed out at festivals or in public. That is absolutely shocking and should not be something we stand for. I thank the Minister of State for the work she is doing and continues to do.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I thank the Minister of State. It is great to have this debate in this House. I look forward to supporting the Minister of State as she brings forward the urgent legislation that has to come next. The "Vaping Nation" programme on Virgin Media One shone a stark light on what parents, teachers and health professionals have been warning us all about for some time, which is that vaping has become normalised among our children and adults. People believe vapes are harmless, but they are incredibly harmful. What was once marketed as a tool to help smokers to quit has been repackaged into bright disposable gadgets designed to hook the next generation on nicotine. The evidence is clear, as the Minister of State knows. Nearly one in five young people in Ireland between the ages of 15 and 24 now vape. Among school-aged children, vaping rates are higher than smoking rates. More than three quarters of teenagers who vape have never touched a cigarette before. That is not harm reduction; that is harm creation.

Fianna Fáil has always led the way on public health. It was our party leader, the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, who introduced the world's first workplace smoking ban. In government, we have banned the sale of nicotine-inhaling products to under 18s, ended self-service sales and legislated for the licensing system for retailers, but as the Minister of State knows the job is not done yet. The two Bills are being finalised. The public health (single-use vapes) Bill will ban disposable vapes outright. These are devices that entice children and pollute our environment. The public health (tobacco products and nicotine-inhaling products) Bill will restrict packaging, flavours and advertising. There will be no more bubble gum flavours, no more cartoon branding and no more shop displays aimed at our children. We need to ensure our legislation is robust enough to ban outright alternative nicotine products. Ministers must have the ability to be flexible to create a regulation to automatically add a new product to a banned list. Legislation alone is not enough and will not be. We must back it with strong enforcement, especially in the black market that continues to increase supply to our children and adults.

A reply to a parliamentary question I received from the HSE confirmed that by June of this year, 310 test purchases had been carried out and there had been 50 cases of non-compliance. That is a breach rate of 16%. It shows a little bit of progress in relation to checks, but we need far more of those checks. We need a far greater focus on imports and illegal supply. We need to deepen the research into the long-term health impacts of vaping, youth addiction patterns and how best to support those children and people who are already hooked. Children are becoming addicted. I ask the Minister of State to ensure the HSE has the resources to deliver appropriate targeted programmes to help those young people to quit. Some adult smokers, like Deputy Ó Cearúil, have turned to vaping to help them to quit. Regulated products will remain available to them, but it is our moral duty to work on public health and protect children from nicotine addiction and the long-term harms that we already know there are from tobacco and nicotine.

Rightly, history will judge us. Our children's health will judge us in years to come. We will be judged not on how convenient we made it for industry to sell these products, but on how strong and high we hold public health. In the legislation that is coming, we need to send a clear message that Ireland will not allow a new generation of young people to be trapped in nicotine addiction.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Unfortunately, some of my colleagues could not make it.

I wish to talk at the outset about protecting our young people. It is not just about vapes, e-cigarettes and nicotine products; it is also about alcohol, nitrous oxide canisters and unfiltered access to social media. Our young people are being assaulted from all sides like never before. We need to protect them. We have legislative tools to make that a reality. Other people have spoken in various ways with different styles of contribution, but the facts that my colleagues have outlined are all fairly similar. There is less research on vapes because they have been around for a shorter period of time. With the long-term implications, there are suggestions relating to cancer. However, there are clearer reports on the immediate to short-term implications.

The key message coming out from some of my colleagues, as well as myself, is that in the short term we have to ban the use of flavours other than tobacco in all vaping products. Deputies have mentioned the sweet smell and I repeat this point. The Minister of State is probably sick of hearing the repetitive contributions about the multicoloured vapes, the different sweet smells and the fact a lot of sweet shops have been thrown in. The Minister of State is aware of it, but we are all reiterating it because it is staring us in the face as legislators and we need to do something about it. If a vape tastes like tobacco, it is going to be much less attractive to young people. It is as simple as that. As Deputy Ó Cearúil referenced, it is why young people were attracted to menthol cigarettes back in the day.

Disposable vapes are the drug of choice among young people. What we can do as legislators is to get rid of disposable vapes, full stop. As a side issue, during a previous contribution about cigarette butt tossers I mentioned that 50% of all litter comes from cigarette butts that contain plastic and do not biodegrade. If we are looking at legislation on banning disposable vapes, we should legislate to ban plastic filters in cigarettes so that cigarettes can biodegrade. This activity is creating huge amounts of environmental waste, but we are talking more about the health impacts here. Research from the Health Research Board has revealed that adolescents who use e-cigarettes are three to five times more likely to start smoking tobacco compared to those who have never used e-cigarettes. As others have mentioned, 8% of the population use e-cigarettes daily or occasionally. Among young people, however, 17% of 15- to 24-year-olds use them daily or occasionally. If young people who vape are about three times more likely to start smoking, vaping is part of the problem. As others have mentioned, it is not the solution to give up smoking. It is actually a gateway to smoking.

A health research report from 2024 pooled data analysis from different surveys and showed a strong link between vaping and the use not only of cigarettes, but also other substances like marijuana and alcohol. We have all these effects. I mentioned the long-term indicators towards carcinogenic impacts, but asthma is one issue that jumps straight out. We also have the issues of burns, blast injuries, poisonings, lung injury and potentially cancer.

I will go backwards for a second. At the outset of my contribution I mentioned the various things we need to examine in order to protect our young people. I want to reiterate the point about nitrous oxide canisters. It is not a part of this debate but I want to keep throwing this issue out there as it is something that has caused damage as well.

What is happening internationally? There are countries that have a record of having zero tolerance on things such as litter, smoking and vaping. Singapore comes to mind, in particular, where it has brought in a total import and sales ban. However, because we are in the European Union that may be more complicated. To take an EU member state, Belgium has banned

disposable electronic cigarettes. That is the first step, as well as banning flavours. Australia tried to have a total ban but saw it led to a black market situation so that is something to be aware of as well. We do not want dangerous products being sold to our young people through the back door, so the products have to be regulated and made accessible to adults - whether we like it or not - but made virtually impossible for young people to access so that sub-market is not created. Germany is considering a ban on flavoured vapes and restrictions on how and where the refillable vapes are sold so I would like there to be a specific tobacco-nicotine-vape shop and get those products out of all convenience and retail stores over a period of time. That might be a way of doing this as well as possibly having a licensing fee for retailers such as the likes of New Zealand is doing.

I welcome that HHC and some other drugs were classed as illegal earlier this year. Credit where credit is due. As some of my colleagues have mentioned, there is an issue with enforcement and some of these products still appear to be being sold to young people and adults, so enforcement is needed.

I also want to reference the pouches which, although it is a pure nicotine issue and their impact might not be to the same extent, they are still dangerous products for young people. They have knock-on effects and even nicotine itself as a pure drug has impacts on the cardiovascular system so we would not be encouraging young people to start to put it between their mouth and gums either.

I welcome the fact that this debate was facilitated. I reiterate, like everyone else, that first we need to get rid of the multicoloured and multi-smelling products and make them smell like tobacco. We have to get rid of the disposable vapes. Equally, it is not good enough just to have statements on vaping. We need to have legislation and I hope that happens within the next three months or so.

Deputy Martin Daly: As both a legislator and a doctor, I cannot overstate my concern at the rise of vaping among young people in Ireland. What began as a tool to help adults to quit smoking has been transformed into a product designed to recruit a new generation of nicotine users. The industry has succeeded in making vapes appear harmless, fashionable and accessible and the result is a surge in adolescent uptake. The evidence is unambiguous. Almost four in ten Irish 16-year-olds have tried vaping and 15% of them use vapes. Disposable devices in particular, have exploded in popularity. A UK survey shows their use among 11- to 17-year-olds increasing ninefold in just two years. We now know the majority of Irish teenagers who vape have never smoked. Vaping is not a bridge out of tobacco; it is a gateway into nicotine dependency. As a clinician, I find this deeply troubling. Nicotine is not benign. In adolescence, it disrupts brain development, impairs concentration, fuels anxiety and entrenches addiction. The *New England Journal of Medicine* has already described cases of airway scarring linked to chronic vaping. International evidence confirms that young people who vape are several times more likely to progress to cigarette smoking.

The Government has acted, and rightly so. The ban on sales to under-18s, the curbs on advertising and the upcoming tax on e-liquids are all necessary steps. However, the reality is that the pace of change in the marketplace is outstripping the pace of regulation. A ban on disposable vapes, tighter controls on flavours and packaging and far stronger action on online promotion must follow. We should also recognise that policy alone is not enough. Prevention

requires education in schools, in families and among health professionals. Young people need clear, credible information, not marketing masquerading as lifestyle advice. The decline in smoking rates during the past 30 years shows progress is possible but unless our new legislation anticipates and pre-empts the next wave of nicotine products - whether pouches, heated tobacco or other substitutes - we risk replacing one epidemic of addiction with another.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister of State for bringing this debate to the Chamber. It is a very significant and important topic that we need to be honest about. If I remember the Minister of State's remarks, she mentioned vaping was both "lethal" and "addictive". Regrettably, many users of vaping products have no concept of those two words. I think they see it as cool and trendy to be using these very colourful vapes. Vapes come in all colours and all flavours which makes them a little more attractive. It is fair to say that when people are under the influence of alcohol, there is an even greater reliance on the use of vapes. That is pretty prevalent in clubs and pubs, etc. As previous contributors have said, the intent at the outset was that vapes would replace cigarettes but it has been counterproductive. We all know the consequences of cigarettes and anything pertaining to vapes because of those people who have respiratory issues such of bronchitis and asthma. There will be consequences of continuing to use vapes, further down the road, and that is where the real issues will start to arise. There is also the litter issue. When one walks around the streets of my own city of Galway, one sees plenty of empty, or void, canisters which makes this a greater problem.

With the greatest will in the world, we are bringing forward legislation - we all welcome that - but the focus must be on policing and enforcing that legislation. The same can be said for any other legislation; it is about who will be responsible for policing it. One of my staff members happened to be having a coffee in a busy Galway city establishment not too many weeks ago, and they witnessed a group of young people - much younger than one would expect to be using vapes - asking an older group of people to go to the vape shop for them and they successfully got them. It will be very difficult to police, in any case. When we talk about Galway city in the context of accessibility to vapes, it is interesting to note that according to my information, there are approximately 12 vape shops in the city, which in itself is a real issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I remind the Deputy of his time.

Deputy Peter Roche: Who is subsidising that? Who is policing all of that? What is coming out of this?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an ábhar seo a thabhairt faoi bhráid na Dála. As Deputy Daly said, vapes have inadvertently turned from a gateway out of nicotine to a gateway into nicotine. We need to see a step change in how we regulate and address this market to ensure that whatever consequences this leads to are not unintended.

At this point, I will recall my work with the junior safety forum in South Dublin County Council, which was an initiative of the joint policing committee. When we asked fifth and sixth class students to identify the burning issues in their communities, one of the top issues they chose was the prevalence of vapes. They referred not just to the single-use vapes that were littering their playgrounds but also to the fact that many of their peers were being attracted to vapes because they were seen as an attractive pastime without any consideration for the

public health and health implications that come with it. As part of that work, the students developed an awareness campaign designed for their peers to show the negative physical, emotional and mental effects of vaping. That was quite an effective piece of work because it came from the ground up in terms of educating people about the dangers of vapes.

I will not repeat the points that have been made already about the prevalence of flavours being used to market these vapes to children so that they are attractive and have the gateway effect that leads to the unintended consequences I referred to earlier. It has already been mentioned that the use of vapes has led to littering in villages, towns and cities around the country. I think there is a role for looking at our planning laws in this context. Just as we seek to prevent an overconcentration of off-licences in our towns and cities, we need to take the same approach to vape shops.

6 o'clock

There are many areas in my constituency where there is an overconcentration of vape shops. We really need to stamp that out now in order to ensure that vapes are seen as a controlled product, that there is a public health aspect to their sale, that they are not the same as sweets and that this should be reflected in our planning code.

As we look towards a new set of development plans for our cities and counties, I encourage Members on the Government benches to take this into account in how we deal with it. Vapes are not supposed to be a stand-alone nicotine product. That should be reflected in every aspect of legislation designed to deal with them. I welcome the Minister's efforts in this regard.

Deputy Albert Dolan: We have a duty and a moral obligation to protect the long-term health of our young people. Right now, too many children and teenagers are being targeted in the context of, hooked on and harmed by vaping. Let us be clear; nicotine is addictive. The long-term health effects of these products are still unknown, and yet an entire generation is being lured in by colourful packaging, candy-flavoured liquids and the false belief that vaping is harmless. Ireland once led the world by introducing the first national workplace smoking ban. That bold step saved lives. We now face a new challenge, and we must act with the same courage.

Disposable vapes are cheap, easy to hide and deliberately marketed to appeal to children. They damage young hearts, lungs and blood vessels. They pollute our streets, our rivers and our environment. The companies behind them are using every tactic in the book to create new life-long customers out of our children. We cannot stand by while that happens and that is why we are bringing forward legislation that must ban disposable vapes, restrict flavours and packaging and remove these products from shop counters where young eyes see them every day. We must invest in public information campaigns, in school resources and in supports for young people who want to quit but who are struggling with addiction. This has to be about prevention. It is about making sure the next generation grows up free from the trap of nicotine addiction. It is also about giving parents peace of mind and ensuring that our communities are healthier, cleaner and safer. Fianna Fáil's record is clear. We put public health first. Today, we must do so again. Protecting the long-term health of our young people is not just good policy; it is the right thing to do.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on the Minister of State to make her concluding remarks.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): First, I thank everyone for the points that have been raised and for this important debate. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and I are very much aware of the issues of bringing the legislation before the House. Some TDs said we are not moving quickly enough in respect of it, but we are. It is a priority. I assure Members of that.

We all want our children to have the best start in life, and that is why it is important that we, as legislators, take action that will make it easier for our children and ourselves to make healthy decisions. As Minister of State with responsibility for public health, tackling the use of vapes is a top priority for me and for the Government. Like many Members, I hear the concerns of parents, teachers and coaches. I also know that the number of these vape shops in our towns and villages is a concern. The array of colours and flavours on display seems determined to affect our children. I will be writing to all local authorities to ask them to consider provisions in their development plans that would limit the number of vape shops for which planning permission can be granted in our towns and villages. That is a real priority for me.

So many questions were asked by Members. On the proposed legislation relating to vapes and the colours and flavours of vapes, one of the proposals is that we would look at introducing shutters - such as we have with cigarettes - in vaping shops in which vapes of all colours are currently on display. Another proposal is to have a campaign in this regard. As Minister of State, I am very mindful that we have to have an awareness campaign. Information will be crucial. Education came up a lot during the debate, as did how we might deal with the matter in our schools. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in respect of that matter. We are looking at a ban on disposable vapes.

I need to get clarification on one point. One Member brought up the fact that he had been speaking to people and discovered that 17 shops had sold vapes to minors. It has been illegal to sell vapes to minors since 2023, so these shops are breaking the law. I hope the HSE has been contacted about this and that the law is being enforced. The shops in question are breaking the law. It is important for us, as legislators, to highlight that. If shops sell to minors, they are breaking the law.

Another issue that came up is enforcement. The national environmental health service is responsible for enforcing the legislation that prohibits the sale of tobacco to minors. That is hugely important. Our environmental officers in each county are carrying out a test purchase programme in respect of retailers of tobacco and nicotine-inhaling products using volunteers who are minors. Retailers who are selling to minors will be prosecuted. If nothing else goes out from this debate, it is extremely important that this message does go out. Another way of monitoring this is the new licensing system that will come into force next year. This will also help to monitor vaping shops and will allow us to be aware of what is going on within them. That is really important.

Nicotine pouches were referred to. I will explain where we are at the moment. The introduction of laws on these products has already been discussed at EU level in the context of a revised tobacco product directive. An EU-wide public consultation was carried out in 2023 to obtain views on the regulation of novel products such as nicotine pouches. I understand people's concerns, but using EU-wide measures is the most effective way to proceed. The

Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has called on the Commission to introduce a revised tobacco products directive as soon as possible and for this to cover all nicotine products, including pouches. It is so important that this information gets out there.

Another matter that was raised was that relating to services to help people quit vaping and what is currently in place in this regard. The HSE has submitted a request for funding to establish a pilot service to help people stop vaping. This includes research into the types of support that will be safe, effective and clinically sound for vaping. The request will be considered as part of the broader Estimates process relating to budget 2026. For adults, the HSE provides safe, effective and clinically sound services for those who want to stop smoking. These are both free and easy to access. They have been designed for people who smoke cigarettes and incorporate behavioural support and access to free medicines to help people stop smoking. The adult service is currently able to support smokers who also vape, so it is a dual-user service. It is about stopping smoking, and vaping is including in that.

The vaping prevention campaign also came up. Funding was allocated in budget 2025 for a youth vaping prevention media campaign. I am very much working on this. It is all about information, awareness and the media campaign. That campaign is being developed by the HSE. It is intended that it will come into operation by the end of this year. As part of the process, research is being conducted with young people to ensure that the messaging is helpful, effective and relevant for the target audience. This campaign will provide evidence-based messaging to young people and information and support to parents and guardians who are concerned about vaping. It may also contribute to the continuing decline in tobacco use among young people, given the association between vaping and subsequent smoking in adolescence.

Reference was made to smoke-free areas. I am trying to get in as much information as I can into the answers I am providing. The tobacco-free Ireland policy is being updated. We are looking at policies in respect of smoking areas for vaping and cigarettes.

The tobacco-free Ireland policy is being updated.

Some Deputies asked about tobacco industry lobbying in relation to the two forthcoming Bills. That is prohibited. It is prohibited and cannot happen. It is important to say that the reason I wanted to come in today and speak about this is because I have huge concerns about vaping. As has been said, the targeting of younger age groups has been very effective. I want to make sure that this House knows that a great deal of work is being done by the Department, the Minister and me. We are working on this. There are two Bills that will be coming in. One will deal with the ban on disposable vapes and the other relates to colours and packaging. It is very visual when you walk into a shop. We will also look at the introduction of shutters. These are all proposals and Bills that are being prioritised by the Government. I assure everyone that I am doing my utmost to get those Bills before the House as soon as possible. The commitment will be, hopefully with all of us working together, to get both passed in order that we can have more enforcement and give a commitment to the future children of Ireland and everyone else. We are very much aware that we need to get the legislation done.

Estimates for Public Services 2025

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move the following Further Revised Estimate:

Vote 24 - Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Third Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €2,724,546,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Probation Service staff and of certain other services including payments under cash limited schemes administered by that Office, and payment of certain grants.

I have formally moved the motion, but I just want to recite exactly what is involved. A sum not exceeding €2,841,123 gross will be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31 December 2025 for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and of certain other services including payments administered by that Office, and payment of certain grants. The Estimate also makes provision for additional capital funding in respect of the international protection accommodation services, IPAS, and reflects the use of additional appropriations-in-aid to make payments under the criminal legal aid scheme and to victims of crime who have received awards from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal. This technical adjustment increases the gross ceiling by €10 million but does not impact the net level.

As Deputies will be aware, the programme for Government contains a commitment regarding the transfer of certain functions between Departments. On 1 August, following approval by the Government, responsibility for the Irish Film Classification Office, IFCO, was transferred to the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport and responsibility for the Property Services Regulatory Authority and the Property Services Appeals Board was transferred to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Housing. This is not quite the final element, but it is nearly the final element, of the transfer of function in the programme for Government for my Department. There will be one other minor transfer that will be effected pursuant to the criminal law and civil law (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2025, which will hopefully be introduced this term. The Bills is necessary because, as the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will be aware, under the Mulcreavy principle, I cannot use secondary legislation to amend primary legislation. Primary legislation will therefore be necessary for the final transfer functions.

Deputies will recall that the House has previously approved Further Revised Estimates to take account of these transfers. The most recent of these was in June relating to the transfer of the National Cyber Security Centre and responsibility for cybersecurity policy, transferring from the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications to my Department. Prior to that, a Further Revised Estimate introduced on 1 May 2025 involved in the region of 330 staff and 150 contractors, and a budget allocation of over €2 billion, moving from the Department of children's Vote.

The original Revised Estimate for my Department was approved on 1 April in advance of the commencement of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, and the establishment of two new Votes for the Policing and Community Safety Authority and Fiosrú under the justice Vote group. Therefore, I am seeking the approval of the House for this Further Revised Estimate for the justice Vote for 2025.

With regard to the transfer of functions, the allocation for IFCO, previously the Film Censor's Office, is transferring to the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport. The gross allocation is €832,000 and appropriations-in-aid are €840,000. I believe the House will agree that the activities of that office align well with the Department of culture.

The allocation for the Property Services Regulatory Authority and the Property Services Appeals Board is transferring to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The gross allocation is €4.25 million with appropriations-in-aid resulting from fee income for licensing active of €2.4 million. Again, these functions are aligned with the overall role and function of the Department of housing.

I will now proceed to deal with the capital funding for the purchase of the Citywest accommodation. This Estimate also makes substantial provision for additional capital funding in respect of international protection accommodation. I am pleased that €113.25 million is being provided in line with the decision of Government to purchase Citywest, a large former hotel complex and site in the outer Dublin region. This represents the first significant move in support of the Government's policy to reduce reliance on the private sector and increase the capacity of State-owned sites. The full purchase price, including VAT, was €148.25 million and represents good value for the State. A sum of €113.25 million is the net funding requirement for the Vote, taking into account the limited existing capital allocation. The purchase of the property provided a unique opportunity to deliver a high-capacity State-owned accommodation centre in a strategic location within an accelerated timeline. The purchase will significantly reduce the current expenditure on State accommodation at this site and will mean that we will save more than €1 billion over a 25-year period. It will increase the value for public moneys now and for the future. The payback period on the purchase price is approximately four years due to the reduced running costs of a State-owned facility. The facility will also act as a cornerstone to the State's implementation of the migration pact in 2026, acting as a screening centre and border procedure location, as required under the new EU pact.

I will now turn to the criminal legal aid scheme and criminal injuries compensation scheme, in respect of which there are further allocations. I am taking this opportunity to provide additional funding for the criminal legal aid scheme of €8 million, and €2 million for the Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal. This is being funded from appropriations-in-aid, which are increasing by €10 million arising from immigration registration fees. From an accounting perspective, this increases the gross ceiling by €10 million but does not impact the net level.

As a result of the motion before us and as a consequence of the changes outlined, Vote 24 will have a budget allocation for 2025 of €2,724,546,000. I commend the motion to the House and ask it to approve the necessary financial arrangements that I have outlined.

Deputy Matt Carthy: These Revised Estimates relate to several matters, including costs associated with international protection accommodation and the purchase of the Citywest Hotel, funding for criminal legal aid, and the criminal injuries compensation scheme agus ba mhaith liom aghaidh a thabhairt ar roinnt de na sean áiseanna seo.

While the justice committee had a very constructive engagement with the Minister yesterday, it should be put on the record that there is a long way to go in addressing the costs

associated with the provision of IPAS accommodation. Tá go leor ceisteanna le freagairt fós agus tá an iomarca airgid á caitheamh fós. There needs to be a thorough examination of previous IPAS contracts signed. The Minister argues that contracts were signed under pressure due to the number of those in need of accommodation in the IPAS system at that stage. However, I contend very strongly that this does not remove us from the responsibility to ensure there is accountability and probity in how public money is and was spent. People have become millionaires through the provision of IPAS accommodation and have built companies solely for this purpose. We have to ask how companies secured contracts for what were sometimes eye-watering amounts, including where they had little or no record in the provision of such services. While the Minister argues that he is making changes, the reality is that a record figure of more than €120 million was paid for IPAS accommodation in July alone.

That is the latest month for which figures are available.

The Minister mentioned at the committee that there is now a rate card with regard to what will be paid for IPAS accommodation. He also signalled that this will not be made public. I am strongly of the view that the lack of transparency that was at the heart of spending on IPAS accommodation allowed that system to get out of hand. There needs to be more transparency and accountability. There also needs to be engagement with communities with regard to the location of IPAS accommodation. That includes cases such as the purchase of the City West Hotel, where State-run facilities are being developed. We all support the concept of State-run facilities, but that does not mean we neglect our responsibilities to engage with communities on matters that affect them.

I am aware the Minister has a large number of items on his agenda; however, I would put it to him that many things are still taking far too long to sort out. While there is an increase in these further Revised Estimates with regard to criminal legal aid, nothing has been done to sort out the crisis with respect to access to civil legal aid. I welcome the publication of the review of civil legal aid, but it should not have taken three years to complete. I have also welcomed proposals to increase eligibility thresholds though there are now serious questions about whether what is proposed is adequate. While implementation of many of the recommendations in that report will take some time, there are things the Minister needs to do without further delay. There needs to be urgent action regarding the fact that many people - and I am particularly talking about women trying to get barring orders in respect of abusive partners - are unable to secure civil legal aid representation. That is because of the level of the fees that are paid, which has remained unchanged since 2012, and the structure as to how those fees are paid. This has resulted in a situation that I brought to the attention of the House previously whereby those who have been granted civil legal aid certificates cannot find solicitors to represent them because fewer solicitors are taking on this work. The impact of this is that some people who are trying desperately to escape domestic violence situations are locked out of access to civil legal aid. That is unacceptable.

Recommendation 22 in the report to which I refer that report states:

An immediate review of the Legal Aid Board's capacity to administer the current Civil Legal Aid Scheme should be conducted by the Department ... in consultation with the Legal Aid Board.

The report recommends that this review should examine the Legal Aid Board's ability to recruit and retain in-house solicitors and sufficient external expertise and look at the salaries of current and future in-house solicitors, private practitioner fees and counsel fees. Has the review been initiated? If not, why?

The Minister will recall that I have raised with him on a number of occasions the issue of the adequacy of the criminal injuries compensation scheme and the lack of progress with putting it on a statutory footing. The Minister admitted during the discussion on the Revised Estimates at the committee in June that the fund gets exhausted early in the year, with people who endured serious injuries forced to wait until the following year for compensation in respect of serious and life-changing criminal injuries.

We welcome the additional allocation in the Revised Estimate today, but the scheme needs to be reformed, put on a statutory basis and properly funded. The Minister referred to the case of *Blanco v. Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal*, and the implications of that case with regard to what victims of crime can be compensated for. Arising from the case in question, a number of other cases have been referred to the Criminal Courts of Justice and a response is due in the coming months. The case to which I refer was taken by a man who, despite having received very serious life-changing injuries and a loss of earnings, received just €645 in compensation four years after a violent assault. While there is a broad agreement that the scheme needs to be properly funded and placed on a statutory basis, it is disappointing that the Minister indicated to that justice committee that this might not happen this year or even next year. That is not good enough, and it is also not good enough to say, as was said at the committee, that people will eventually get their money. Of course, that is the very minimum they should be entitled to but we also need to get to a point where the Minister is in a position to make a commitment that this scheme will be properly funded for 2026. I would appreciate it if the Minister could outline whether he intends to bring such a proposal forward in the context of budget 2026.

Deputy Gary Gannon: What strikes me reading through the Estimate is how little ambition the Government is showing when it come to targeting vulnerable young people, tackling domestic violence and living up to our obligations on prisons and immigration. Once again, we are presented with tables that look busy on the page but that fail utterly to meet the needs of the people who depend on a functioning and fair justice system.

On youth diversion, Vote 24 sets aside €33.2 million for youth justice interventions this year, up from €30.5 million last year - an increase of €2.6 million. The latter amount represents the cost of a few consultancy contracts in any other Department. We are told it will support 4,600 young people nationwide. That is the total ambition of Government, namely 4,600 places in a country where tens of thousands of children are growing up in poverty and where youth workers tell us daily that they are at breaking point.

In the context of the so-called early intervention for eight- to 11-year-olds, 767 children are targeted for this year. That is 767 across the whole country, which is less than the enrolment of a single primary school in some areas. Why is early intervention capped at 767 places? Can the Minister name a single county where every child who needs diversion actually gets it? What is outlined appears to be a ration book as opposed to a youth justice strategy. If we

believed in prevention, we would double capacity and make diversion a right, not a privilege as it presently stands.

The allocation in respect of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will increase from €54 million to €61 million, but this is no step change. We are still talking about just 170 refuge units nationwide. How can the Minister stand over that when the Istanbul Convention says Ireland needs at least 500 units? We are also talking about just 307 men completing behaviour change programmes. Does the Minister really believe that 307 men in programmes is an adequate response in a country of 5 million people? Perpetrator accountability is a public safety work. At this scale, the allocation barely scratches the surface. Where is the recognition that violence is moving online? Survivors are stalked, tracked and harassed through their phones, yet not a single euro is earmarked for tackling cyber stalking, spyware or image-based abuse. Why is there no budget line for online violence?

On prisons and probation, the pattern repeats in our prisons. There is money at the back end of the system but nothing to prevent the harm in the first place. The Dóchas Centre is at 141% of capacity. Limerick Prison is at 128% of capacity. If these were schools or hospitals, inspectors would shut them down. When it comes to prisons, however, overcrowding has very clearly become a policy. The Department has set a target of 3,000 prisoners in programmes at a time when more than 5,000 people are actually in prison. That is simply cooking the books. Why is the Department hiding behind the figure of 3,000 when the true population is almost double that? Meanwhile, the Probation Service has a 90% success rate but it is consistently outspent in the context of prison beds that fail every day. Why is the Probation Service still being starved will overcrowded prisons get funding? Probation very clearly works; prison overcrowding does not. The recidivism rates give testimony to that fact. This Government funds failure and starves success.

On immigration, migrants are being charged millions in fees for registration, visas and citizenship. Families are paying thousands of euro to just stay in the country legally. How much will the State collect in migrant fees this year and how much of that will be reinvested in housing, early legal aid or integration? These fees are bankrolling bureaucracy and backlogs. Detaining people while they await deportation has become a practice. Despite the fact that this breaches international human rights, it is just accepted as a norm. Why is Ireland detaining people in breach of UN standards? Does the Minister accept that families are paying to finance their own exclusion? That is not integration; it is deterrence by delay.

The bigger picture is that these Estimates are about rationing services, not about building justice. Youth diversion is capped at 4,600 places when the level of need is so much greater. Domestic violence support is stuck at 170 refuge units in a threadbare way. We are not holding perpetrators to account. Probation, despite being proven to work, is starved of resources while prisons are overflowing. The immigration system is collapsing and falling far short of basic human rights standards.

Ours is not a justice system that is built on rights or safety.

It is a system designed to ration services, keep demand manageable and push the most vulnerable out of sight. We should be starting our Estimates with rights. We should massively expand refuge spaces, guarantee early intervention for vulnerable young people, invest properly in probation and build a humane migration system that is rooted in solidarity with and

acknowledgement of the struggle that many people have had. Until then, these Estimates remain what they are today, tables of numbers that speak volumes about a Government that knows the cost of everything and, clearly, the value of nothing.

Deputy Alan Kelly: This is just a transfer of a number of functions and also capital in relation to the purchase of accommodation in regard to provision of accommodation for IPAS. I would make an observation in relation to it. As referred to by Deputy Carthy earlier, we had interaction yesterday in the justice committee in regard to value for money in the purchase of properties, which will be seismic but over will create greater value over a number of years, it is believed, given the ongoing volumes of people coming into the country. Will the Minister outline whether there are intentions to purchase similar types of properties, maybe not to the same scale but properties in other locations around the country? I read through the costings the Minister estimated for Citywest, which are seismic, but in comparison to what was going on before, there are savings. However, we also need to match that in relation to where other properties can be procured and ensure fair geographical distribution. I have asked numerous times and received a breakdown by local electoral area of where people are being located. I understand that this cannot be an exact science and that there are various different measures that have to be met. However, there is an imbalance in regard to where we are locating people in communities. I believe in the system and I want it to work, but it has to be fair. I am still not sure it works or is fair. I accept that there have been improvements and I acknowledge and commend the Minister on some of those improvements. Having said that, how do we ensure we have geographical balance, regional balance and community balance in this?

I respect the fact that the Minister cannot give out the weightings table by which decisions are made between when to give a provider a contract and when to buy another property, but it would be good to have some indication of the measurements by which these are made. Transparency is the Minister's ally here. There are serious concerns out there about how so much money has been spent with certain people and companies in certain locations. It cannot continue. I appreciate the fact that, when the Minister's predecessor was in office and during Covid-19, the number of people coming into the country was unprecedented. Checks and balances, the rules and everything else was up for question. The volume of accommodation that was required instantaneously was incredible. There was serious pressure. It was not acceptable as a country that we were left in that position, but the reality is we were. Now, it is different. Now, there is time for change and time to be able to create a form of rules and balances as regards how we spend this money.

I appreciate what is going on in terms of Citywest but I want to see it across the board for many reasons. For social reasons, I want the best for people who are coming into this country and who need and deserve protection. I believe their applications should be processed quickly, particularly where there are children. If they are not processed within a reasonable time, then we do not have an opportunity to remove them. We had that debate yesterday. However, we need to see some form of criteria that all of us in this House can stand over regarding how these decisions are made. If the Minister elaborated more on these observations in his reply, I would appreciate it.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the three Deputies for their useful contributions. Obviously, they were all present for the justice

committee meeting yesterday where we covered much of the ground in respect of international protection accommodation services.

Deputy Carthy started with reference to the issue of IPAS. All of us here - Deputies Gannon, Kelly and Carthy and myself - agree that far too much money is being spent on accommodation for international protection applicants. My policy objective is to try to drive down the amount of money we are spending on it. It is not sustainable in the long run when we consider that, this year, we are going to spend €1.2 billion on IPAS. I would love to have that money available to deal with other issues that have been identified by Deputy Carthy, such as criminal legal aid, civil legal aid and the criminal injuries compensation tribunal, CICT.

In terms of the objective and as I said yesterday, the real driver of the cost of IPAS is the number of people within the system and the length of time they stay therein. I gave the statistics yesterday as to the number of people claiming asylum in Ireland, both prior to and during Covid-19. In the three years since then, from 2022 to 2024, we saw 45,000 people arrive and claim asylum. Our accommodation provision in IPAS went from 7,000 to 33,000 people who we are accommodating at present.

I note what Deputy Carthy said about people making a lot of money out of this. That is the case, but regrettably, because we do not have State-owned accommodation, we have to pay people to provide this accommodation. My objective is to try to ensure that we reduce the amount of money we are spending on it. That is why we proceeded with the purchase of Citywest. To answer Deputy Kelly's question directly, the State intends to make other purchases similar to the purchase of Citywest. I am conscious that we probably will not get a facility of equal size to Citywest. However, it is necessary that we purchase more sites so that I can achieve the policy objective, which is that, by 2028, we will have 14,000 State-owned accommodation units for those seeking asylum. I want to get there because, as I said yesterday, the cost of accommodating an asylum applicant in private accommodation at present is €30,000 per year. The cost of accommodating him or her in State-owned accommodation is €12,000 per year. There is a clear saving in providing State accommodation as opposed to providing accommodation in the private sector.

I note what Deputy Carthy said about criminal legal aid and civil legal aid. I am in negotiations with the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation with respect to trying to get further increases in the criminal legal aid sphere. There has been a well-motivated campaign on this issue, seeking full restoration of criminal legal aid fees. I am also conscious, however, of the limitations of the civil legal aid system that operates. I got the report and the minority report from Mr. Justice Frank Clarke and his committee. I cannot give any commitments in respect of it.

Regarding the criminal injuries compensation tribunal, Deputy Carthy correctly pointed out the significance of the Blanco judgment. The reason that man got such a small award of €645 from the CICT is that the compensation tribunal does not compensate people for pain and suffering. All one will get from the CICT is compensation for material financial loss. It is very limited in what it provides for. One of the cases being considered at present is whether there is an obligation on the State to provide compensation for pain and suffering. It potentially could increase the liability of the State hugely. Obviously, that has to be taken into account.

I listened carefully to Deputy Gannon, who spoke about youth diversion. We have excellent youth diversion programmes in this country. Later on this year or early next year, I hope to be able to say that we have rolled out youth diversion programmes in every part of the country. They do outstanding work. They do not get enough credit. It is the same case with the Probation Service. The Probation Service is an entity within my Department that does superb work.

I think I have answered Deputy Kelly's question about the purchase of other accommodation. He also raised the issue of the rate card. I am not going to publish the rate card because I think it would be to the financial disadvantage of the State.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I did not ask the Minister to, in fairness.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I know the Deputy did not ask that. What the Deputy wanted to know was the basis upon which we try to categorise a price. Location is one consideration. The size of the entity and the services in the surrounding the area are others. There is greater consistency coming in.

Vote put and agreed to.

Special Education School Places: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Darren O'Rourke on Wednesday, 17 September 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the right to education is a fundamental right for every child, as enshrined in the Irish Constitution and international conventions;
- despite two Dáil motions in 2025 calling for the provision of appropriate school places for every child with additional needs in their locality, the Government has rejected these calls;
- the Minister for Education has, to date, repeatedly declined to provide the exact number of children with additional needs still awaiting a school place for the 2025/2026 academic year, disaggregated by county and educational setting (primary/post-primary, special class/special school), despite a commitment to do so before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth;
- as of mid-June 2025, there were an estimated 260 children without any offer of an appropriate school place;
- the "Equality in Education" campaign has identified a further 168 children who have received an offer of a place but cannot take it up due to delays in essential building works, a situation which effectively denies them their education;
- numerous families have been forced to initiate legal proceedings to secure a basic school place for their child, a stressful and unnecessary course of action;

— these figures represent a significant undercount of the total number of children with additional needs without an appropriate school place, as they do not include:

— children with additional needs being home-schooled while awaiting an appropriate place;

— children undertaking excessively long and burdensome daily journeys to access education; and

— children placed in inappropriate settings (e.g., in mainstream classes awaiting a special class placement, or in special classes awaiting a special school place);

— the failure to invest, plan, and deliver adequate school infrastructure and supports has left many hundreds of children with additional needs without appropriate education;

— the comprehensive Report on the Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 revealed profound dissatisfaction with support services, finding that 49 per cent of parents and 38 per cent of staff surveyed described their contact with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) as "unhelpful" or "very unhelpful", while 41 per cent of parents and 46 per cent of staff reported similarly negative experiences with Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs);

— the widespread denial of essential Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support, through the effective imposition of a cap on numbers or a narrow reinterpretation of SNA duties, is causing severe hardship; and

— delays in clarifying SNA allocations to schools are creating unnecessary stress and anxiety for school leaders, parents, and children alike, destabilising the start of the school year;

condemns the Government for:

— its abject failure to strategically invest, plan, and deliver appropriate school places and supports for children with additional needs;

— effectively denying children access to education based solely on their additional needs, thereby violating their fundamental rights; and

— creating an environment where parents are forced to resort to legal action to vindicate their children's basic right to education; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately publish the exact number of children with additional needs still awaiting a school place for the 2025/2026 academic year, broken down by county and educational setting (primary/post-primary, special class/special school);

— immediately publish the exact number of children with additional needs who have a formal offer of a school place but are prevented from taking it up due to delays in building works, broken down by county and educational setting;

— establish a time-bound School Building Delivery Task Force with the mandate to ensure the expeditious and priority delivery of special schools and special classes, this

task force must include relevant technical and departmental expertise and incorporate continuous engagement with local school communities and parents;

— initiate an independent review of the role, function, and resourcing of the NCSE and SENOs to improve efficiency, transparency, and performance;

— commit to a significant investment in the recruitment and retention of SNAs and Special Education Teachers (SETs) to meet current and projected demand;

— review and reform the SNA and SET allocation model to ensure it is needs-based, transparent, and timely, and to ensure the voice of the child, their parents/guardians, and school leaders is central in the decision-making process; and

— publish and implement a costed, medium-to-long-term strategic plan to guarantee that every child with additional needs has equal access to appropriate education within their own community, ending the crisis-driven approach of many long years.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

— a child's right to education is enshrined in the Constitution and, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), must be accessible on an equal basis with others in the community in which they live; and

— the Government is committed to ensuring that each child and young person with a special educational need has an appropriate school place, in line with their Constitutional right and Programme for Government commitments;

notes that the Government will:

— progress work on the development of a more inclusive education system for children with special education needs by supporting them to attend their local school;

— continue to expand the number of special school places, special classes and special education teaching hours as required across the State;

— improve communication and outreach to parents of children with special educational needs to streamline the process by which parents apply for specialist school places, reducing the burden on them and improving the timelines, including the introduction of a common application procedure;

— continue to increase investment into the area of special education to ensure that every child can reach their full potential;

— support additional schools and students to benefit from the Summer Programme 2025;

— ensure that the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) will continue to engage intensively with parents and all educational partners to continue to increase capacity;

- ensure that available capacity across schools is maximised to make provision for children with special education needs; and
- prioritise school building projects delivering additional capacity for special classes and at special schools; and

further notes:

- the continued significant State investment of €2.9 billion in supporting the provision of special education, a 48 per cent increase since 2020;
- 97 per cent of all children and young people enrolled in schools, including the majority of children and young people with special educational needs, are supported to attend mainstream classes with their peers;
- the significant increases in the allocation of Special Education Teachers (SETs) and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to support children with special educational needs in our schools which facilitates them in prioritising the allocation of all of these resources to children with the greatest level of need, including the completion of all SNA reviews and appeals for September 2025, there are now over 23,000 SNAs in our schools, an increase of 43 per cent since 2020;
- there are almost 21,000 SETs working in our schools whose sole role is to support children and young people with special educational needs, this is a 23 per cent increase since 2020, approximately 15,000 of these SETs support children and young people in mainstream classes, supplementing the work of mainstream teachers;
- the strategic initiatives introduced to provide for the continued, accelerated delivery of special class places in mainstream schools and special school places, the number of special classes has doubled over the last 5 years to over 3,700 and 16 new special schools have been established;
- 407 new special classes have been sanctioned for the 2025/26 school year and over 300 new special school places are being provided, including over 100 places in five new special schools opening presently;
- over 3,700 special classes have been made available across the country for the 2025/26 school year, ensuring that children can continue to access a special class in their local area avoiding the need for long distance travel;
- the commitment to prioritise investment in special education and school places as part of €7.55 billion in National Development Plan (NDP) capital funding for 2026-2030;
- the Minister of State at the Department of Education with special responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion and the NCSE have used statutory powers to compel one primary school in County Kildare to open two new special classes and the NCSE initiated S67 proceedings against a number of schools to ensure that children and young people with special educational needs were enrolled;
- confirmation from the NCSE that all, bar a very small handful of children in Dublin, known to them by the mid-February cut-off point, have been placed for this

school year and that there are available special class places for these children and young people;

— the progress being made by the Department of Education and Youth and the NCSE in introducing new measures to support improved forward planning for the 2026/27 school year which brings forward the date of notification and will see the majority of new special classes sanctioned by 31st December, 2025;

— the streamlining of funding to ensure schools can access funding for repurposing accommodation;

— the significant investment in the expansion of staffing at the NCSE to assist families of children with special educational needs in all aspects of their educational journey, including accessing a placement appropriate to their needs;

— a new Education Therapy Service is being established which will commence initially in special schools and subsequently extend to schools with special classes and mainstream provision, it is intended that the service will be rolled out on a phased basis in some special schools at a later stage in the 2025/26 school year, with a wider roll-out for the 2026/27 school year, it is expected that recruitment of therapists for this service will be initiated in Q4 2025;

— the continued expansion of the Summer Programme, which has seen a 52 per cent increase in school participation since 2022, with over 1,900 schools taking part in 2025, and the introduction of the hot schools meals programme this year to support schools;

— the extensive review by the Department of Education and Youth of the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, which was published during the summer and the work underway to implement recommendations;

— ongoing work on the first SNA Workforce Development Plan by the Department of Education and Youth, which recognises the essential role played by SNAs in our school, which is engaging with SNAs, schools, unions and other stakeholders, and which is underpinned by a new national training programme for SNAs delivered by Atlantic Technological University costing €1.9 million;

— the work underway on the SNA Redeployment scheme which for the first time, will allow SNAs in posts which may no longer be required for reasons such as falling enrolments, reduced care needs or changing demographics, to be redeployed to a school which has a vacant/new post;

— the significant level of funding and supports being provided to schools to deliver accommodation for special classes, including school building projects, the repurposing of available rooms, and the provision of modular accommodation;

— the new pilot single application system for admission to post-primary schools, including admission to post-primary special classes, being rolled out by the Department of Education and Youth this year across five areas; and

— the renewed focus of the Government on the area of disability services, with a particular focus on improving the delivery of services for children with disabilities."

- (Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth)

Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion on special education school places. On Wednesday, 17 September, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 61; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Daly, Martin.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hearne, Rory.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Seán.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Grealish, Noel.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mythen, Johnny.	

Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lahart, John.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Neville, Joe.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connor, James.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 76; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	

Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Devine, Máire.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	
Currie, Emer.	Kelly, Alan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dooley, Timmy.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fleming, Seán.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Foley, Norma.	Murphy, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Geoghegan, James.	Nash, Ged.	
Grealish, Noel.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	

Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
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 Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Energy Costs: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Pa Daly on Tuesday, 23 September 2025:

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.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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."

- (Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Thomas Byrne)

Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion on energy costs. On Tuesday, 23 September, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 76; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Devine, Máire.	

Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	
Currie, Emer.	Kelly, Alan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dooley, Timmy.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fleming, Seán.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Foley, Norma.	Murphy, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Geoghegan, James.	Nash, Ged.	
Grealish, Noel.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
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 Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Devine, Máire.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	

Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	
Currie, Emer.	Kelly, Alan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dooley, Timmy.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fleming, Seán.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Foley, Norma.	Murphy, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Geoghegan, James.	Nash, Ged.	
Grealish, Noel.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, 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 Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Child Poverty and Homelessness: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Mark Wall on Wednesday, 24 September 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the number of children in consistent poverty nearly doubled in 2024 to 8.5 per cent, rising by over 45,000 in one year to 104,780, up from 4.7 per cent in 2023;
- the research by Economic and Social Research Institute shows one in five children, over 225,000, live in families below the poverty line when housing costs are accounted for;
- the cost-of-living crisis is deepening with annualised food price inflation in August up by 5 per cent;
- Ireland already has some of the most expensive energy costs in the world, and suppliers are now increasing their rates by over 12 per cent for the winter ahead;
- over 300,000 households are in arrears on electricity bills, and nearly 175,000 in gas arrears, while the moratorium on disconnections only covers the Christmas period;
- there were 5,014 homeless children in emergency accommodation at the end of July, an increase of 14 per cent in a year;
- the reduced funding available for the Tenant in-Situ Scheme is not enough to meet demand, and local authorities do not have sufficient resourcing for the purchase and repurposing of vacant and derelict properties; and
- the School Meals Scheme has been rolled out across primary schools, but remains unavailable to far too many children in schools not signed up to the scheme;

recognises that:

- budgets are about choices, and regrets that the Government intends to spend over €630 million a year to reduce Value Added Tax (VAT) on food and catering hospitality, while the number of children living in consistent poverty and homelessness continues to increase; and
- the reduction in VAT:
 - will be of most benefit to those businesses with the highest turnover;
 - will not be passed on to customers;

- will not be reflected in better pay and conditions for workers; and
- will not address the underlying issues facing the hospitality sector; and

calls for in Budget 2026:

- the €630 million cost of an untargeted VAT reduction, instead be committed to measures to relieve child poverty and homelessness, the improvement of public services, and reduction in waiting lists for disability and health services;
- the urgent implementation of a targeted rate of child benefit, a new child income support payment - to address the shocking rise in child poverty;
- a ban on the eviction of children into homelessness, and legislation to prioritise the housing needs of homeless families;
- the removal of the restrictions introduced in March 2025 on the Tenant in-Situ Scheme so it is demand led, and the resourcing of local authorities to tackle the scourge of vacancy and dereliction; and
- the introduction of targeted energy payments, an extension of the moratorium on disconnections, an increase to the Fuel Allowance payment and widened eligibility to include those on the Working Family Payment.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

- reducing child poverty and ensuring every child has the best start in life are key priorities for this Government and will be a core focus of Budget 2026;
- the Government has prioritised the reduction of child poverty through the establishment of the dedicated Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office, ensuring cross-departmental coordination to address the root causes of poverty affecting children and families;
- the increases in child poverty rates, as reported in March 2025 by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in its Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2024, are disappointing, until the release of this data, child consistent poverty in Ireland had been on a downward trend, peaking in 2013 at 12.7 per cent and falling to its lowest level in 2023 at 4.8 per cent;
- the CSO data is based on 2023 income data, and therefore does not reflect the Government's full response to the cost of living that were contained in Budget 2024 and Budget 2025;
- overall, the last two budgets each contained the largest social welfare packages in the history of the State and combined, invested €4.9 billion in communities across the country;

— this included, unprecedented increases in core social welfare rates, the largest ever increase in the Child Support Payment, an increase in the Working Family Payment, and increasing the number of people who are eligible for the Fuel Allowance;

— none of these increases are included in the latest CSO data, nor has the Government's significant investment in non-income supports for children and families during this time, such as the significant expansion of School Meals Scheme and free schoolbooks;

— the School Meals Scheme has now been expanded to enable the roll-out to all primary schools, with 3,200 schools and 550,000 children now eligible;

— in addition, over 23,000 children are availing of cold lunches, while a Holiday Meals pilot project took place this summer with 914 schools providing meals to 68,000 children;

— the Government has expanded the roll-out of free schoolbooks for all children in primary education, and more recently this has been expanded to Junior Cycle;

— the Government have announced a new Child Poverty Target of 3 per cent or less, of consistent poverty, to be achieved by the end of 2030;

— meeting this Child Poverty Target will require sustained investment over the lifetime of this Government and beyond;

— the Government is investing almost €6.8 billion in 2025 to support the delivery of social, affordable and Cost Rental homes, housing supply has increased significantly with almost 32,800 social homes delivered between 2022 to 2024;

— Budget 2025 provided an allocation of €303 million for the delivery of homeless services, an increase of €61 million or 25 per cent on the 2024 Budget allocation, in addition, €25 million in capital funding is supporting the delivery of high quality transitional and emergency accommodation for individuals experiencing homelessness;

— the Government recently announced that an additional €50 million for housing acquisitions will prioritise families in long-term homelessness;

— the Government has committed €325 million to support a second-hand acquisitions programme in 2025, allowing local authorities to target priority categories of housing needs, including families in long-term homelessness;

— the Government approved an extension of the 9 per cent Value Added Tax rate currently applied to gas and electricity to October 2025, at an estimated cost of €85 million; and

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

acknowledges that:

— the Government is committed to further progress, building on the initiatives already introduced, targeting those most at risk, and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive in a fairer and more inclusive society; and

— the Government will utilise Budget 2026 and future budgets, to prioritise measures aimed at tackling child poverty and reducing homelessness."

- (Minister for Social Protection)

Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion on child poverty and homelessness. On Wednesday, 24 September, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Devine, Máire.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	
Currie, Emer.	Kelly, Alan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Lawless, Paul.	

Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dooley, Timmy.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fleming, Seán.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Foley, Norma.	Murphy, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Geoghegan, James.	Nash, Ged.	
Grealish, Noel.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, 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 Ged Nash and Mark Wall.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Devine, Máire.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	
Currie, Emer.	Kelly, Alan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dooley, Timmy.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fleming, Seán.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Foley, Norma.	Murphy, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Geoghegan, James.	Nash, Ged.	
Grealish, Noel.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	

Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, 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 Ged Nash and Mark Wall.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.30 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 25 Meán Fómhair 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.30 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 25 September 2025.