

Vol. 1072
No. 5



Thursday,
25 September
2025

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 25 Meán Fómhair 2025

Thursday, 25 September 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Small and Medium Enterprises

1. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the measures he is taking to ensure that small- and medium-sized businesses can access affordable credit and avoid being burdened with high borrowing costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51024/25]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Will the Minister outline the measures he is taking to ensure small- and medium-sized businesses can access affordable credit and avoid being burdened with high borrowing costs? Access to affordable credit is a significant barrier to our SMEs that want to expand and grow their market share. As they try to navigate their way around all of the challenges they face, they need access to credit.

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for this very important question. I firmly commit to ensuring that small- and medium-sized businesses have access to affordable credit. My Department has developed several loan guarantee schemes, the first in 2012, that have enabled participating lenders to offer loans at interest rates below their standard commercial terms.

The scheme currently open to SMEs is the growth and sustainability loan scheme. This is a €500 million initiative developed by my Department and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, underpinned by a partial guarantee from the European Investment Bank Group and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI. The SBCI also operates the scheme. This scheme offers long-term loans ranging from €25,000 to €3 million, with terms of up to ten years, to SMEs, farmers, fishers, and small mid-caps. Loans of up to €500,000 are available on an unsecured basis, making finance more accessible for SMEs.

Interest rates under the scheme are determined by each participating finance provider, in accordance with its own credit policies. However, all rates must reflect the benefit of the EU-backed guarantee and SBCI support, ensuring they are below standard commercial lending rates. In practice, participating lenders offer discounts ranging from 1% to 4.86% compared to their equivalent SME loan rates, making credit more available. A minimum of 30% of the scheme's lending is targeted at environmental sustainability and climate action, with the remainder supporting productivity and competitiveness. Loans for climate-related purposes also benefit from an additional interest rate discount.

As of the end of June, 1,930 loans had been approved, amounting to €432 million, by my Department and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. We are negotiating with the EIB Group and the SBCI on the potential to extend the duration and expand the capacity of the loan. I plan to bring proposals to the Government in the next three months.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome these initiatives but last year, in 2024, we saw no real growth in Ireland's SME bank debt, with continued low demand from applicants and an overly cautious approach to risk from the banks. SMEs with any form of credit challenge find it difficult to access credit from the traditional financial institutions, even more so since the departure of Ulster Bank and KBC from the market. These are the sources where most small and retail businesses go to look for credit. Despite what the Minister says he is doing to make credit more accessible for SMEs, a recent report from IBEC revealed that 63% of SMEs still consider the application process to be overly complex and lengthy. Many SMEs do not have the knowledge and expertise to navigate the overcomplicated process of securing finance, even more so now that the banks have automated their application processes and removed all human interaction with local bank managers who would have traditionally advised and assisted a struggling applicant.

Deputy Peter Burke: To go back to the evidence, if we look at the first scheme I referenced, which was the growth and stability loan scheme, we have at this point in time almost used up the €500 million allocation. This demonstrates that SMEs are using it and drawing it down. We also increased the Microfinance Ireland loan scheme for our smaller SMEs, up to €50,000 from €25,000, and it is supporting approximately 12,000 jobs in the economy. We have had a succession of schemes, including the Ukraine guarantee scheme, the future growth and loan scheme and the Brexit loan scheme. A huge amount of low-cost finance has been provided. We are also renegotiating to extend the €500 million and increase its capacity and keep it competitive.

I also point out the Department of Finance recently conducted a survey of SMEs and only 6% of them cited the cost of finance as an issue in terms of getting support. We are reducing the conditionality of all schemes to make it easier for SMEs to go through the application process. This is very much to the forefront of my mind in doing things simpler, lighter and faster.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome this. The problem sometimes is that many of these systems are automated and somebody may not have an absolutely clear record. There can be many reasons for this which are explainable, and at one time people could have gone in and sat down with the bank manager to explain the reason something happened and they could come

to an agreement. This was also the case for people with good creditworthiness. This is something that needs to be looked at.

With regard to the length of time it can take to draw down credit, I wonder whether any analysis has been done on situations where all of a grant is drawn down by one cohort of people while another cohort of people, such as those coming to our constituency offices, find it very difficult. We need to be conscious of this and ensure we bring all businesses with us and ensure the sustainability of all businesses.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am very happy to work in this regard. The critical thing I am trying to do is make these supports available to our SMEs and family businesses, which employ two thirds of the people throughout our economy. I am very aware that the average SME does not have a finance director or a HR director. A lot of the great work is done around the kitchen table. This is why we are working with the centre of excellence at Enterprise Ireland and those who craft the schemes so we are reducing red tape and the administrative burden. Particularly for some of the lower-scale grants, such as with regard to digitalisation or sustainability supports, which can be less than €10,000, we should be able to turn them around in 24 hours. This is my target for the agencies. We are working to deliver this. There are other methodologies we can bring in to get efficiencies and ensure we are really supporting them at the forefront. The cost of doing business advisory forum is working with a lot of the regulators and their interoperability among the sectors. What they ask of various applicants may already have been asked in other areas and we want to get a floor under this and reduce the administrative burden.

Export Controls

2. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment whether there are concerns in his Department regarding due diligence on the granting of licences for dual use goods, particularly in light of plans to expand Ireland's role in the dual use market, per the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50822/25]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: In the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity the Minister outlines progressing the interests of Irish SMEs in the dual-use area, specifically citing defence research and development and the European Defence Fund. Is the Department equipped to deal with an increase in licence applications and the due diligence required to facilitate the dual-use licence system?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank Deputy Gibney for her question. The Department is the national competent authority with responsibility for the control of exports of dual-use and military items under EU and national legislation. The primary focus of export controls is not to block trade or exports but to enable the free movement of legitimate goods while ensuring that certain sensitive categories are subject to appropriate regulation. These controls are designed to manage risk, uphold international peace and security, and ensure Ireland's compliance with its international obligations.

The bulk of dual-use exports from Ireland are mainstream business ICT products, both hardware and software, including networking, data storage and cybersecurity. They are categorised as dual-use items as a consequence of fact that they incorporate strong encryption for ICT security purposes. All export licence applications are considered by departmental officials in accordance with criteria set out in the relevant dual-use and military EU and national regulations, and with Ireland's international obligations and responsibilities as a member of non-proliferation regimes and export control arrangements. Each application is assessed individually, considering the nature of the items, the destination country, the identity of the end-user and the intended end use. The Department also consults with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on each application.

Under the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, the Department of Defence has committed to continuing to progress the interests of Irish SMEs to facilitate growth and ensure deeper engagement in the commercial dual-use area, both nationally and at EU level. I understand from my colleague, an Tánaiste and Minister for Defence, that while his Department will look to develop a more structured approach to enhance engagement with Irish SMEs in the area of dual use, the methodology around this support is being developed.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State for the detail. My key concern in this area is that while the Department continues to emphasise dual use as, including perfectly legitimate ICT products, it also emphasises military applications and plans to extend this industry in Ireland. I welcome that applications are risk assessed but with this emphasis on military and defence applications of these goods there is a natural increase in risk and in the number of applications that need additional scrutiny to ensure the end use presented to authorities is appropriate and accurate.

9 o'clock

Figures from the Minister of State's Department reveal that the value of these exports has trebled since 2021 and that the number of licences went up by 28%. How is the Department addressing the need to increase our regulatory capacity to ensure that Irish companies are not negligently or purposefully selling these dangerous goods, which can then be used to commit crimes such as those war crimes we are now seeing in Gaza and Ukraine?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for her question. I know she has raised this matter on a number of occasions before. I too take this risk incredibly seriously. I will speak to officials in the Department in detail in this regard.

The Department of Defence currently only facilitates Irish SMEs during their initial interaction with initiatives such as the European Defence Fund. This interaction is primarily administrative in nature, assisting entities to navigate the bureaucratic requirements associated with the collaborative EU programmes. My officials will continue to engage with current and potential exporters regarding their responsibilities under export control including via a webinar being hosted this morning to raise awareness among relevant stakeholders of their responsibilities under export control legislation. The bulk of dual-use producers from Ireland are, as I have said, mainstream businesses producing ICT products and so on. Their applications are assessed individually. The Department of Defence currently only facilitates Irish SMEs during their initial interaction with initiatives such as the European Defence Fund.

As I said at the outset, I take these risks incredibly seriously. I am keeping a very close eye on this and I am working collaboratively with the Minister for Defence on the issue.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I hope that is the case because, even in the previous answer to Deputy Conway-Walsh, we hear this emphasis on streamlining and making more efficient the administrative burden on businesses. However, this is a really serious area and one that needs to go in the other direction. In data released to me in answer to a parliamentary question, figures showed significant increases in the value and number of export licences granted since 2021. The Government's competitiveness plan indicates that the Government wants more dual-use products sold abroad by Irish companies, directly linking the productivity and competitiveness of Irish SMEs to funds for military research and development. Logically, that means more and riskier dual-use exports to be assessed for licences. How can any Department do more work and more complex work without additional resources allocated to ensure that everything is above board? When it comes to this conversation, we keep hearing about chips and ICT products but these goods can also be parts for drones such as those that are attacking humanitarian workers on the Sumud flotilla and civilians in Gaza right now. It is an incredibly serious topic and I and others need reassurance that the Minister of State's Department is taking its duties regarding this matter seriously.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Applications for dual-use licences in respect of exports to any country are assessed on a case-by-case basis in line with the assessment criteria set out in the regulation and the eight criteria set out in the European Council Common Position 2008/944/CFSP defining common rules governing control of exports of military technology and equipment. In addition, my officials seek real-time geopolitical observations from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in respect of any applications. These views inform the final decision to grant or deny a licence. The assessment process is rigorous. My officials carry out a series of checks to ensure, insofar as they can, that the item to be exported will be used by the stated end user for the stated end purpose and will not be used or diverted for any other purpose.

Departmental Schemes

3. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the means by which existing grant and support schemes are being simplified to make them more accessible to small and medium businesses; the steps his Department is taking to cut unnecessary red tape and reduce the administrative burden on small businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51025/25]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The previous question is a very important one. Will the Minister outline the means by which the Department is simplifying access to existing grant and support schemes for our SMEs and the steps he is taking to reduce the administrative burden for those businesses? The administrative burden on small and medium-sized enterprises is a major impediment for business owners around the country at the moment, sucking vital resources away from businesses that could be better deployed elsewhere. By no means am I suggesting reducing the needed scrutiny in the context of the previous question.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for her question. I am happy to inform the Deputy that my Department is making significant progress in simplifying the application process for enterprise grants, particularly those administered through the local enterprise offices and Enterprise Ireland.

Following instruction from my Department through the recently established small business unit, the Enterprise Ireland LEO centre of excellence has completed a comprehensive review of application requirements for each of the LEO grants. This has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of questions across multiple grant schemes. For example, the number of questions regarding the priming and business expansion grants has reduced by 47%, the green for business grant by 30% and the feasibility grant by 28%. Work has already commenced with the online application service provider to make the recommended changes and to merge the application processes for the digital for business and green for business consultancies with the respective follow-on grants: grow digital and the energy-efficiency grant.

Enterprise Ireland is also driving this process through major initiatives. The service delivery transformation programme will introduce a new operating model, along with advanced technology and data capabilities, to deliver service excellence. The start-up Ireland programme is focused on creating a better journey for start-ups and entrepreneurs, strengthening ecosystem co-ordination and enhancing both national and international connectivity. Together, these programmes will help to deliver greater impact and support for Irish enterprise.

Work is also under way with the National Enterprise Hub to examine how it can be utilised to reduce the administrative burden for SMEs applying for Government supports. Scoping work is taking place to identify common data points in applications, starting with agencies under the control of my Department, and to consider how the National Enterprise Hub can be further developed in line with the "once-only" principle of data provision.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The issue is that we still have too many people coming into our constituency offices who cannot get the help and support they need to access grants. I hope that any grants announced in the budget will be thought out properly. The way to do that as regards the design of the grants is to have small businesses involved at the design stage of these grants because they will be able to see what impediments may arise that would prevent them from accessing the grants. You often find that the businesses that least need a grant can get it while those that really need it cannot access it either because of the criteria being too tight or the administrative burden being too large. This significant time and effort could be redirected to other business and substantial costs could be saved if compliance and regulations in public authority reporting could be eased. Again, I am in no way suggesting deregulation. We only have to look at the issue of defective concrete blocks to see the results of deregulation in this country.

Deputy Peter Burke: We are not really talking about regulation here but about the administrative procedures for small businesses to get the funding they need to develop online platforms, to become more sustainable and to meet their objectives. What we want to do is to make that process easier. This is not a significant risk to the taxpayer. Many of these grants are particularly small and many genuine enterprises just do not have time because time is their scarcest resource. We are working through the process with Enterprise Ireland. We have made

significant progress on our LEOs and the users should now be seeing the benefits of that. On design and policy, our SME test has now been brought to our State agencies. We are really looking at thinking small first. How do changes, whether a statutory instrument or the design of a scheme, impact on the smallest businesses that do not have the resource base to go through very significant administrative processes? We are doing a huge amount of work on that. That is on the policy side. That is how you change how the scope is determined across government.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Will the Minister think about this? In Sinn Féin's manifesto and over a number of years, we have envisaged the establishment of a *mol gnó*, a new Irish enterprise agency focused specifically on scaling existing Irish businesses. This would be a strong agency for non-export focused start-ups and established companies. It would specifically cover the void in support from existing agencies like Enterprise Ireland and the IDA. Enterprise Ireland and the IDA do a really good job but we are not using the space we have at the moment to address over-reliance on foreign direct investment. Although we absolutely need and thrive on foreign direct investment, we have to bridge that gap. In setting up a new agency – I hate the idea of a new agency – we must ensure it is something with specific targets and aims for that area to increase our indigenous businesses rapidly in the space they have been given.

Deputy Peter Burke: I appreciate the feedback and ideas because we all need ideas to come forward. Along with Enterprise Ireland and the LEOs, I am particularly focused on making things more accessible and trying to reduce the administrative burden. I am trying to establish a new accelerator programme for our country. The Deputy will be aware of PorterShed in Galway, Dogpatch Labs in Dublin, the NDRC and issues around it. We need to ensure that we have a stable landscape for those businesses that are part of the indigenous economy so that they can thrive. It is to be hoped we can bring that forward through the capital allocations we have received.

A new national accelerator programme will bring those strands together and ensure that prime space is kept for businesses which need it in order to give them the opportunity to grow and scale. We know at this point in time that we are very challenged by the US. The EU has been left behind in the growth and scaling of companies, in particular on the tech side. We are far behind at this point in time and have a huge amount of work to do in this area. I am also open to ideas from colleagues and look forward to working with the Deputy.

Wage-setting Mechanisms

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment when subminimum pay rates for young workers will be abolished; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50574/25]

Deputy Paul Murphy: In the run-up to last year's general election, the Government promised to abolish subminimum wage rates for young workers. When will it do it? Will this turn into another broken promise to workers and young people, alongside a week's sick pay and the promise of a living wage?

Deputy Peter Burke: I am not aware of making any such promise. I want to be very clear on that. The National Minimum Wage Acts allow for lower or subminimum rates of the minimum wage for employees aged 20 years and younger. Those aged less than 18 years can be paid 70% of the full minimum wage rate, while those aged 18 and 19 years can be paid 80% and 90%, respectively, of the full rate. As the Deputy is aware, the Low Pay Commission recommended the abolition of subminimum rates in March 2024. The commission highlighted in its report that this is a very complex issue. It said the Government will need to give its findings and recommendations detailed consideration and deliberation and highlighted the potential need for the Government to take its own legal advice on the matter.

It is important to acknowledge the challenges the enterprise sector has faced over the past number of years. We know that the use of subminimum youth rates is largely concentrated in the accommodation, food and retail sectors, and these sectors have reported facing considerable cost pressures. As part of the measures designed to bolster business resilience and support competitiveness, earlier this year the Government agreed to defer a decision on the subminimum rates until 2029. The decision should be considered in the context of the recent significant increases in the minimum wage which show that the Government continues to commit to fair wages for the lowest paid workers in our economy, but also in the context of the Government's introduction of a range of measures to assist workers, including a statutory sick pay scheme, the right to request remote working and other supports.

It is also important to highlight the very real progress we have made in raising the national minimum wage over recent years. Since 2020, the national minimum wage has increased by 33.7%, from €10.10 to today's rate of €13.50. In 2024, there was a significant uplift of 12%, or €1.40, in the minimum wage. This year, the minimum wage increased by 80 cent, an increase of over 6%. These increases were well ahead of inflation and projected wage growth in the economy and have brought about substantial and real wage growth for the lowest paid workers in our economy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Did I hear the Minister correctly? Did he say he will not do it until 2029? Is that what he said?

Deputy Peter Burke: This is not an over and back exchange. The Deputy can make his contribution.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is an over and back exchange. That is the nature of the format. The Minister said the rate would not be changed until 2029 or he would consider it at that stage. I ask him to clarify that. It is incredible. We introduced a Bill to get rid of this legalised superexploitation of young people in 2022, which was passed on Second Stage. It would have gotten rid of the rate in 2023, with a timed amendment. The Government said at the time that it had to wait for a report from the Low Pay Commission. The report came out in 2024 and was absolutely clear and unanimous that the Government should get rid of the superexploitation.

At that stage, I remember at a committee meeting the Government said it would produce an economic impact report. Last September, the committee was told it would take six to nine months, but there is still no sign of the new economic impact report. The Government is

kicking the can down the road. The Minister is now saying that this will now be changed in 2029, and will not even give a commitment to do it. A 19-year-old cannot pay 90% of their rent to their landlord. An 18-year-old cannot pay 80% of their grocery bill. A 17-year-old cannot pay 70% of the price of petrol. It is scandalous.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Government's commitment is to defer the decision to 2029. We will publish the data behind that shortly. It should be noted what the commission actually said on subminimum rates. It is not exactly what the Deputy quoted. It stated:

The Low Pay Commission recommends that sub-minimum wage rates for employees who are 18 and 19 years of age should be abolished no sooner than 1 January 2025.

Contrary to what the Deputy said at the very outset, I did not make any commitment to abolish the subminimum rates. It is important to be aware that approximately 5% of 19-year-olds receive subminimum rates. The majority of workers in those cohorts are above the level of the minimum wage. Critically, the increases of recent years have been ahead of wage growth in the economy and ahead of inflation. That is combined with support from the statutory sick pay scheme, an increase in the minimum wage, banning zero-hour contracts, the introduction of legislation on tips and the introduction of auto-enrolment from 1 January.

In another question, the Deputy asks about increasing the minimum wage to €17, an increase of approximately 30%, which is six times the growth rate of wages and our economy. When combined with auto-enrolment and other increases, it would leave this country without any jobs. Deputy Murphy does not have an iota of what it takes to run the enterprise economy. He does not know what it means to employ people. He does not know the value of the 2.81 million people who are going to work in our country every single day. The policies the Deputy brings forward would close down the enterprise economy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister's bluster will not disguise what is a viciously anti-worker and anti-young person policy. The Minister is saying that 19-year-olds, 18-year-olds and 17-year-olds do not deserve to get the minimum wage - the inadequate minimum wage - in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. The Minister is saying that people who go to work and do the same work as the workers next door to them, who happen to be a little bit older, are not entitled to the minimum wage. Some 15,000 young people are affected by this. The Minister is telling them there is no chance of getting the minimum wage until 2029. That is scandalous.

I will repeat the point. People who are 19 years of age cannot pay 90% of their rent. People who are 18 years of age cannot pay 80% of the grocery bill. People who are 17 years of age cannot pay 70% of the price of petrol. The Minister thinks it is okay for employers to superexploit young people by paying them less than the minimum wage. The Fine Gael agenda has been exposed. It is an absolutely disgusting policy.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am proud of the role the Government has played in improving the rights of employees. The Deputy spoke about rhetoric. Every decision he puts across to us is binary. He does not consider the potential impact such decisions would have on education pathways for young people and the unintended consequences. He does not consider training. He referred to 19-year-olds and 18-year-olds. I can tell him right now that 5% of 19-year-olds are on subminimum rates. That shows us the opportunity in our economy and the pathways

currently available. Everything has to be taken in the round. I can demonstrate to the Deputy that there was a 12% increase in the minimum wage rate last year, ahead of wage growth and inflation. Subminimum rates also increased last year. We plan to continue the trajectory of improving conditions for workers. I also have a responsibility to make sure those jobs are there. A corner shop in a small village may be struggling with costs, but the Deputy wants to increase its wage costs to €17 per hour.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This question is about subminimum rates.

Deputy Peter Burke: That is what the Deputy's proposal will do. Let us be clear about it. He would close down every small business in the country if he had his way and he was running the country.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If they cannot afford to pay the minimum wage, they should not be in business.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy does not have any balance. He does not know what it means to keep good high-value jobs in our economy.

Wage-setting Mechanisms

5. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment when the action plan on collective bargaining will be published; the timeline for publication of the underpinning legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51026/25]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: My question relates to the publication of the action plan on collective bargaining that underpins the EU directive on an adequate minimum wage. When will we see the contents of this plan? What is the timeline for the delivery of the legislation underpinning that? There is a commitment in the programme for Government to finalise this action plan by the end of 2025. It will be October next week and the Minister is running out of road in this regard.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for the question, which I appreciate. It concerns a very important area for us as a Government and one that under the programme for Government we have committed to finalising the action plan on the promotion of collective bargaining by the end of 2025, in line with the EU directive on adequate minimum wages. Work on developing the action plan in conjunction with our social partners is currently ongoing. Under Article 4, the directive aims to promote collective bargaining on wages in all member states. Each member state in which the collective bargaining coverage rate is less than a threshold of 80%, as is the case in the majority of member states, including Ireland, shall provide for a "framework of enabling conditions" for collective bargaining and shall also establish an action plan to promote collective bargaining by the end of 2025.

The European Commission expert group's report on transposition of the directive is clear that the design of the framework of enabling conditions and the content of the action plan is entirely up to member states, in consultation with the social partners. A technical working group has

been established in the Department with officials and the social partners to examine what will be considered for inclusion in Ireland's action plan, and the group has met regularly this year. The work of this group is now at an advanced stage and is essential in developing the content of the action plan. It met as recently as last week and will be meeting again shortly. I expect the action plan on collective bargaining to be published over the next couple of months once this work has been completed.

We were also very clear regarding the case coming forward in relation to the adequate minimum wage directive. I made it very clear that irrespective of the result of that we are pressing ahead and will have our plan together. In relation to the consultation open from 14 April to 12 May, I note we received about 80 valid submissions, to which we have responded. Working with our social partners and through the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, is very important. There will also be challenges from both sides as the plan is being worked on, but I want to get the best plan we can by the end of the year and I am very committed to achieving that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This is absolutely critical because we are at a juncture regarding how we will shape our economy going forward. We cannot have an economy without workers. We need to stop viewing it as workers versus employers because the benefits of collective bargaining are huge. I commend the campaign in this regard which is being run by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, in particular, and the presentation yesterday in the audiovisual room. People will be surprised to see that although there is a constitutional right for people to be part of a union, there is no legal obligation on the employer to engage with that union. We have an imbalance there that needs to be addressed. Investing in SMEs and microbusinesses to rescue jobs and protect our communities should be a priority for all our parties. It is certainly a priority for Sinn Féin.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh again for her comments on the matter. As I said, it is one area that through the programme for Government we are very much committed to. The Deputy quite rightly spoke about participation in the various forums. Deliberations will be ongoing on that and how we can address it in our action plan. We will be doing that. We have got a lot out of the LEEF structure in terms of the social partners. It is a good mechanism to air these issues. We will not solve everything, however. I can be absolutely honest about that. We will, though, give our best effort to this plan to build confidence and show the Government's capacity regardless of the uncertainty that was there through the legal challenge. We have committed to pressing ahead. I think that is an important statement on how we value workers and value their right to collective bargaining and how we want to give people that opportunity and put in place the conditions where that can grow.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Six of the top ten FDI companies enable union representation. We know for a fact that it increases respect for management. It increases as union recognition increases. We need to take heed of the good jobs Bill in the North as well, because that is really making inroads in this area in terms of union recognition. As a party, Sinn Féin has long stood in support of trade union recognition and the fundamental right of workers to be represented by their unions. I acknowledge the work of my colleague, Deputy Louise O'Reilly, in this area, as well as the work of my former colleague, a former Senator, Paul Gavan, with regard to the

support and progression of trade unions and trade union representatives. We on this side of the House are committed to the rights of workers right across this island. Again, this speaks to the all-island economy. We need congruence of workers' rights across the island too.

Deputy Peter Burke: I absolutely agree that quality jobs are so important in our economy. I think this will be one of the areas we will focus on during our Presidency of the EU in the second half of next year. That will give us a key opportunity. We must remember that in the action plan and under the adequate minimum wage directive, MEPs from my party, including Regina Doherty and others, played a huge role in really working on that directive and getting agreement in the European Parliament. We are, therefore, very keen to try to bring forward the best possible plan that we can. When our EU Presidency term does come, we are also very keen to focus on high-quality work, because this is what our economy should be about. This is why we are very focused on it at all times. I have been part of the past number of Governments and I know the huge improvements we have had for lower-paid workers. That must be acknowledged. When people challenge us on what areas there have been improvements in, it must be acknowledged we have banned zero-hour contracts, which were totally wrong, brought in tips legislation to protect vulnerable workers and we now have a sick pay scheme. Additionally, we have auto-enrolment, which will future-proof people and their retirement plans. The State will be stepping up to the mark over the next number of years. Those are key improvements in the economy, including watching out for lower-paid workers, while also trying to enhance the capacity to get more high-quality jobs into the country, because this will be critical for us all to realise our ambitions in life.

Business Regulation

6. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the action he is taking to simplify business regulation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51027/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Red tape is a huge issue for small businesses. When I am out meeting business people, one thing that comes up consistently is red tape. What is the Minister of State doing to cut through red tape and simplify business regulation?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for his really important question. This is something we all hear about regularly in our constituency offices. The action plan on competitiveness and productivity - a commitment in the programme for Government - recently published by the Minister, Deputy Burke, is a whole-of-government strategic response to the challenges that Ireland is facing. A key focus of the action plan is improving Ireland's regulatory environment under the theme "Regulating for Growth and Controlling Costs". Measures under this theme include introducing a red tape challenge across Government to reduce regulation for SMEs, undertaking a public consultation to identify areas of high burden and all Government Departments applying the SME test to all measures, and in particular to policy initiatives where it is proposed to increase costs on small business.

In terms of my Department, there is an ongoing commitment to ensuring the regulatory environment is proportionate and fit for purpose. This includes the conduct of regulatory

impact analysis and the systematic application of the SME test, which has been designed to invite consideration of less stringent compliance requirements for smaller companies, where appropriate and proportionate. My Department has also established a small business unit which has been tasked with ensuring that the needs and issues of small businesses have a dedicated focus and are recognised and acknowledged across Government.

In terms of legislative change, the Companies Act 2014 was updated through the Companies (Corporate Governance, Enforcement and Regulatory Provisions) Act 2024, which introduced a range of practical reforms consistent with ensuring that Ireland's regulatory framework provides flexibility and is fit for modern business operating in an increasingly digital and virtual environment. Work is ongoing to modernise and reform a range of other legislation, including the co-operative societies Bill and legislation relating to limited partnerships and business names. The foregoing complements work ongoing at EU level, where there is a particular focus on simplification. This is what this all boils down to - simplification. I know the Minister has been a huge champion of the simpler, faster and lighter approach in terms of bureaucracy for small businesses.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Go maith agat. I really welcome all that is being done in the Department to try to simplify business regulation. From my dealings with the Department, that is definitely the thinking. It wants to make life better for businesses. It wants to make Ireland a better place to operate a business. To reiterate how important this point is, the IBEC CEO Survey 2025 ranks sensible regulation as the third most important issue that CEOs across our country face. As Fianna Fáil spokesperson on enterprise, I want to make sure that we continue with that train of thought. SMEs suffer the brunt of overregulation. They do not have the scale and capacity to subsume a lot of the burden. What will be done for the SMEs to ensure that they will have smoother operations, that they can deal with State agencies better and, ultimately, have greater longevity.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The red-tape challenge will be introduced across Government to significantly reduce regulation for SMEs, because we have to get the balance right. I am glad the Deputy stated that regulation is the third most important issue. Companies and CEOs recognise the importance of regulation without killing businesses with additional burdens. The red-tape challenge will include a review by each Department to identify regulations to be removed or reduced without impacting on policy objectives, and a public consultation to identify areas of high burden or where burden reduction could be launched is a focus of the Government.

The overarching objective of the action plan to which I referred is to maintain and improve Ireland's position as a competitive and productive economy capable of withstanding shocks, building on our strengths and developing the indigenous enterprise base while continuing to attract investment and talent from abroad. The action plan contains 85 actions for enhancing Ireland's competitive and productivity performance, with 26 of these identified as priority actions. I hope that provides some detail for the Deputy.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Part of what will make our business environment better to do business in is something that falls within the Minister of State's brief, namely digitisation. Ultimately, the question the Department needs to be asking is whether every grant application, licence

permit, etc., can be processed by it digitally? It is important for every Department to look at this because if somebody cannot easily deal with a Department in person, they will still be able to deal with an official online if they encounter any difficulties. That is the way to think about it.

I have read many times about Estonia's digital-first policy and how innovative it is. The reality is that Ireland is home to the biggest tech companies in the world. The Government need to show both leadership and that we want to be a digital-first nation. Of course, we want to make sure that nobody gets left behind. We need to show leadership, however, because when all of these companies are investing in Ireland, they want to see that we are tech-minded, that we are tech leaders and that we want to see success for their businesses and this country.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I agree wholeheartedly with what the Deputy said in terms of digitalisation, and that is not to take away from Deputy Conway-Walsh's point that there are businesses which will struggle with that. That is why the Department launched the digital charter, which is a call to action for bigger companies that are digitally proficient to buddy up with smaller businesses across the country to help them get on the digitalisation train. AI will be transformative and will bring us to a new level. I am looking forward over the coming weeks and months to us planning the AI summit, which will be part of Ireland's EU Presidency. In all of that, we need huge co-operation from the bigger companies to assist smaller companies where possible. They are willing to work with the Department and have been doing so up to this point.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Tourism Policy

7. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment for the up-to-date position on the development of a tourism plan for the Museraí district to include the Gearagh, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50804/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I must tell the Minister about this magnificent place, the Gearagh, which is right beside Macroom. It formed after the last Ice Age. It is the remains of a post-glacial alluvial rainforest. It is a magnificent place. Migrating birds have nested there for many generation as they travel north to south and back again. People, whether local or international, may not know it well. We want to bring this wonderfully magnificent place to the attention of more people in order that they can share and enjoy it. Can the Minister provide an outline of what efforts are being made to promote the Gearagh?

Deputy Peter Burke: First, I should say that we will have a new tourism plan, hopefully in the next month, following consultation right across Government. That should be a good response to where we need to be for future-proofing the sector.

I should clarify that the promotion and operation of regional tourism is a matter for the local authorities, Fáilte Ireland and other tourism stakeholders. Cork is represented by three regional

tourism brands, namely Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East and Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

Fáilte Ireland's regional tourism development strategies for the period 2023 to 2027 provide a roadmap for the tourism industry and all stakeholders involved in tourism. The development strategies set out a strategic approach to unlocking the commercial potential in each region. They ensure focus on tourism development is sustainable and regenerative and that the benefits accrue to local communities and to nature. To activate these strategies, Fáilte Ireland has established localised five-year destination experience development plans, DEDPs. These local development plans are highly collaborative in nature, involving local stakeholders, and are reflected in agreed action plans where ownership is assigned among the various parties.

The west Cork and Kenmare DEDP, which encompasses Muscraí, was launched in quarter 4 of 2023 to efficiently manage the delivery of actions within the DEDP. Three thematic subgroups were established based on the prevalence of actions emerging in this plan, namely artisan food, outdoor activities and marketing. In 2025, Fáilte Ireland has worked to create six new thematic itineraries for the destination which focus on, food experiences - including high-end food, both coastal and inland - outdoor activities and eco car-free travel itineraries. In addition, the Muscraí tourism action plan is incorporated into the work of the destination experience development plan implementation group.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I acknowledge the huge work that has been done in developing the west Cork and Kenmare development plan. As part of that, there is work also with Údarás na Gaeltachta on developing the Muscraí plan. Muscraí is very much focused on the Gaeltacht area. There is an amazing offering between food, culture, language, the landscape and so much more. The Gearagh is right on the edge of this; it is not the central focus of that plan. It is an amazing nugget on a corridor between the large population centre in Cork, the airport and right out to the Wild Atlantic Way. It is almost slipping between two stools. Can some effort can be made to bring the Gearagh to the fore and to get greater awareness of it?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Moynihan for his question. Absolutely, I am open to working with the Deputy on that. Maybe we could set up a meeting with Fáilte Ireland to see what is specifically being done for the Gearagh to ensure that the message about its natural beauty is being advertised. Údarás na Gaeltachta and Fáilte Ireland met recently to form a strategic partnership. They have signed a memorandum of understanding detailing their commitment to the area, particularly on the Gaeltacht side. In the context of the Deputy's specific question, I would be happy to set up a meeting to try to see how we can unlock the potential that exists.

One of the key issues in tourism that I am focusing on is trying to see how we get performance indicators into the tourism policy. We are spending a great deal of money. The sector is probably worth €8 billion or €9 billion at present. It has stabilised. It has got back to where it was prior to Covid. We had extraordinary growth last year. It stabilised this year, and it presented some challenges. In relation to a number of matters, including the cap, enhancements to the business sector and growing the SMEs, it will provide a strong value offering. I suggest that we could have a meeting with Fáilte Ireland on the matter to see where we might take things from there.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The proposal to meet with Fáilte Ireland is both positive and one we should take up. There are a number of stakeholders involved. Having ESB, which is the landowner, participating in such a meeting would be very important, particularly as it owns the Gearagh area, which is part of the Lee reservoir. While they have done some work on bird hides, walkways, etc., many feel that there is a lack of energy or interest on the part of the ESB in advancing and promoting the Gearagh. There is limited signage on site for interpreting what is there and limited car parking. Many locals and stakeholders would also feel that there is limited interest on the company's part. It would be important to engage with or energise the ESB, given that it owns the land. Even if it was not interested in continuing at the site, there is a possibility of transferring the land to a body like the NPWS while allowing the ESB to continue as the authority for operating the reservoir.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am happy to bring in the stakeholders to see how we can improve the offering. I have no objection to that, especially when, as the Deputy has well described, the asset could have great potential. That is what we need to do. We need to get back to the authentic beauty that Ireland has to offer and the authentic céad míle fáilte that we are so renowned for worldwide. We can do a huge amount of work on that in the upcoming tourism plan, on which I look forward to working with all my colleagues. The tourism officer has had a number of meetings with the DEDP implementation group. I would be happy for us to do further work, have that meeting and talk to the various stakeholders.

Industrial Development

8. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the steps he is taking to ensure that County Offaly does not fall further behind neighbouring counties in attracting IDA Ireland investment and securing employment opportunities; if his Department will commit to increasing the number of IDA Ireland site visits and targeted investment in Offaly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50722/25]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for his important question. As somebody from a rural constituency, I am aware of how incredibly important IDA Ireland site visits are. I know the Deputy feels very strongly about those engagements as important opportunities for his county and the midlands.

IDA Ireland remains committed to regional development as one of four key strategic objectives of its strategy for the period 2025 to 2029, Adapt Intelligently. The aim of this ambitious strategy is to secure 550 of the 1,000 investments targeted over the lifetime of the strategy to the regions, including 40 in the midlands. Over half of the 973 investments won under IDA Ireland's strategy for the period 2021 to 2024 went to regional locations. Some 31 of these were in the midlands region, exceeding the strategy target of 25.

There are 1,420 people currently employed in Offaly across 11 IDA Ireland-supported companies. Figures show that employment among IDA Ireland clients increased by 26% in the region over the past five years. The midlands has a significant ecosystem of well-established companies across life sciences, technology, global business and financial services and engineering and industrial technologies. IDA Ireland will continue to position the midlands as a competitive and attractive destination for global investors.

In relation to site visits, I am advised that to the end of quarter 2 of this year, there were two visits to County Offaly, five in 2024 and three in 2023. I should state, however, that these figures represent individual visits and are not necessarily indicative of the number of companies that have visited. In addition, site visits may not necessarily be a true measure of the overall level of FDI activity in a region or county. The goal for the coming years is to build on the region's strengths and competencies to win investment, with a particular focus on high-value manufacturing, services and research and innovation opportunities across established clusters.

Deputy Tony McCormack: In the past ten years, IDA Ireland has made 240 site visits to Westmeath but only 45 to Offaly. That is a more than a five to one imbalance between two neighbouring counties in the midlands. IDA Ireland is also overnighing most of these itineraries in Athlone, where it wines and dines potential clients and, therefore, has a better chance of landing them in the area. The people of Offaly will not stand for being ignored or pawned off by a State agency that is supposed to treat all counties equally. Does the Minister of State accept that this looks like favouritism? What immediate steps will she take to ensure that IDA Ireland directs more visits and resources to Offaly? To be honest, over the most recent period, it has been a case of everything being the same. We need that to change.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I understand the passion and frustration of Deputy McCormack. While he gives us the figures regarding what is going to Westmeath and Offaly, there can be many reasons for that, although I am not defending it in any way. If the Deputy would like me to facilitate a meeting between him and IDA Ireland regarding the visits to County Offaly to see if there is more we can do to bolster those visits, I would be more than happy to try to facilitate him.

A core objective of IDA Ireland is to enable, influence and deliver a competitive property offering that supports the winning of FDI and the growth and expansion of indigenous clients within Enterprise Ireland's portfolio and promotes national economic investment. The availability of quality business parks and strategic sites is a critical component of the regional value proposition and winning investments in the regions. It is crucial that the midlands region has a competitive and sustainable offering to enable the attraction and retention of jobs and investment in the area.

I have a list with me of the companies that have visited County Offaly. As I said, if the Deputy wants me to facilitate a meeting in the future, I am happy to do so.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister of State for the offer of a meeting. Unfortunately, when I have had meetings with IDA Ireland, I get very little information because it is withheld due to it being of a sensitive nature. IDA Ireland-supported employment in the midlands fell last year by 0.45%. Offaly's only IDA Ireland business park is already full. We need another park. Without new sites and investment, Offaly simply cannot compete with neighbouring counties. What commitment can the Minister of State give today that Offaly will see targeted IDA Ireland investment, including a newly expanded advance business park in Tullamore, with a clear timeline for delivery, as part of its new national plan? Tullamore was earmarked for an advance unit. Without the space to build, however, this will not happen.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The goal in the coming years is to build on the region's strengths and competencies to win that investment. I take the Deputy's point that you have to have the facilities - sometimes you have to build it and they will come. Very often, the metric that gets people to come is if they see nice facilities and all the wraparound things, such as infrastructure, housing, footfall or whatever. I take the Deputy's point. As somebody from Cavan-Monaghan, I know that we do not get many visits either, so I feel his pain. From my dealings with IDA Ireland so far, I know that sometimes it cannot dictate where companies go because their representatives come with particular requirements or a vision in their heads as to where they want to go. I take the point that a balance has to be struck if we are to create the proper regional development that we are all concerned about. A part of that is for IDA Ireland to have a greater spread across the regions. I take the Deputy's points, which are very valid, and I will raise them with IDA Ireland.

Industrial Development

9. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the number of investments IDA Ireland is targeting in the west under its current strategy; its performance in investments in the west under the previous strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50584/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: The work of IDA Ireland cannot be underestimated. It has a proven, serious track record of delivery right across the country and of bringing in business and creating jobs. Under the current strategy, how has IDA Ireland performed in the west of Ireland, what is the plan for the future and where are we going from here? Ultimately, it is vital that we make a success of the west. I would appreciate it if the Minister could speak to IDA Ireland's performance under its strategy.

Deputy Peter Burke: IDA Ireland's regional strategy has a proven track record of success, and the agency has reaffirmed its strong commitment to regional development as a core pillar of its strategy for the period 2025 to 2029, which I launched some months ago. The strategy aims to secure 550 regional investments over its lifetime. That is 55% of all investments, including 100 in the west, reflecting IDA Ireland's ongoing commitment to supporting transformation and growth across all regions.

IDA Ireland supported the delivery of 973 investments over the period of the strategy for 2021 to 2024, 54% of which went to regional locations. Some 91 were in the west against a target of 76. The west has a significant ecosystem of well-established companies across life sciences, engineering, international financial services, content, consumer and business services and tech. IDA Ireland will seek to build on the strengths and competencies of the region and will continue to market it, targeting these sectors for investment opportunities.

Suitable property availability can play a key part in winning investments from both new clients and the existing client base. As part of the strategy for the period 2021 to 2024, 19 advance building solutions were progressed across 15 locations, including an advance building in Galway that is available for marketing. IDA Ireland's regional building programme for the period 2025 to 2029 will consist of 23 projects across 21 locations in eight regions, primarily involving manufacturing buildings. This will include a building in Castlebar, which is at site

selection stage, and an additional new building in Galway, subject to the successful marketing of the existing building and, of course, dependent on planning and procurement outcomes. The IDA is also partnering with local authorities to deliver advance planning permits in Ballinasloe, Mayo and Roscommon. As the Deputy will be aware, IDA Ireland's strategy focuses on partnering with the existing FDI base to increase the competitiveness of their Irish operations, providing the foundation on which they can capture new growth opportunities, alongside attracting new investment to the regions.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Over 31,000 people are employed by IDA companies in the west of Ireland, as the Minister outlined. I welcome the fact that the ambition is going up, from 76-IDA backed investments in the last plan to a target of 100 investments over the lifetime of this strategy. I welcome the publication of the strategy.

I attended the opening of the Medical Technology Ireland conference yesterday in Galway and saw for myself the talent, business and enterprise that was ongoing in the Galway medtech ecosphere. It is vital that we continue to support that. Over the last 20 or 30 years, we have built expertise, facilities and such a successful ecosystem, including relationships between the universities and businesses. Does the Minister have any plans to continue to support that and what will that support look like?

Deputy Peter Burke: I do indeed. Our new life science strategy will be brought forward next year. That will be in line with the EU life science strategy and will aim to grow the 100,000 employees in the sector and the more than €100 billion in exports. Galway is very much front and centre of that, being a hub of medtech. About 70% of medtech companies are doing research and development and they are very good at the commercialisation of research in our tertiary education settings. One of the key areas of our new strategy is semiconductors, which is also important for the west. Obviously, Galway has been highlighted for its very significant and large-scale site, which will be very important for our next-generation semiconductor investment. The Deputy referenced the 31,000 people employed by IDA companies in the west, particularly in Galway, but there are an additional 25,000 jobs intrinsically linked to the IDA. If one looks at the current semiconductor companies and their supply chains, one of them has 900 SMEs intrinsically ingrained in its supply chain management process, so that will be a significant game-changer for Galway. It is very important that we get that site over the line. We are expecting to bring a memo to Cabinet on it in the next number of weeks, in consultation with our friends in the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. It is important that we get that on the road.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I really welcome that and I assure the Minister that, when he goes to Cabinet with that memo, he will have my full support. We must make sure that site is unlocked and the potential is realised. What is notable about that semiconductor site, adjacent to Oranmore, is its scale. It is going to be huge and the impact will secure the future of the west of Ireland for the next 20, 30 or 40 years. Something like the advance planning permit that the Minister mentioned in his reply is vital. I saw the success of Dexcom in Athenry. It had such a smooth run through the planning system. There was not one local objection and there was collegiality with Galway County Council. There was an understanding there. The council did its job and attached 58 conditions to the development but it got planning permission in eight

weeks. That development will provide 1,000 jobs in Athenry, which is an absolutely huge investment.

The Minister's idea of preplanning permits so that we can have a general outline of the site's potential will be needed at the Oranmore site. Work should begin on that immediately, alongside the Minister's proposal for a €3.2 billion infrastructure package that will not only secure that site, but secure the future of Galway as well.

Deputy Peter Burke: I understand that work is ongoing with the local authority in relation to that. My Department is very happy to support that planning permit, which will be very important for the sector. There is huge opportunity. We hear some negative things about the planning process but one thing that strikes me, as a former Minister of State with responsibility for planning, is that over 90% of planning decisions in this country do not go to appeal. A lot of good things happen but we do not hear about them. Dexcom is a prime example of that. I met representatives of the company recently and had a chat with them at an event in Galway involving the chamber of commerce. I also met the chief executive of Galway County Council, Liam Conneally, who outlined the ambition for County Galway. If I remember correctly from my days in the Custom House, this is the second biggest local authority in Ireland and has a huge amount of opportunity. The area has grid capacity and power, which we do not have in a lot of areas of the country. Galway has a lot of good cards and hopefully it will get to play them right over the next number of weeks.

Questions Nos. 10 to 12, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Industrial Development

13. **Deputy Seán Fleming** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the number of investments the IDA is targeting in the midlands under its current strategy; its performance in midlands investments under the previous strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50579/25]

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Fleming for his question on the midlands region. Regional development is a key focus in the programme for Government and is central to the work of my Department and its agencies. In that regard, IDA Ireland has reaffirmed its strong commitment to regional development as a core pillar of its 2025 to 2029 strategy, which we launched a number of months ago. This ambitious strategy aims to secure 550 foreign direct investment projects in rural and regional areas, accounting for 55% of all planned investments. The overarching goal is to create 75,000 new jobs nationwide and generate a projected €250 billion in economic impact. IDA Ireland is targeting 40 client investments to the midlands region over the lifetime of the strategy.

Last year saw the conclusion of IDA Ireland's 2021 to 2024 strategy, Driving Recovery and Sustainable Growth. Over the course of the strategy, IDA Ireland supported the delivery of 973 investments and creation of 76,790 jobs, or 121% and 153% of the respective targets. Some 54% of all investments were in regional locations outside Dublin. The investment target for the midlands over the period 2021 to 2024 was 25 investments and the total number of investments won for the region was 31. IDA's goal for the coming years is to build on the

strengths and competencies of the region, with a particular focus on high-value manufacturing, services, and research and innovation opportunities across established clusters in life sciences, technology and global business services. Emerging technology trends will continue to create new opportunities for the region in areas such as data analytics, smart manufacturing, cybersecurity and new approaches to working, such as co-working hubs.

As the Deputy will be aware, IDA Ireland's strategy focuses on partnering with enterprises in the existing FDI base to retain and renew their Irish operations, alongside attracting new investment. The agency provides ongoing support to existing clients through investment in research and development and it will be very important in the upcoming budget to get the research and development value proposition correct. IDA Ireland also provides support for upskilling, talent development, digitalisation and sustainability in the FDI sector.

Deputy Seán Fleming: I thank the Minister for that overview of the midlands region but I am sure he will understand if I speak about Laois in particular. At the end of last year, there were 8,045 IDA-supported jobs in the midlands. Laois has 30% of the population of the midland counties but has only 1.8% of the IDA-supported jobs in the area. If one looks at the county-by-county list produced by the IDA, one sees that Laois has 145 IDA-supported jobs. It is a disgrace. I say that publicly. The total of 145 is, by a mile, the lowest of any county in the country even though the services in Laois are as good and as available as anywhere else.

I was very worried by the Minister's statement. I would ask him to introduce the IDA to County Laois and to arrange a meeting for the TDs and the chief executive of Laois County Council on this. I was especially worried when the Minister said that the IDA wanted to partner with existing FDI investments that were already up and running in the midlands region and nationwide because that means it would exclude Laois. The county does not have those investments. It is remarkable that the Laois figure is so low.

Deputy Peter Burke: I will be categorical in stating that we are absolutely not excluding Laois. I was down there recently. The Leprino plant is an existing sector business under Enterprise Ireland that we are trying to find a replacement for through the FDI sector. It is a highly regulated plant that needs very significant support. As the Deputy will be aware, we are also working on an advance planning permit for Portlaoise. This is a very important investment which aims to get more high-quality stock into the market to assist County Laois.

As I pointed out, employment in the region increased by 26% over the last number of years. I am happy to arrange a meeting to work with Laois companies and to try to get more investment into the region but we have to be honest about the fact that we are operating in a very constrained space now. Over the next five years, relations with the US Administration will be very constrained. We are under significant pressure in terms of capital investment and we have very strong competitors. Singapore, for example, has very deep pockets. In terms of increases in capital allocations in the budget, we are looking at getting 6%, if we are lucky. That leaves us in a very tight space in the context of the work we do.

10 o'clock

We just have to be very honest and we have to protect what we have. I absolutely want to grow Laois. I will be unequivocal about that and will work with Deputy Fleming in trying to

assist through the IDA. We are committed on the capital side through our land bank there and the work we have to do on it.

Deputy Seán Fleming: I thank the Minister for that and, in particular, his commitment to help arrange a meeting between the TDs, the chief executive of Laois County Council and appropriate IDA officials - or Enterprise Ireland officials, while we are at it, because the figures for Enterprise Ireland in Laois are abysmally low as well. We are almost at the bottom.

I will make a few key points. The Minister mentioned Leprino. That company provides 135 jobs. We hope we can get a replacement. It is a high-tech business. That replacement, however, would only maintain the jobs already in the county. Portlaoise is ideally located. It has the best road network in the country. It is on the M7. Thirty-two trains leave Portlaoise every day for Dublin and Portllington. We have the best train service of any provincial town in the country. As regards the housing in Portlaoise, thousands of houses have been built in Laois in recent years, more than in any other county *per capita*. We therefore have all the facilities that are required in Portlaoise. The IDA has a 30 ha site already in Portlaoise. We want to see an advance factory on that site as urgently as possible. If we have that, we might have a location to bring clients to.

Deputy Peter Burke: I would absolutely support Deputy Fleming in what he set out, those 30 ha and the critical importance of an advance factory unit or a building solution unit because we know that it shortens lead time for investors. When you are bringing someone on site and you have a ready-made building, or the consent agreed for a building, it makes a difference. We will absolutely work with the Deputy on that. I know from my town, Mullingar, that it can be very difficult at times to secure good, high-quality investments from the IDA, and I feel the Deputy's pain in trying to get additional clients in, but I am absolutely here to work with him on that journey. As he points out, the Leprino site is very highly regulated. I have met with the IDA on a number of occasions in respect of it and met the management in Leprino to try to ensure that it is doing everything to get a good prospectus together in order that we can try to get a replacement into what is a very highly regulated site. I know Portlaoise and Laois very well. The housing increases there have been very significant. You can see as you drive through the town progress at every corner. The town's connectivity, road and rail, is exceptional. We are very happy to work with the Deputy on that.

Question No. 14 taken with Written Answers.

Pigmeat Sector

16. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to consider supporting producers of pig products impacted by Chinese tariffs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50805/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: China is the sixth largest destination for our agrifood exports, worth over €613 million, and pigmeat is a huge part of that trade, at €102 million last year. The imposition by China recently of what it considers anti-dumping tariffs will really challenge that trade. What efforts are being made to end those tariffs?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Deputy Moynihan for his very important question. In June, the Government of China initiated an anti-dumping investigation on imports of pork and beef products from the European Union, and it has now announced provisional duties on imports of pork from the EU. The European Commission is in the process of assessing this announcement and will consider measures to protect EU industry and economic interests ahead of the deadline for the final determination of the Chinese investigation on 16 December.

I understand that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is aware of the preliminary findings of China's investigation and that the Department is confident that Ireland's exports of pork and pork by-products to China are fully compliant with World Trade Organization rules. The Department has encouraged the Irish industry to co-operate fully with the Chinese investigations. The Commission will be supported in its efforts to defend EU farmers and exporters on this matter.

My Department, through Enterprise Ireland, provides a range of funds and grants to agrifood businesses, including pig processors, to support export growth and capability development in the sector. Supports are available for capital investment, research and development, digitalisation, training, and sustainability initiatives. Bord Bia also runs promotional campaigns which aim to boost domestic and export demand.

In addition, my Department, together with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, co-fund the capital investment scheme for the marketing and processing of agricultural products, which is implemented by Enterprise Ireland. This scheme is targeted at businesses in the meat and dairy sectors to support them to expand and diversify and to increase sales of higher value-added products in the global marketplace. Thirty-four projects have been supported, with total public and private investment exceeding €420 million. This investment helps future-proof the sector, sustain jobs and enhance export potential.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: These tariffs are a huge burden on the export of pig products to China. Two obvious supports are needed: first, the ending of the tariff and allowing free trade and, second, alternative markets. It is reasonable to expect that China will build its own pigmeat businesses and will be able to satisfy its own market more in the years ahead.

What particular efforts are being made to find alternative markets for Irish pig product across any other parts of the globe, whether South America, North America or wherever else?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: As the Deputy knows, the Minister, Deputy Burke, launched the Government's Action Plan on Market Diversification recently. It contains important actions aimed at supporting export-orientated sectors, including the agrifood sector. This focus on market diversification for the sector also aligns with the objectives of the Food Vision 2030 strategy, which is led by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The action plan sets out a path to support Ireland's businesses large and small and to adapt to the global trading environment by striking out into new and diverse markets, deepening their engagement in existing markets and expanding where possible and where opportunities exist. As a global and open trading economy deeply connected into international supply chains, the action plan also serves to mitigate the current risks and bolster our economic resilience. Of the grants and schemes that are available, I want to talk about two in particular. The market research grant provides up to €35,000 to help companies assess the impact of tariffs, gain market insights and

develop mitigation strategies even in markets where they already operate. The second piece is the new markets validation grant, offering up to €150,000 to support the development of market entry strategies into new markets and new products.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): Thank you, Minister. We will get you back in.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: To return to the earlier question, this relates to the efforts to end the tariff and to reopen the opportunity for trade. I understand this investigation has been ongoing for some time, with the expectation of an outcome later this year, or possibly by the end of the year. Is there any evidence emerging of dumping going on? Where do things stand at the moment on this? I know that it was raised by the agriculture Minister at the recent AGRIFISH meeting as well with his EU colleagues. Is there any evidence, or is there a risk, that this tariff could continue long-term, or what efforts are being made to ensure that it would be ended?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: As I said, the Department has encouraged the Irish industry to co-operate fully with the Chinese investigations, and the Commission will support its efforts to defend EU farmers and exporters on the matter. I am cognisant of the fact that the Minister, Deputy Burke, has done a huge amount in terms of particular sectors being able to take shocks like that, having that resilience in place. That is what the action plan on competitiveness and market diversification is all about. As a Government, we are mindful and cognisant of that, looking to other markets and trying to ensure that we future-proof not just our pig sector but all agrifood sectors that face tariffs, potentially. I would like us to await the outcome of that investigation, which is due to be published on 16 December.

Business Supports

15. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide an update on the steps being taken to help reduce the cost of doing business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50598/25]

Deputy John Clendennen: Apologies for my punctuality.

I acknowledge the work the Minister has done in relation to small businesses, especially the establishment of the small enterprise unit within his Department and the National Enterprise Hub. I ask the Minister to provide an update on the steps he is taking to reduce the cost of business.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Clendennen. The Government recognises that the cost of doing business has been an issue for firms in recent years arising from wider inflationary trends, including energy costs. It is important to note that costs for firms, as measured through the CSO's wholesale price index, are declining and are down 3% in the 12 months to August 2025.

Most recently, the Government has taken action to address business costs through the publication of the action plan on competitiveness and productivity and the convening of the cost of business advisory forum, both commitments in the programme for Government. The focus of the action plan on competitiveness and productivity is action that can be taken to strengthen Irish competitiveness and productivity, which in turn will lead to improvements in our economic performance. The development of the action plan was informed by extensive consultation across government with external stakeholders. My Department held a series of bilateral engagements with other Departments in the areas of infrastructure, housing and research and innovation. A core theme of the plan is regulating for growth and controlling costs with 18 actions, including five priority actions, focused on addressing this key issue. Key actions include better regulation, which will decrease regulatory burdens across business, address high legal costs and improve competition in our markets.

Complementary to the action plan, the cost of business advisory forum delivers on the commitment to support small businesses, enterprises and industries across a number of sectors. The forum's key objective is to examine and identify the concerns of the enterprise sector around the impact of the rising costs of doing business by creating a structured space where business owners and representative bodies can speak directly to decision-makers about the real-world impact of regulations, fees and operational challenges. The forum has already met a number of times on energy costs, security of supply and insurance costs. The forum will also focus on other cost driver topics, with each meeting including relevant regulators and agencies to ensure actionable outcomes. The findings will inform a report and set of recommendations to Government to take immediate action to address these short-term issues that merit a changed approach for business owners.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister. I welcome the cost of business advisory forum. Over the summer, I conducted a survey with over 600 respondents. A key finding was that over two thirds of SMEs that engaged in the survey were uncertain about the future and lacked the confidence we need to ensure they have. Other key findings were around easing the cost of labour pressure, cutting energy costs, tackling insurance reform and reducing the tax burden. When it comes to competitiveness in particular, local enterprise offices have a greater role to play. I ask the Minister to look at a review of the role local enterprise offices can play. More often than not, small businesses go to local enterprise offices, are offered mentoring and so on but when they want a small few euro to expand their business, considering the pressures of operational costs are too much, they are ineligible for grants. I ask the Minister to consider broadening grant eligibility to ensure businesses can continue to progress, create further employment and protect jobs.

Deputy Peter Burke: Deputy Clendennen has been a firm advocate for small family businesses. His voice has been very strong in that regard. We know many of those operate around the kitchen table; they do not have a finance or HR director. They employ two thirds of all people in our economy. That is why we have worked very hard to reduce the red tape in LEOs. We set about working through the centre of excellence in Enterprise Ireland, reducing the administrative burden and number of questions asked for a number of these supports. We reduced questions by 47% across a number of grant forms. We will continue at pace through our simpler, lighter, faster approach, reflecting that the most valuable resource businesses have is their time. We have increased the output of the national enterprise hub from 180 supports to

250 across 32 Government agencies and Departments and with operators on the other end of the phone. The hub had over 7,000 individual inquiries in August alone. Those are leads on the phone, following up on supporting businesses. We have also worked with Enterprise Ireland, reducing the number of questions and red tape, and interoperability of some of those applications where the same information has been furnished previously.

Deputy John Clendennen: When it comes to protecting jobs, I ask the Minister to strongly consider, along with his Cabinet colleagues, introducing the 9% VAT rate for the hospitality sector in the upcoming budget. The Minister spoke about the kitchen tables to boardroom tables where decisions were made. Small businesses need help. A VAT rate of 9% is an important stimulus in that regard. To look at the figures, there are 20,000 companies with 200,000 employees. Of those companies, 76% have fewer than ten employees and another 20% have fewer than 50. This will target over 95% of businesses in every town and village, ensuring economic and social well-being and community benefit, whether through the coffee shop, restaurant or other small businesses. I urge the Minister and his colleagues to ensure the 9% VAT rate is part of budget 2026.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his strong support of the 9% VAT proposal. I know as tourism Minister as well that the key link in our identity is the authentic offering we have through our independent businesses like small coffee shops and restaurants. That will be key to the Government's response. We know the pressure they are under. There are over 240,000 jobs in regional locations and an €8 billion sector that we need to sustain. That will benefit everyone because the more activity there is, the more the money flowing into businesses goes out into the community. That is where people invest their money because they are a key part of the community. We will bring forward our tourism policy next month, which will look at how to expand Fáilte Ireland's remit to restaurants, helping them to develop their business models, help with costs, get them on board with digitalisation in terms of sustainability grants, and enhance their capacity. Tourism is keenly linked with our SMEs. They go hand in glove. They need to grow together. That is why having tourism at the heart of the Department of enterprise is important.

The work the Deputy did engaging with businesses over the past number of weeks is commendable and will form part of discussions as we approach budget 2026. I look forward to the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers, having a strong enterprise budget. This is budget No. 1 of the new Government. It needs to be an enterprise budget focused on sustaining job growth, keeping 2.81 million people employed - a record in our country - and giving everyone the key opportunity in life of a job.

Export Controls

18. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the number and value of dual-use export licence applications, in respect of end-users in Israel, approved by his Department by quarter to date in 2025; the number refused in each quarter to date in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50786/25]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I wish Deputy Connolly well in her campaign in the weeks ahead. She is a brave lady.

As the national competent authority for export controls, my responsibilities centre around the control of exports of dual-use and military items under EU and national legislation. These controls are administered by the Department in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2021/821 of the European Parliament and of the Council setting up a European Union regime for the control of exports, brokering, technical assistance, transit and transfer of dual-use items. The primary purpose of export controls is not to block trade or exports but to enable the free movement of legitimate goods while ensuring that certain sensitive categories are subject to appropriate regulation. These controls are designed to manage risk, uphold international peace and security and ensure Ireland's compliance with its international obligations.

To date in 2025, a total of nine individual dual-use licences have been issued in respect of end users in Israel. Four were issued in quarter 1 with a maximum value of €797,000. In quarter 2, three were issued with a maximum value of €93,000. To date in quarter 3, two licences have been issued with a maximum value of €172,000. There has been one refusal to date in 2025 in respect of an end user in Israel, which was refused in quarter 1. The bulk of dual-use exports from Ireland, including those to Israel, are mainstream business ICT products, both hardware and software - networking, data storage and cybersecurity. They are categorised as dual-use items because they incorporate strong encryption for ICT security purposes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister of State for her good wishes. Exports of dual-use goods have increased phenomenally, which might be good or bad depending on the oversight arrangements we have. In 2023, the value of dual-use exports to Israel spiked to nearly seven times what it was in the previous year. It came down slightly but remained high in 2024. The value of dual-use goods exported in 2022 was €10.7 million. In 2023, as I indicated, it was €70.4 million, and, in 2024, it was €64.3 million. On the figures the Minister of State gave - I do not have the reply in front of me - there seems to be a significant reduction in that figure, which is welcome in a sense. I will look at the figures carefully.

The Minister of State said one application was refused. Will she clarify, as I did not quite catch it, the basis on which it was refused? Respect for human rights and international humanitarian law in the destination country is one of the criteria - I will come back to the others - that were spelled out by the former Minister, Simon Coveney.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I do not have exact details on the reasons the application was refused. I will look for clarity on that and furnish the Deputy with the details. There is extensive engagement between my officials and exporters should any questions or concerns arise regarding any application for any destination, including Israel. If, after engagement, there are any outstanding concerns that the goods being exported will not be used for the stated end use or by the specified end user, as detailed in the application, or if the exporter does not provide enough information on the intended end use for my officials to make an informed decision, the application for a licence is denied. In applying export controls in a robust and transparent way, my Department ensures legitimate business transactions by reputable Irish traders are not damaged in any way, while ensuring exports of controlled goods are thoroughly risk assessed in the context of ongoing conflicts, diversion of goods and humanitarian considerations.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I respect the Minister of State's bona fides and I know she will get back to me. In 2023, our exports of dual-use goods to Israel spiked by seven times, at a time when, in my opinion, genocide was happening and has continued to unfold before our eyes. Back in February 2024, the then Minister, Simon Coveney, said the Department of trade and the Department of Foreign Affairs "review all dual-use export licence applications against the eight assessments set out in [the relevant] EU Council Common Position". These include respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, and the risk of internal repression, in the country of final destination. Certainly, Israel does not comply with that. Other criteria include the internal situation in the country of final destination with respect to tensions or armed conflicts, risks posed to the territory of neighbouring countries and risk of diversion of goods for undesirable uses. They are four of the eight criteria laid down under the EU policy. Can the Minister of State tell me more specifically who carried out the analysis of the licences given and where I can see that analysis?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I reiterate that I will ask the Department, insofar as it can, to furnish the Deputy with much greater detail on the refusal I indicated and the reasons for it. My officials seek real-time geopolitical observations from the Department of foreign affairs in respect of all applications, and those views inform the final decision to grant or deny a licence. The assessment process is rigorous. The officials carry out a series of checks to ensure, insofar as they can, that the item to be exported will be used by the stated end user for the stated end purpose and will not be used or diverted for any other purpose. Ireland remains firmly committed to supporting open, free and responsible trade within a multilateral rules-based international system while ensuring global security and humanitarian concerns are not compromised. Strong export controls are essential to preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, protecting regional security and stability, combating terrorism and protecting human rights.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): I take the opportunity to wish Deputy Connolly the very best of luck in her campaign in the next couple of weeks. I wish her very well.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh maith agat.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Poverty Data

82. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is aware that the measurement 'consistent poverty' obscures the full number of people both at risk of poverty and in material deprivation; if he is aware that 'consistent poverty' fails to account for housing costs; if he will consider using both 'material deprivation' and 'at risk of poverty after housing costs' as alternative measures for future national child poverty targets; if he will ensure all research commissioned on the topic of child poverty utilises both 'material deprivation' and 'at risk of poverty after housing costs' when measuring poverty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50375/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In keeping with my form, this question is fairly straightforward. It is to do with the use of the measurement of consistent poverty, which obscures the full number of people both at risk of poverty and in material deprivation. I hope the Minister tells me he will do what I am asking, which is to consider alternative measures. We all have an interest in tackling poverty but we cannot do that unless we are measuring it properly.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as a ceist. Reducing child poverty is a key priority for the Government. I agree with the Deputy that it is important to use data that is complete, accurate and can be tracked over time. The data on poverty used by my Department is the official data the Central Statistics Office, CSO, publishes in its annual survey on income and living conditions, SILC. The headline measure produced by this survey is consistent poverty, which combines income poverty and material deprivation. The CSO also presents at risk of poverty data on a before and after housing costs basis and by tenure status.

These indicators, together with indicators on material deprivation, are relied on by my Department and reported annually in our social impact monitor, which tracks progress against the national poverty reduction targets. The Department also utilises the data from the minimum essential standard of living reports of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. We fully fund the partnership to produce those reports.

While there is no one measure that adequately captures all facets of poverty, the use of the headline consistent poverty measure is useful in that it combines both those at risk of income-based poverty and those facing deprivation through a lack of basic necessities. This dual approach gives us a valuable insight into the level of social inclusion in Ireland. That is why the consistent poverty measure has long served as the national poverty benchmark. It has been endorsed by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and is used for the national poverty target in the cross-Government social inclusion strategy, the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.

As the Deputy knows, we recently announced a new child poverty target utilising the consistent poverty measure. I will be making the delivery of the new child poverty target of 3% or less, down from its current level of 8.5%, a key objective of the new roadmap for social inclusion action plan to be published in 2026. I am also currently prioritising measures to address child poverty in consideration of budget 2026. I hope that clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The problem is that the level of children in consistent poverty is currently 8.5%, that figure having doubled since 2024. However, the consistent poverty measure, in and of itself, does not account for housing costs. The Minister and I both know that for reasons of Government policy, housing costs are out of control. People who are at risk of poverty or living in consistent poverty are not having the extent of that poverty measured because housing costs are not included in it. These are people who are forced to pay among the highest rents in Europe. If we look at the study from Barnardos, the parents are saying that by the time they pay for housing, in particular, and energy, the cost of which, again, is among the highest in Europe and we are told no energy credits are coming, they have nothing left at the end of the week. If the Minister is not taking housing into consideration, he is missing that

key measurement. He said these measurements are relied on by his Department for the actions it takes. It needs to be measuring all the things that contribute to kids living in poverty.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely agree with the Deputy that we need accurate figures. We have long used the consistent poverty measure as the national poverty benchmark. The recently agreed child poverty target of 3% or less is based on the consistent poverty measure, which is the critical measure of child poverty because it captures income-related and deprivation-related aspects. In addition, we use CSO data on the financial burden of housing costs, while poverty rates by tenure status are reported annually in our social impact monitor. That also tracks progress against national poverty reduction targets. Any approach to measuring poverty rates after housing costs should take into account the supports available through HAP and rent supplement.

We are preparing a new roadmap for social inclusion for 2026 to 2030 and considering the inclusion of CSO SILC data on the at-risk-of-poverty rate before and after housing as an indicator for the new roadmap. I am happy to engage with the Deputy and the social protection committee as we finalise that documentation for publication in early 2026.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Is that the dashboard that will be published in early 2026?

Deputy Dara Calleary: No, it is the new roadmap for inclusion.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Maybe when he comes back in, the Minister can tell me when the dashboard, which will allegedly contain a number of child poverty measurements, will be available. I know it will come from the child poverty unit so is not, strictly speaking, the Minister's Department, but I am sure it will be involved in it. Here is my difficulty. The consistent poverty rate for children is running at 8.5%, double what it was in 2024. When we add in housing costs, we find that 17.6% of children were at risk of poverty in 2024. The Minister is missing a key part of what he should be tackling. I welcome the fact the Minister is open to considering housing costs. They have to be considered. When looking at the whole picture, of course any supports available will be included in that. The doubling in the figure from 8.5% to 17.6% means there is potentially a significant number not being captured.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will revert to the Deputy on the dashboard. There is huge work under way to make it as inclusive and measurable as possible. The unit is open to suggestions on what should be part of the dashboard. It is crucial it be used as a cross-governmental measure. We are looking at the whole area of housing costs. Depending on tenure and on whether a person owns or is renting, it can have a different impact on the figures. We are going through all of that with a view to making a decision on it as we prepare the social inclusion roadmap. That should be published in the first quarter of 2026.

Social Welfare Appeals

83. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Social Protection to provide the number of requests for an oral hearing over the past four years; the number of oral hearings that have been

held virtually, in-person and over the phone, in the past four years, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50021/25]

Deputy Mark Wall: I think we can all agree on the importance of oral hearings as part of the social welfare appeals process. To that end, I ask the Minister to set out the number of requests for oral hearings over the past four years, and the number of oral hearings held virtually, in person and over the phone.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. Oral hearings on social welfare appeals can be held virtually, in person or by phone. In 2024, there were 432 oral hearings, comprising 120 in person, 53 by phone and 259 virtually. The figure has fallen considerably in recent years but that has to be set against the backdrop of a number of things. When a case is assigned to an appeals officer, the officer examines the documentary evidence presented and considers if the appeal can be properly and fairly decided by way of a summary decision. Where there is a conflict in the evidence provided that would materially affect the question under consideration, the appeals officer will consider if the conflict could be resolved at an oral hearing and will make the arrangements for that hearing to take place.

Appeals officers are statutorily independent in the exercise of their powers, including with respect to whether to hold an oral hearing. However, in order to increase transparency around that, the social welfare appeals regulations 2024 came into effect on 28 April 2025. They established for the first time the legal right of an appellant to request an oral hearing. Appeals officers must consider these requests. Where it is decided not to hold an oral hearing, the appeals officer must provide reasons in writing as to why this is the case. The ability to request a hearing and to be provided with reasons as to why a hearing is or is not being held did not exist prior to these regulations.

The new appeals functionality on MyWelfare means appellants can now easily transmit documentation and evidence to the relevant scheme area and the appeals office electronically. This can mean that evidence that previously would not have been available to an appeals officer until an oral hearing can be provided earlier in the process and is resulting in appeals officers being able to decide a higher number of cases on a summary basis.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister for the reply. My concern is that a reply to a parliamentary question from my colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, stated that social welfare held 5,397 oral hearings in 2018 and the Minister has confirmed that the 2024 figure was down to 432. I am sure the Minister gets many requests for appeals. I know my office does. One of the mechanisms my office has used is the appeals process, in particular the oral hearing, because it gives the appellant the chance to meet somebody in person and face to face, to see the whites of their eyes and make sure every part of the evidence they can get out gets out. We seem to have gone back to a reliance on virtual interactions, which is a backward step. I ask the Minister to assure us oral hearings will continue and that where a request is made, even under those regulations, no obstacles to oral hearings are being put in place by the Department.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I can absolutely assure the Deputy that oral appeals will continue. The regulations are now there for people to request them. However, things have changed and the functionality available on MyWelfare.ie gives much more information earlier in the process,

which leads to a situation where the oral hearing is not as important as it may once have been. I assure the Deputy oral appeals will continue to happen and I will continue to monitor the figures. My main focus at the moment is working with the appeals office to get through any backlogs. We have appointed 20 new appeals officers this year and are getting through the backlog.

Deputy Mark Wall: I have to disagree on the importance of oral hearings. Much as virtual contact is good and modern, I deal with many people who cannot come to terms with that new technology. I used to attend 30 to 40 oral hearings. I am sure other Members of the House used to attend them as well. I have hardly attended one in the past two years because of the lack of oral hearings being held. When you are sitting beside somebody and they are putting across their case, they have an independent person - it has to be an independent person who is not medical - and that person sees what the appellant has gone through. That is the importance of oral hearings. That is why we should allow oral hearings in every case where a request has gone in. Virtual is great but, unfortunately, for a large proportion of the people who come through my office, it is not good enough and they are not in a position to use the virtual part of MyWelfare. Oral hearings had and still have a huge part to play in the social welfare appeals process.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not disagree. We have all done oral hearings and they are very important. As the Deputy said, it is about seeing the white of a person's eye and having that interaction. There is a mix of the traditional oral hearing and the other options available to get a decision quicker and get through the process quicker. I assure the Deputy I do not intend to discourage the use of oral hearings. They are an important part of the process.

School Meals Programme

84. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of schools under contract to a supplier (details supplied) under the hot school meals programme; the number of these schools that exclusively cater to additional educational needs; the number that are DEIS schools; the number that are DEIS+ schools; his plan to provide parents of children affected by the cessation of the services with a stipend while a new contractor is being procured; the options for school meal provision for children affected in the meantime; if alternative cold lunches will be subsidised or provided by the Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50376/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The question relates to the sudden cessation of an element of the hot school meals programme. I am specifically interested in the number of schools impacted that are DEIS schools or that exclusively cater for children with additional educational needs. The Minister has to be aware that this news came as a bolt out of the blue for parents. It seemed there was no contingency in place when it happened. Will the Minister outline the steps taken and the contingency that will be in place for the future?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. As she knows, the hot school meals programme was established to ensure that children across Ireland have access to safe, nutritious meals during the school day. It is a core Government commitment to support children's health, well-

being, and educational outcomes. The programme is being made available to all primary schools before the end of this year. This will allow 3,200 schools, which cater for approximately 550,000 children, to avail of hot school meals currently provided by 300 suppliers across the country. Those suppliers are a diverse group of organisations from the large national supplier and regional suppliers to local restaurants and food outlets, as well as Meals on Wheels groups, which we will get the chance to discuss later. The advice my Department has given to schools is that they can procure school meals from any provider they wish as long as they meet the standards set out in the procurement documentation. The evidence is that the vast majority of small school meals suppliers are capable of meeting these standards.

The companies referred to in the Deputy's question, The Lunch Bag and Fresh Today, withdrew their school meals service at very short notice from 79 schools. Four of these schools are special schools and 38 are DEIS schools. It is highly regrettable that the providers acted in this manner, giving virtually no notice to the school communities. The Department immediately contacted the affected schools. They were sent information on 4 September advising them of the options open to them, including procuring a new hot school meals supplier quickly or serving cold lunches in the meantime. Many of them have already procured alternative suppliers, while others are in process. The Department is engaging with the schools that have not responded, to provide support. The programme is designed so that meals are provided by contracted food business operators. This ensures responsibility for food safety and legislative compliance is placed on those professional providers and not on the schools. This also ensures children benefit from a reliable, high-quality service while protecting schools from having to take on responsibilities more appropriate to the food business operators.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We have known for months that at least one in five parents skip meals or reduce their own portions to ensure their children have enough to eat. That underlines the importance of this programme. The Minister's colleague, An Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, has said he will personally intervene in the case of one school in Cork. I have just read a newspaper article in which he confirms that. I do not think a nationally available hot school meals programme is appropriate for that type of parish-pump politics. Deputy Calleary, as the Minister, should be intervening directly to ensure that where kids are not getting a hot meal, it is made available. The Minister said his Department is engaging to provide support. Will he outline in his next response what form that is taking and if extra funding has been provided? My understanding is this information was available to the Department in advance of it being available to parents and that there was something of a time lag. Will the Minister outline that? Given that we know there are children living in poverty, and consistent poverty, access to a hot school meal is more important than ever before.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are agreed that access to a hot school meal is vital, and that is what we are trying to secure. My Department officials have worked incredibly hard since we were informed by the school communities that the companies were withdrawing. We have set up a new process. My officials are regularly in touch with the school communities involved. Many of them have secured a replacement supplier, because there are other suppliers who approached my Department to say they would step in. There are other schools where it is harder to get a replacement provider, but my Department is working with school communities to make the replacement procurement process as easy as possible and in the interim to provide

a cold meal. That is not the optimum. I want hot school meals to be provided. It has also given us an opportunity to further pursue Deputy O'Reilly's suggestion from a previous round of questions regarding local providers, such as community food providers, Meals on Wheels and others. Some schools are working with that as well. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure the legislative responsibility for food safety is paramount. That needs to be the responsibility of the operator, not the school community. That is why we have had to make some of those changes.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will give the Minister another chance to tell me what the timeline was regarding when the Department knew about the service withdrawal and when the parents knew. This came as a bolt out of the blue. When you are living on a low income or a fixed income and you are trying to feed kids, you plan ahead. Parents had planned ahead on the basis that their kids would be getting a hot meal in the middle of the day. That has not happened for many. I am interested to know the details of the timeline between when the Minister's Department found out and when parents found out. Many parents had absolutely no warning and no chance to put contingency arrangements in place. Indeed, there was possibly no money to finance the kids to bring food to school. If the Minister does not have it, his Department should provide, in writing, a clear timeline and an explanation of why parents got absolutely no warning. I would also like to know what is being done to ensure this does not happen again, since we all agree on the importance of kids being able to access a hot school meal in the middle of the day.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not want to give the Deputy inaccurate information. I will provide her with the timeline. I can assure her that there was no delay. We were not informed by the supplier; we were informed by school communities. As soon as we became aware of it, we put the processes in place. The members of the team in the Department of Social Protection are continuing to work incredibly hard, for example by making phone calls very late into the evening. I want to thank them. I will provide the Deputy with a timeline. I have asked my officials to look at the make-up of those suppliers to ensure this situation does not happen again. This is not the Department's fault or the school's fault. These companies withdrew at very short notice. I will provide the accurate timeline, but the notice to school communities was a matter of days. In that context I have asked that we look at the contract documentation so this situation does not happen again, and school communities, teachers, boards of management and especially parents and children are not left in this situation again.

Programme for Government

85. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to introduce a cost of disability payment to help address the significant additional costs of having a disability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50570/25]

Deputy Liam Quaide: Will the Minister provide some detail on the Government's commitment to introduce a permanent cost of disability payment to help to address the significant additional costs that come with having a disability and impose financial hardship on many of our disabled citizens?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. The programme for Government includes a range of commitments in relation to support for people with disabilities. This includes a commitment to introduce a permanent annual cost of disability support payment with a view to incrementally increasing this payment. As we know, addressing the cost of disability is not a question of income support alone. The delivery of and access to services is also key. We need all Departments and agencies of Government to work together to address the issue in a comprehensive manner. This is why the Taoiseach has established the Cabinet committee on disability with its own dedicated programme office in the Department of the Taoiseach. In addition, the recently published National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 takes a whole-of-government approach. The publication of this strategy sets out specific actions being led by named Departments, including, for my own Department, the responsibility to lead a strategic focus network on the cost of disability. The work of this network, which will include people with disabilities and advocates, will inform the approach to be taken in delivering on the programme for Government commitment. I have asked my officials to expedite this work with a view to bringing a proposal to the Government in the first half of next year.

In the meantime, I am engaged with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, to explore what might be feasible in the forthcoming budget. As the Deputy will be aware, the last number of budgets included some specific measures to assist disabled people with the rising cost of living. As part of budget 2025, for example, a €400 disability support grant for people in receipt of disability allowance, invalidity pension or blind pension was paid in November 2024 together with a €12 increase in the maximum personal rate of weekly disability payments from January 2025. We have taken a range of other measures to help people with disabilities to secure and maintain employment. We are continuing to work through our commitments in the national human rights strategy for disabled people.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister for his response. A recent report from the Economic and Social Research Institute and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission shows that the additional costs faced by disabled people are now estimated to be between 52% and 59% of disposable income. For those with more severe disabilities, that rises to as much as 93%. These costs arise across essential areas, including transport, medicines, specialised equipment, the need for personal assistance and care hours. The report also highlights how traditional poverty measurements underestimate the levels of deprivation experienced by disabled people as they fail to take account of these unavoidable additional costs. This is a stark reflection of how far behind we are in providing meaningful support to disabled citizens.

I urge the Minister to take the evidence seriously and to introduce a specific cost-of-disability payment in the upcoming budget. People with disabilities cannot be expected to wait any longer.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is a programme for Government commitment. As I said, we are looking at the best way to implement it and we will be working with people with disabilities and their advocates to assess it.

I have looked at the ESRI report. As the Deputy said, it estimates that the average cost of a disability ranges from €25,376 to €28,860 depending on the severity. That is much higher than other reports. We are trying to work with the ESRI to understand how it reached that figure.

The most important people in this conversation are those with disabilities and their advocates. I want to engage with them in order that I can understand what will work best for them. I will see to it that this payment is implemented during the lifetime of the Government, and we will seek to ensure it is adequate.

We are continuing our other work in this space. I am focused on assisting people with disabilities who want to get back into employment and on assisting employers to support their employees with disabilities. We are looking at wage subsidies and income supports as well.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The introduction of a cost-of-disability payment has been proposed but not acted upon for far too long. Detailed research and costings were carried out by the National Disability Authority as far back as 2006 and updated in the comprehensive Indecon report of 2021. Both reports clearly demonstrated the significant additional costs that come with living with a disability. These findings have been consistently echoed by the Disability Federation of Ireland, which has long advocated for a permanent payment that recognises these unavoidable expenses.

A cost-of-disability payment would represent a structural long-term recognition of the daily additional costs of disability, covering such areas as transport, heating, medical needs, equipment and more. This is a matter of basic fairness and equality. I call on the Government to set out without delay a firm timeline for the introduction of a cost-of-disability payment and to make provision for it in the upcoming budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have given the Deputy a sense of the timeline and of the work that is under way. This is priority work in our Department. I hope to bring a firm proposal to the Government in the first half of 2026. As I said, I am engaging strongly with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, about budget 2026 provisions in the meantime. I do not intend to do nothing in this budget. We are working with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, around that. I can absolutely guarantee that there is no point in our publishing a human rights strategy for disabled people which takes a whole-of-government approach, without implementing measures that make a difference. A cost-of-disability payment is one of those measures. It will be implemented during the lifetime of this Government. However, it is important that we do not impose a model on those who will be in receipt of it. I want to engage with and hear directly from people with disabilities and their advocates about exactly what kind of model will work. I will put that work and time in. I assure the Deputy it is a priority for me to introduce this payment.

Pension Provisions

86. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of former An Post employees whose initial applications for pensions were refused in each of the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51086/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are major problems with pensions at the moment. People have to fight for their pensions. Aer Lingus pensioners come to me who are still not being paid their full pensions. Pensioners come to me who say that 70,000 of them have received letters stating they may have been overpaid on their pensions. They are living in fear about that. This

question relates to An Post pensioners who have been left in limbo about their pension rights. A High Court case is coming up, which seems like it is looking to deny them the income they should have as pensioners. How many pensioners are in that situation? When will it be resolved?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The contributory State pension is funded by contributions paid into the Social Insurance Fund. In general, people will qualify for the contributory State pension if they are aged 66 or over and have between 520 and 2080, or more, reckonable contributions, of which 520 must be full-rate pay related social insurance, PRSI, contributions. There are no issues relating to An Post employees who meet the qualifying conditions for the contributory State pension.

Contributions paid at class B, C or D, that is, those made by public servants recruited before 6 April 1995, are known as modified or reduced-rate contributions. They are not qualifying contributions for the contributory State pension. This is because those contributors pay less in social insurance contributions in return for fewer social insurance benefits. For example, class D contributors currently pay a contribution at the rate of 1% on their weekly earnings up to €1,443 and 4.1% on weekly earnings above that amount. Their employers pay a contribution of 2.45% on all employee earnings. In contrast, class A contributors pay a contribution of 4.1% on their weekly earnings. Their employers pay a contribution of 8.9% where employees' weekly earnings are €527 or less, and 11.15% where employees' weekly earnings exceed €527. Class A contributors have access to the full range of social insurance benefits.

Given that social insurance contributions are paid over people's working lifetime, during which time they may have had multiple, and in some case overlapping, employments, been awarded credited or attributed contributions or paid for voluntary contributions, it is difficult to associate entitlement to a benefit with employment with a particular employer. This information is also not required to assess eligibility for a pension. The Department does not therefore categorise or record applications for the State pension by prior employer name, which is the information the Deputy is looking for.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A pensioner came into my office recently who was one of six workers who started work on 25 July 1994. The rule, which the Minister mentioned, was that anyone who started before 6 April 1995 and worked on a continuous basis in an established position should be on class D PRSI contributions. The State made its decision. The scope section of the Department agreed with the decision. The class D contribution means people were entitled to retire at 60 and receive the full State pension. However, an appeal was made by An Post. Let us think about this. These are workers who committed their lives to the service of An Post. They paid a rate of PRSI which means they are entitled to a decent standard of pension on retirement and a semi-State company is in court fighting this decision. As a result, these pension entitlements are in limbo. The pensioners cannot find out what their entitlements are because of an outstanding court case brought by An Post. How come the Department cannot work out their entitlements? Why are they the subject of a court case? Will the Minister seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I cannot comment on a court case, as the Deputy will understand. An Post operational matters are a matter for An Post and the relevant Minister. I have gone

through the reasons we do not keep this information in the Department and how difficult it is to categorise or record applications for State pensions by prior employer name. However, if the Deputy wants to contact me later with a specific request that was not apparent in the question, I will try to address it. I want to be helpful, but I cannot get involved in an ongoing court case. However, I do want to be helpful to the Deputy and his constituent.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am happy to share any information I have about the constituent, but the question on the Order Paper asks how many pensioners are in a similar situation. This is not a criminal case that An Post is involved in, so I do not see why the Minister cannot give a view about the entitlement and rights of a pensioner. I know of at least 30 pensioners who are in a similar situation to this pensioner. It is my understanding that it might be the case throughout elements of the public service. Perhaps people who are employed by local authorities could be in a situation where there is confusion about what pension entitlement they have. This is a serious situation. For example, as part of the court case, papers have been requested from An Post to help the case and An Post is refusing to provide the papers, which is slowing down the case.

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These workers - men and women - are getting older. This is a live situation that has to be resolved. It cannot be allowed to meander and languish in the High Court for years.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have outlined the position regarding that information. The Department does not categorise or record applications for State pensions by prior employer name. Issues relating to An Post are a matter for the Minister for communications, who has political responsibility. It is our role in the Department to lay down the rules, set out how it can be done and make payments in relation to pensions. It is a role we take very seriously, but specific issues as to how companies deal with their employees are a matter for individual companies. I am happy to try and pursue this further for the Deputy, but, equally, whether it is criminal or civil in nature, it is not the role of the Oireachtas to get involved in a court case.

Social Welfare Code

87. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans for phasing out the means test entirely for the carer's allowance during the lifetime of this Government, as per the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51028/25]

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: This question relates to an issue that goes to the very heart of compassion, dignity and fairness in our society, namely the support we provide for family carers. Across Cork North-West and, indeed, every parish in Ireland there are countless people who quietly dedicate their lives to caring for a loved one, whether that is a child with additional needs, an elderly parent or a partner who requires daily support. Will the Minister provide an update on the programme for Government commitment to phasing out the means test entirely for the carers allowance during the lifetime of this Government?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We all acknowledge the valuable role that family carers play. The Government remains fully committed to supporting carers in that role. The carer's allowance

scheme is the main scheme by which the Department provides income support to carers. This year, expenditure on the carer's allowance scheme is estimated to be over €1.24 billion. There are currently almost 102,000 people in receipt of carer's allowance.

The programme for Government contains a commitment to significantly increase the income disregards for carer's allowance in each budget with a view to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of the Government. This is a major change to the carer's allowance and to the Irish social welfare system generally. It is important that we make progress in a sustainable manner without limiting our scope to support other vulnerable groups in society.

Recent progress was made in July when the weekly income disregard for carer's allowance increased from €450 to €625 for a single person and from €900 to €1,250 for carers with a spouse or partner. This amounts to cumulative increases to the disregards of €292.50 and €585 respectively, or 88%, since June 2022. These increases mean that a carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €69,000 can retain their full carer's payment. Even with an income of €97,000, they can retain a partial payment. It is important to note that my Department provides non-means-tested supports to carers, including carer's benefit, domiciliary care allowance and the annual carer's support grant of €2,000.

I assure the Deputy about my work in this area. We will continue to advance the programme for Government commitments in relation to care and, in particular, in respect of the means test. We will do so in a sustainable manner and over the lifetime of the Government.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I welcome the Minister's response and thank him for outlining the plans to phase out the means test for carer's allowance over the lifetime of the Government. Furthermore, I acknowledge the implementation of increased disregards for the carer's allowance in recent months. This has assisted many carers to get an increased allowance or, indeed, to qualify for one for the very first time. The phasing out of the means test will send a powerful message that Ireland recognises the irreplaceable work of carers and that we will not place unnecessary barriers in the way of those who give so much of themselves. These carers make enormous personal sacrifices. They often have to step back from work, set aside career ambitions and reconfigure their entire lives around the need of their loved ones. They do so not out of duty but out of love. Their work is immeasurable in human terms but also has undeniable social and economic value. I acknowledge that changes like this take time, that they require significant resources and that they must be implemented carefully. I believe, however, that there is a strong recognition on the part of the general public and the Government of the need to improve support for carers.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely agree with everything the Deputy said about the work of carers and family carers right across the country. That is why significant improvements have been made and we will continue to make them. I am engaging with the Minister for public expenditure around budget 2026 with a view to progressing further supports for carers.

On the work carers do, the point I would always make is that without that work there would be considerable extra pressure on our health system and on other parts of government. Without the commitment of carers, as the Deputy said, based on love and family, this country would be a lot worse off. That is why we have considerably changed and enhanced the investment in carers in recent years. That is why we have commitment in the programme for Government to

phase out the means test which, as I said, is a major change in social welfare policy. I will ensure that is completed during the lifetime of the Government.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for his commitment today on this very important issue. Budget 2026 will be the start of the process of ending the means test for carers. I very much welcome that. I hope we can work towards that goal over the lifetime of this Government.

The Minister mentioned how there would be an extreme cost to the taxpayer with increased costs to the health system if carers did not exist. The contribution of carers is not something that should be measured by a bank balance. It is measured by the hours of care given, the love provided and the burdens carried for all carers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 88 taken with Written Answers.

Pension Provisions

89. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Social Protection to review the contributory pension entitlement of someone with fewer than 520 contributions; and to grant those recipients a pro rata pension. [50762/25]

Deputy Edward Timmins: I ask the Minister to review the contributory pension entitlement for someone with fewer than 520 contributions and look to give them a *pro rata* pension. This policy imposes a cliff-edge cut-off. It is very unfair. Someone with 519 contributions gets nothing but 520 would entitle them to get between €99 and €120 per week, and sometimes much more.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy may be aware, the previous Government established the Commission on Pensions to review the State pension system and make recommendations for its future. The commission strongly supported the retention of the qualifying criterion of 520 paid contributions. In part, this is because the actuarial value of the contributory State pension is currently estimated at approximately just under €400,000, so it is reasonable to require people claiming a contributory pension to have made at least 520 paid contributions over the term of their working life to qualify for a payment. Once a person reaches the qualifying criteria of 520 paid contributions, their rate of payment is determined by their total number of contributions, paid and credited, and the applicable calculation method.

In December 2023, legislation was enacted to introduce a series of landmark reforms to the State pension system in response to the commission's other recommendations. A key measure was the introduction of a flexible pension system. This new system is about providing people with choice. People will still be able to retire at 66 and draw down their pension as they always have. Additionally, they may now choose to defer claiming their contributory state pension up to age 70 and receive an actuarially based increase in their weekly payment rate.

People can decide for themselves what best suits their needs and circumstances. For example, a person who reaches age 66 who does not have sufficient contributions to qualify for a contributory State pension may be able to use this period to continue to work to establish entitlement or increase their level of payment. Where a person does not satisfy the conditions to qualify for the contributory pension or qualifies for less than the maximum rate, they may instead qualify for the means-tested non-contributory pension with a maximum payment equivalent to over 96% of the contributory rate.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I also want to address the fact that the home caring scheme does not allow for any additional credits. This is unfair as a mother often gives up work in order to care for her children and is given no increased credits for this time. Can this be revisited as it penalises a parent who makes the decision to give up work, a decision which actually saves the State money?

Deputy Dara Calleary: One of the major reform measures was the enhanced State pension provision for those who have been caring for incapacitated dependents of 20 years or more. It is being done by attributing the equivalent of pay contributions to such long-term carers to cover gaps in their contribution records for the period in which they were caring for an incapacitated dependant. The measure is available to those who reach State pension age from 1 January 2024 and to those currently over the pension age.

In September 2023, we launched an online system for people to register for long-term caring contributions. We continue to work with people on this. This is the first time that a pension provision has been made for carers. This discussion follows that with Deputy O'Shea just now, on supporting carers and giving them the backup they need in their older years.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I want to address the homemaker's scheme, which is often confused with the home carer's scheme. This only applies from 6 April 1994. Again, this date is an arbitrary cliff edge. It discriminates against people who cared for children who were 12 years of age before that date. It is completely unfair and illogical. It should apply to all caring for children and not only those cared for after 6 April 1994. Similarly, the home caring periods are only applicable from 6 April 1994. Will the Minister look at including all years prior to 6 April 1994?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have a range of supports available. I am happy to consider the proposal made by Deputy Timmins, but we must also ensure the State pension system is sustainable. The demographics of our country are changing very much as we speak. At present, we have four workers for every person over the age of 66. By the time we get to 2050, however, which is not that far away, this figure will be down to two. In that context, we will have to make decisions that ensure the long-term sustainability of our pension system in order that it will continue to support those who need it in the years to come, especially as those demographic changes happen. We have increased PRSI rates with regard to employees, employers and the self-employed across the Social Insurance Fund in order to sustain it. With that in mind, I will ask the officials to look at this proposal and come back to Deputy Timmins.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Many of these people will have passed away by 2050.

Pension Provisions

90. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to develop a pension solution for foster carers, in recognition of the enormous contribution they make to vulnerable children in our society, as committed to in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50587/25]

Deputy Joe Neville: What are the Minister's plans to develop a pension solution for foster carers in recognition of the enormous contribution they make to vulnerable children in our society, as committed to in the programme for Government?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Government acknowledges the very important role that foster carers play. We remain fully committed to supporting them. The contributory State pension system already provides a range of measures to recognise caring periods outside of paid employment, such as PRSI credits, homemaking disregards and home caring periods, to recognise caring periods of up to 20 years outside of paid employment in the calculation of our payment rate. Foster carers are entitled to benefit from these measures on the same basis as other carers and parents. If they are not in receipt of child benefit they can still qualify for the homemaker's scheme or home caring periods, provided the caring periods are confirmed by Tusla.

Since January 2024 long-term carer's contributions can be awarded to a person who has cared for an incapacitated person for a period of 20 years or more. These contributions are treated in the same way as paid contributions for contributory State pension entitlement and can be used to fill any gap in a person's contribution record, including satisfying the minimum 520 contributions required for eligibility. Foster carers who have cared for an incapacitated dependent or dependents for more than 20 years also benefit from this provision.

These measures assist for carers to access the State pension system in the same way as biological or adoptive parents, while ensuring the system remains sustainable. Any future change to the State pension system will have been considered in the overall policy and budgetary context, including, as we have just discussed, the sustainability of the Social Insurance Fund.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his response. I am especially conscious of the words in the programme for Government whereby we will seek to examine the pension provision for foster carers to acknowledge their long-term commitment and ensure valued support after years of fostering. I am very conscious that 4,000 foster carers in Ireland provide a service which, as with services provided by other people in this area, benefits the State and makes a difference to individual lives. They help people not only during the time they are with them but also for the rest of their lives. They give them a stable environment which they may not have had otherwise. Deputy Timmins outlined the gender balance issue because most typically it is women who look after children in these situations. We want to ensure they are looked after and that there is fairness and equity in the scheme in this way. As I have said, we have a plan to do it. I thank the Minister for his comment. I hope it is something we can look into in future.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As Deputy Neville knows, there is a commitment in the programme for Government to look at the long-term pension provision for foster carers. The Department is engaging with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, which has line responsibility and operational management for foster caring, and with Tusla. We will engage with other stakeholders as necessary in terms of looking at the commitment to see how we can operationalise it.

I absolutely assure Deputy Neville that within the Department we are very aware of the very important work of foster carers. This is why this year I expanded the back to school clothing and footwear allowance to specifically include foster parents, who had been directly excluded from the scheme until then. I will continue to work in the Department to ensure we have the best supports available. I plan to have a meeting with Foster Care Ireland in the coming weeks.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his very genuine response and for his commitment. As he outlined, he is very aware of the contribution that foster carers make. He has demonstrated his knowledge on the topic and his willingness to engage further in the coming weeks and during in his term as Minister. It is something we will continue to work on together and I will follow up on it. I thank the Minister for answering the question so clearly and with a depth of knowledge and understanding of the issue.

School Meals Programme

91. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of schools enrolled in the school meals scheme in 2025; the percentage of waste analysis has been done in these schools; and the nature of the reporting mechanism. [50836/25]

Deputy Joe Neville: How many schools are enrolled in the school meals scheme? Has an analysis been done of the waste in schools? Will the Minister outline the nature of any reporting mechanism in this regard?

Deputy Dara Calleary: As we discussed earlier, the objective of the school meals programme is to provide regular nutritious food to children to support them in taking full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement. In budget 2025, it was announced that the hot school meals scheme would be extended to all remaining primary schools in 2025. By the end of this year, approximately 3,700 schools and 682,000 children will be eligible for the school meals programme.

Under the school meals programme, the primary relationship is between the school and the supplier. The Department provides the funding for the meals directly to each school. It is the responsibility of a school board to administer the programme in its school building, including handling the procurement process in accordance with the rules and guidelines set out by the schools procurement unit of the Department of Education and Youth.

Wherever food is eaten, there will always be the challenge of waste and packaging. Prior to the school meals programme it may have been sandwiches wrapped in cellophane or plastic water and fruit juice bottles sometimes left unopened and uneaten at the end of a school bag.

Under the school meals programme this issue is perhaps more evident than before. Therefore, it is clear, as stipulated by the schools procurement unit, that the school meal supplier is responsible for operating policies that progressively address environmental considerations, including waste and packaging. In addition, under tender documentation requirements, the supplier shall make all reasonable efforts to minimise adverse environmental impact in the methods of service delivery and in the materials used. We do not collect, and we do not have access to, the details of the wastage from school meals. This is managed at school level in accordance with the relative contract. However, I have recently made funding available to the Department of Health to employ a dietician, who will be based in that Department, to examine the nutritional content of school meals and to look at the waste issues. It is clear from feedback from colleagues and schools that waste is an issue we need to look at.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his response. I welcome the work that has been going into this and the efforts that this Government and the previous Government have made in putting forward the hot meals programme. Ultimately, it is there to provide meals to people who might not be in a situation to get them otherwise. This is definitely something we need to encourage. It is a great idea but we do need to monitor waste. In fairness, the Minister's team is working on that. As I have said, the Minister is providing the budget for 682,000 students in 3,700 schools. That is a huge effort and a huge contribution from the State to those children's daily lives. However, as I have said, it is important that we get feedback from the schools that we can analyse to help improve the process they are engaged in.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: On a related note, in the context of waste within the hot school meals programme, I understand the relationship is between the school and the provider but the Minister's Department issues guidelines and those guidelines refer to things like portion size and calories. Will the Minister issue some guidelines regarding age appropriateness? A child of four does not eat the same portion size as a child of 12. They just do not. If there are to be guidelines and guidance issued in relation to waste, this would be very appropriate to include because, at the one end, you have a child who is not getting enough and, at the other end, you have a child who is getting too much. You cannot ask them to meet up and swap over so that kind of guidance needs to be issued. If the Minister is going to look at waste and get feedback from schools, perhaps he would consider asking that question as well. He might also give guidance to the providers regarding right-sizing the portion sizes.

Deputy John Connolly: One issue that pertains to this was brought to my attention last week. It pertains to a number of schools in the Connemara region. Unfortunately, due to the upgrading of guidelines over the summer preventing food from being heated or cooked on site, a number of operators are no longer providing a service to these schools, which has resulted in the loss of the service for the children and families there. The schools are trying to source a new provider but they are having difficulty in doing so. The alteration of the guidelines has caused one or two concerns we need to look at.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Deputy O'Reilly is spot-on regarding waste. I get that feedback all the time. A five-year-old should not be getting the same portion as a 14-year-old. That is something I am going to engage with the dietitian on. The procurement of school meals is done

through the Department of education. We have a school meals working group and I have asked it to look at the whole area of waste.

The second issue relating to waste is around menu choices. The challenge is always to get children to eat healthily. We are trying to ensure that, in the analysis we are doing of the diet and nutrition side, the food will still be attractive and tasty for children to eat to ensure they get the nutrition.

To respond to Deputy Connolly, we discussed earlier the issue of a particular group of suppliers withdrawing services. There has been no major change to the procurement guidelines for existing schools. The procurement guidelines have been updated for new schools. The guidelines are based on food safety, food health and ensuring that a situation does not arise that could be challenged for whatever reason. They also ensure that responsibility for the food is not on the school, but on the food provider.

Departmental Schemes

92. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of active participants in the fish assist scheme in each county, in tabular form; to consider an increase in the rate of payment under the fish assist scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50828/25]

Deputy John Connolly: What is the number of participants in the fish assist scheme? How many are there per county? Could we get that information? In light of budget 2026, will the Minister look at the scheme to see if it could be made more attractive for more participants?

Deputy Dara Calleary: My Department provides the fish assist support, which is available to self-employed fishers on a low income under the means-tested jobseeker's allowance scheme. It is based on the conditions and rate of payment under the farm assist scheme.

The fish assist scheme provides favourable treatment to self-employed fishers compared with other self-employed workers through additional income disregards and entitlement to secondary benefits. For example, under the jobseeker's allowance, self-employed income is assessed at 100%. This is reduced to 70% under the fish assist and farm assist schemes. Child disregards also apply that do not exist for jobseeker's allowance.

My Department also has responsibility for the rural social scheme, which provides income support for those engaged in farming and fishing who have an entitlement to specified social welfare payments. Participants work 19.5 hours per week providing services that benefit rural communities and receive a top-up on their social welfare payment.

Fish assist is a demand-led scheme. There are currently 43 people in receipt of fish assist. These are based in counties Donegal, Galway, Mayo, Sligo, Kerry, Cork, Waterford and Wexford. I will provide the Deputy with a table showing the breakdown per county. He will be interested to know that, of that total of 43, there are nine recipients of fish assist in Galway. Consideration and decisions in relation to any social protection rates as part of budget 2026 will be taken in the context of the overall funding available. The negotiations continue.

Deputy John Connolly: I thank the Minister. It is quite a low number of participants considering we are an island nation. Fishing has been a traditional means of earning a living and sustaining some vibrancy in coastal communities in this country for centuries. The number the Minister has given us as regards people availing of this scheme is an indicator of the number of people involved in the industry in general. That is a matter for another debate on another occasion.

One of the things we could look at in trying to ensure people continue in this trade and craft is the other small marine-based trades and industries that could avail of fish assist or for which a similar scheme could be introduced. I think particularly of seaweed harvesting. One of the things about the fish assist scheme that prevents people from also participating in seaweed harvesting is that any income above £1000, that is, €1,270, gained from seaweed harvesting eliminates the opportunity to avail of the fish assist scheme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I was surprised at the low numbers on the scheme myself. I have asked my officials to interrogate those numbers and to make sure there is awareness of the fish assist scheme in the communities where fishers are based. We will work on such an awareness programme. I will revert to the Deputy with regard to the provisions on seaweed, which he has discussed with me previously. We have a range of supports in place. In addition to fish assist, there is the rural social scheme, which I have mentioned, and other provisions. I wish to acknowledge that. I will absolutely work with the Deputy on promoting the fish assist scheme and, indeed, the farm assist scheme to ensure those who may be entitled to the payment are fully aware that these schemes are open to them.

Deputy John Connolly: I again ask the Minister to look at that low threshold for seaweed harvesters. The income threshold for seaweed harvesters who might wish to also participate in the fish assist scheme is very low. It has not changed since the mid-nineties. It is €1,270. Taking inflation over the years into account, we could look at increasing that figure. The equivalent figure today might be €6,000 or €7,000. That would not be a regressive step at all but quite a positive one. Failing that, perhaps we could look at some other type of scheme akin to the fish assist scheme for seaweed harvesters that would be purely for their own industry and trade.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We will certainly engage with the Deputy on that. One of the difficulties in relation to seaweed harvesting is that it continues to be a very informal part of the economy meaning it is very difficult to get statistics and measurements we can stand over as regards those participating in it and earning from it, supply chains and so on. We have looked at it. I have followed up with my officials based on the Deputy's previous representations. We will continue to do so to see what is the best possible support for communities involved in fishing and marine activities.

Public Sector Staff

93. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Social Protection if his attention has been drawn to the classification of employees of State and semi-State bodies (details supplied). [39838/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am frustrated by the Minister's answer on the pensioners who have worked in An Post for decades who are being given a reduced pension. It is an incredibly serious issue. It determines the standard of living these pensioners have. Given the Minister's previous answer on this matter, it seems like he is outsourcing a decision to the High Court. It is the responsibility of the Government to set out the rights of pensioners clearly. It is wrong for the Government to come in here and tell the House that the High Court will sort out this particular misclassification. Will the Government take responsibility for this classification problem?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Not for the first time, the Deputy has inaccurately represented what I have said. I did not say that we are outsourcing this to the High Court or we are leaving it to the High Court to sort this out. I said it is not my role to get involved in a case that is before the High Court. Let me be very clear on that. I did not outsource it to anybody. Were I to get involved in a case before the court, the Deputy would probably be one of the first to have a go for getting involved.

On the question, the insurability of public service employees, including local or other public authority workers, is provided for in the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 and SI 312 of 1996. Most public servants employed before 6 April 1995 were classified as modified rate class B or class D social insurance contributors. Public servants recruited on or after 6 April 1995 are liable for the standard rate class A of PRSI. Modified rate contributors pay a lower rate of PRSI, but do not have the entitlement to some benefits, including the State pension, illness benefits and the treatment benefit scheme.

In some cases, people employed in the public service before April 1995 were already classified at class A for social insurance purposes. They are mainly people employed in what are known as unestablished positions. Some of these staff who were subsequently appointed after April 1995 to an established position have sought to be reclassified at the modified rate. This is mainly because they believe it will help to grant them access to an employer's occupational pension scheme. In some cases, there is a belief that, even if they are reclassified to a modified rate, they can retain access to class A benefits. This is not the case. In addition, access to employer occupational pension schemes is governed by their own scheme rules. Social insurance classification is not necessarily a feature of these rules. Having said that, it is the case that in certain circumstances public servants-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is currently a case before the High Court. The Minister is in charge of the law at the moment. He quoted the Act determining the situation. There is confusion about the Act. It is obviously not doing what it is meant to do in clearly delineating the different responsibilities people have under the different classes. That is a problem.

The Minister is handing over the decision-making process to the court. He could change the law to clear up the current position. An Post is also a semi-State organisation and operates under the Government's policy and law. Scope is a State agency. It operates under the Government's policy and law. It is the Government's pension law in question that is problematic. I have no doubt that this will last for years; these men and women will find

themselves before the High Court in two, three or four years' time. Some will have to pay costs, which can be extremely high, having taken cases against a semi-State organisation.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We discussed this earlier. The Deputy's concern is with An Post. We do not have any information, and I have gone through the reasons why we in the Department do not possess the information the Deputy is seeking.

On Scope, I will engage with it on its decision-making in this space and provide the Deputy with further information on that. It is not just a question of an easy change in the law. Our pension law is incredibly complex. We have already had discussions on the sustainability of the pension system. I do not want anyone to lose out. I do not want any pensioner or anybody who will be entitled to be a pensioner to lose out, but the laws are complex and are not as simple as the Deputy makes them out to be. Changing the law is even less simple than the Deputy makes it out to be.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: If this was an isolated incident, there would be some excuse for it. The truth of the matter is that we know there are dozens, potentially hundreds, of people who will be affected by this.

Regarding An Post, a group of retired workers had to hold a national day of action in Dublin before the Dáil broke for its summer recess to protest the unfair pension cap. It was put in place due to the financial crisis in 2008. I understand, admit and accept this is a separate case to the case we have discussed, but in this situation pensioners have had their pensions significantly reduced because of an emergency action taken after the 2008 crisis. Other emergency restrictions imposed on public services were removed many years ago, yet these men and women, aged in their 70s and 80s, are suffering from financial hardship because of the cap. I ask the Minister to look into that particular issue.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I said, I do not want anybody to lose out or not get the pension to which he or she is entitled. The details provided in the Deputy's question today are not as detailed as those provided previously. I will ask my officials to engage with Deputy's office later today in order to give him the information we have and can share with him. I again make the point that we do not have very detailed information on employers and employer categorisation.

Social Welfare Eligibility

94. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to reform the disability allowance payment and remove anomalies in the current means test for the payment. [50675/25]

Deputy John Connolly: I wish to ask the Minister about the commitment in the programme for Government to examine the anomalies in the means test for disability payments. Have we progressed that work?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Supporting disabled people is a key priority for me and for the Government. That is why the programme for Government contains a range of measures to support disabled people. One of these commitments was the publication of a new disability strategy. I am very pleased that we recently published the national human rights strategy for disabled people. This strategy sets out a whole-of-Government approach to disability, with its focus on ensuring the full participation of disabled people in Irish society.

Disability allowance is my Department's primary disability-related social assistance scheme. The payment is subject to a medical assessment, a means test and a habitual residency requirement. The means test takes account of the income a person or couple has in terms of cash, property other than the family home and capital. Applying a means test ensures that the recipient has an income need and that scarce resources are targeted to those with the greatest need. This approach supports an economically sustainable and socially equitable allocation of scarce resources.

Disability allowance has one of the highest capital disregards operated by my Department. A recipient can have up to €50,000 in savings and still receive the full rate of payment, compared to €20,000 for most other social welfare payments. Over the last four budgets, the Government has progressively improved payment rates and income disregards for disabled people. The weekly payment rates for disability allowance have increased by €41 per week in that time. The earnings disregard has increased by almost 38% since budget 2021, from €120 to €165. This enables those in receipt of disability allowance to earn more without having a negative impact on their payment. It means that people can earn up to €165 per week and keep their payment in full and can earn up to €517.60 per week and keep a portion of their payment.

We know that disabled people are at a much higher risk of poverty, have lower employment rates and a higher cost of living and we want to address that. The national human rights strategy has tasked my Department with dealing a strategic focus network, including people with disabilities and their advocates, on the cost of disability. The work of this network, which I have asked my officials to expedite, will inform my approach to the reform of disability payments.

Deputy John Connolly: I understand the Department is currently reviewing means testing across all of our schemes. Has that job of work progressed? When might we expect its completion? I refer in particular to the means test for the disability allowance. One issue is that a slight increase in household income can lead to a substantial decrease in the allowance paid to disabled members of society. That is one of the major anomalies the review of the means test should examine.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy said, we are examining the whole area of means testing. It is important that our supports are targeted and go to those who need them most in terms addressing people in poverty. The work is ongoing on that, in particular as regards the disability allowance. We have been tasked within the human rights strategy on disability to look at this issue. We have set up a network to examine it. Most importantly, however, we will be engaging with people with disabilities and their advocates in this space with a view to informing me and the Government about the best way to proceed and ensure, first, that whatever changes we make will not disadvantage those on the payment currently and, second,

ensure the payment is as relevant and effective as possible to those receiving it as their main income every week.

Deputy John Connolly: The programme for Government also makes a commitment to introduce a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment, with a view to incrementally increasing it over the lifetime of the Government's term. Is this part of the current considerations in terms of the review of the disability payment?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely, it is. Under the national human rights strategy for disabled people, one of our jobs is to lead a strategic focus network from within the Department. The network will include people with disabilities and their advocates. I have asked the officials to expedite the establishment of that group, and one of the areas we will be looking at is the cost of disability payment. I intend to bring a proposal to the Government in the first half of 2026 concerning this payment. In the meantime, I am engaging with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Department of public expenditure around continuing to give support to disabled people in budget 2026 in terms of a recognition of the substantially higher costs that they face daily and weekly.

We had an engagement earlier with Deputy Quaide around the Indecon report and the ESRI report and the work of the network will involve going through those figures and ensuring we have full understanding within the Department and the Government of the full cost of disability, not just for those who have a disability, but also for their families and their communities.

Social Welfare Schemes

95. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Social Protection the cost of reducing the minimum required hours under the wage subsidy scheme from 21 hours to 15 hours in April 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50438/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question concerns supporting people with a disability to find substantial, sustainable and meaningful employment and implementing the recommendations of the review of the wage subsidy scheme. I would like to know the cost of reducing the minimum required hours under the wage subsidy scheme from 21 to 15 hours in April 2024 and if the Minister will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The wage subsidy scheme is a key disability employment support provided by my Department. It aims to encourage employers to offer substantial and sustainable employment to disabled people through a subsidy. As the Deputy knows, the employee must work at least 15 hours per week for the employer to qualify for the scheme. The subsidy is payable for a maximum of 39 hours per week. The base subsidy rate is €6.30 per hour, which increases to €9.45 per hour for employers with 23 or more disabled employees. An employer who employs 25 or more employees on the wage subsidy scheme may receive a grant of €30,000 towards the cost of employing an employment assistance officer.

Last year, my Department published a review of the wage subsidy scheme. In April 2024, based on the findings of that review, the minimum required hours for the scheme were reduced from 21 hours per week to 15 hours per week. This change sought to make the scheme more

accessible and flexible to disabled people. However, it is also intended to ensure that the wage subsidy scheme maintains a key aim of encouraging employers to provide substantial and meaningful work to disabled people. The cost of the reduction in the hours requirement is estimated at approximately €889,000. This represents the cost of paying the subsidy in respect of employees whose weekly contracted hours are from 15 to 20 hours, inclusive. Prior to the change, employers would not have been eligible for the subsidy in respect of those employees.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The programme for Government recognised that people with a disability face significant additional costs in their daily lives and seeks to improve supports and ensure the welfare system is progressive and empowers people to live full and independent lives. It is welcome to see that the stakeholder review was taken on board by the Department. As the Minister mentioned, the cost of €889,000 associated with this change is relatively minor but it has a major impact. It means that 257 people with a disability or health condition who were not covered previously have benefited from the many social, economic and health benefits that come with sustainable and meaningful employment. We really need to continue to support them. They have valuable skills and strengths to contribute to the workplace and they may want the opportunity to do so. It should be a priority for the Government to remove any barriers that still stand in their way. Are there any plans to implement the other recommendations in the review or how does the Minister see them being progressed?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are working through all the recommendations and the review with a view to implementing them. One of the key recommendations was to ensure we can keep the minimum required hours and the subsidy under more regular review than was done previously. This is something we are absolutely going to make sure happens. We are also working with our colleagues in Intreo to ensure services and employment opportunities are available to people with disabilities. EmployAbility provides a professional job-matching service and ongoing support, advice and information on employment supports for people with a disability. It also acts as a recruitment advice service for employers and provides the business community with access to a pool of potential employees. In 2023, we also established the WorkAbility programme. This is cofinanced with the EU employment, inclusion, skills and training, EIST, programme to support people with disabilities into employment through 57 local, regional and national organisations. In 2024, more than 1,400 people with disabilities engaged with these projects.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister. I think we still have a way to go here in terms of making progress. I welcome the ongoing review of the subsidy itself and the entry points and levels. According to the Disability Federation of Ireland, just over 30% of people with disabilities here are in employment. The EU average is around 50%, so we need to focus on building skills. I also suggest we need to promote the scheme. I think one element of the feedback from a year or two ago was that employers were basically unaware of the scheme and what it could do for them. Promotion of the scheme, therefore, is very important. Nationwide, we can use the local authorities and the various groups to promote the scheme and to get more people participating in the scheme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím leis an Teachta go gcaithfimid an obair ag chur dinn agus an focal a chur amach. We did that this year through the summer after we relaunched the wage

subsidy. We promoted it considerably and used targeted promotion to employers to encourage them to take on persons with disabilities and look at the opportunities that would bring to their businesses. In relation to the partial capacity scheme and the wage subsidy scheme, we have allocated an additional €3.7 million. We have also expanded the wage subsidy scheme to the community and voluntary sector and to the commercial State-sponsored sector to open up opportunities possibly on a more local basis than is currently the case.

In July 2024, we launched the new work and access scheme, which offers seven supports to improve access in workplaces for those with a disability. Funding is available for communications support, work equipment, workplace adaptation and training. Jobseekers, employees, self-employed people and employers may apply for those supports. We are very conscious of the need to continue to promote the schemes and this is something I want to focus on through next year.

Social Welfare Eligibility

96. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will review the assessment criteria for social protection payments in cases where applicants and-or part-time farming applicants are not in paid employment outside the home but provide essential unpaid care and support within the household; and if he will consider allowing greater flexibility in recognising minimal or subsistence-level farming activity (details supplied), in view of concerns that rigid application of the rules is leaving some families without necessary supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50808/25]

Deputy Peter Roche: Will the Minister consider reviewing the assessment criteria for social protection payments, especially in cases where applicants, including part-time farmers, are not in paid employment outside of the home but are providing unpaid care within the household? Could there be more flexibility in recognising minimal or subsistence-level farming activity, given the concerns that the current rigid rules are leaving some families without the supports they badly need?

Deputy Dara Calleary: My Department provides a number of supports for small-scale farmers in the circumstances outlined by Deputy Roche. Farm assist is the statutory income support specifically for farmers on low incomes. A person can qualify for farm assist if he or she is aged from 18 to 66, engaged in farming and meets the other statutory scheme conditions of the scheme. The farm assist scheme is similar to the jobseeker's allowance in a number of ways, such as the retention of secondary benefits and access to activation programmes where a person may want to take up off-farm employment or is seeking educational or training opportunities. However, the means test is more generous on farm assist. For example, under jobseeker's allowance, self-employed income is assessed at 100%; this is reduced to 70% under farm assist. Child disregards apply under farm assist which do not exist under jobseeker's allowance. In addition, account is taken of any exceptional circumstances to ensure the assessment for the scheme reflects the current situation accurately. The scheme is demand-led and there are currently just over 3,300 farmers availing of the farm assist payment.

The Government acknowledges the valuable role that family carers play and remains fully committed to supporting carers in that role, including those who care in a farm situation. This

is recognised in the programme for Government. We provide a range of income supports for carers, including carer's allowance, carer's benefit, domiciliary care allowance and the annual carer's support grant. If the Deputy has specific cases that are not qualifying, I ask him to bring them to my attention and we will work to try and assist him on those.

Deputy Peter Roche: I think all of us would have specific cases. Obviously, it would not be an avalanche by any manner of means, but we have people come to our constituency offices with those circumstances where they would be engaged full time in caring and their farm would be more of a financial burden than financially rewarding. They are doing the State a great service by providing care for their loved one.

The calculation, based on the number of acres and the numbers of livestock, sometimes prohibits them from gaining carer's allowance for their loved one. When I mentioned "rigid", that is what I am referencing. There is a perception, somehow or other, that if you have land and-or a small number of stock, the calculation is that you are doing all right and that you are outside of your means, but there needs to be greater flexibility with those instances that I am referencing.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I said in my main response, farm assist is a flexible payment as compared to, for instance, jobseeker's allowance, and there are better supports available to those on farm assist. That flexibility is built-in, as I said. Self-employed income, under jobseeker's allowance, is assessed at 100%. Under farm assist, that is 70%. Child disregards apply under farm assist which do not apply to jobseekers.

In relation to the home carer's scheme, we are trying to ensure that carers who look after people within the home - the family carers, be that in a home or on a farm - are also given support through pension and we have reduced a scheme in recent years to ensure that is done.

The means-testing measurement is there to ensure that we target resources at those who most need them and that those resources, which are scarce, go to the areas that need them most. If there are specific cases, we will engage with the Deputy on them.

Deputy Peter Roche: I fully accept that cases have to be assessed and the criteria are strict. The cases that I mentioned, as I said, involve only a small of people who have come to my constituency office who would fall into that category where they are full time.

In fact, in order to come to the constituency office, they would sometimes have to get somebody to stand in and do the caring while they were absent from the house. That will tell the Minister the level of necessity there is and the requirement there would be for the Department and the Minister to be more compassionate in terms of the way we would deal with cases like that.

Social Welfare Code

97. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he is aware of the fact that when custody is split between two separated or divorced co-parents, there is no mechanism by which both co-parents may each receive half of the children's allowance and the children's allowance instead universally goes to the mother regardless of circumstances; if he

is aware of the financial hardship this can incur on fathers who co-parent equally; his plans to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50385/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want it to be clear before I put this question that I understand completely why the default is that child benefit goes to the mother. I absolutely respect that. I appreciate where it comes from. However, increasingly I have people coming into my office and contacting my office here in the Dáil to say that they are co-parents, children are not cheap, they split the bills 50:50 and they have access. In some instances, there can be an informal arrangement, but that is not always possible. I wonder if the Minister has given any consideration to how this can be split in a 50:50 co-parenting situation.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for the question. As we discussed offline yesterday, it would be good to start a conversation in this space and it might be something that the social protection committee could look at.

Child benefit is a monthly payment to families with children up to the age of 16. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their 19th birthday where they are in full-time education or have a disability. It is currently paid in respect of almost 1.3 million children. Child benefit is paid to the person with whom the child normally resides. Where a child spends time across two households, they are considered to reside in the household where they spend the majority of the time.

Legislation does not provide for splitting the payment between both parents, even in instances where the child splits their time evenly between both households. In cases where the parents have an equal custody arrangement, the payment is traditionally awarded to the mother. There are a number of reasons that this policy position has been maintained. First, various international studies have found that, on average, when the child benefit payment is made to the mother, it results in more money spent on the child than when it is paid to the father. For example, a 2017 article published in the *International Tax and Public Finance* journal found that more money is spent on food when the mother is in control of child benefits compared to when it is jointly controlled. Similarly, researchers found that when the United Kingdom replaced the family allowance payment to the father with a children's allowance to the mother, it resulted in greater spending on children's clothing.

Second, Safe Ireland, which works with more than 40 specialist domestic violence member organisations across the country, has pointed out that domestic violence, which is overwhelmingly experienced by women, often includes economic abuse and that control of household income can be one of the ways in which this type of abuse manifests itself. Many would argue that directing the child benefit payment to the mother can act to mitigate the impact of this kind of abuse. Finally, in split custody arrangements, it would be challenging to split the payment proportionately on a case-by-case basis. However, this is something that we need to engage with more.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I think so. I respect the reply that the Minister has given and I do not disagree necessarily. However, there are instances increasingly where parents can demonstrate, either with a mandate from the court or, indeed, with an informal arrangement, that they split the custody, the care and, more importantly, the bills - as I said, children are not

cheap - 50:50. There is an unfairness there. The reasons child benefit goes mostly to the mother are obvious. I absolutely respect those, but we need to start that conversation to encompass the fact that, increasingly, it is 50:50. The regulations state that the benefit goes to the place where the child resides mostly but when it is 50:50, the child is in both and it could equally be one or the other. We both know that children who grow up in lone-parent houses are more at risk of poverty. Therefore, there is scope for us to look at that. I will engage with the Chair of the social protection committee and I would be grateful if the Department would assist us in our work on that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. It is definitely worth an engagement and an analysis. My Department would be more than happy to engage in a conversation around the international experience and the international data, but also engage with the organisations in this space for their expertise on that. Certainly, the Department officials will engage. I look forward to seeing that engagement and I will work with the Deputy in relation to it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is a sensible suggestion and one that I will take on board. I welcome the fact that the Minister is not opposed or hostile to the notion that we can look at it. I am not sure exactly what can be done but a conversation on this would be worthwhile at committee. I will engage with the committee Chair and with the Department.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Can I make a point of order? My party leader has written to the Ceann Comhairle and the leaders of the Government parties. We tried to introduce an urgent motion to condemn the attack on the flotilla. As the Minister knows, there are 20 Irish citizens on board the flotilla trying to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza. They are in international waters. It includes one of our colleagues, Senator Chris Andrews, whose boat has been fired upon on four occasions by Israeli drones. This is so urgent that the Italian and Spanish navies have deployed part of their fleets to support and defend Irish citizens.

We in this House have been refused and blocked from bringing a motion of condemnation before the House today. This cannot be business as usual. I ask the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to allow for the urgency of this issue. I cannot see any issue that could be more urgent. By the time we reconvene next week, God knows what could have happened to those boats. I know there is support. I heard the comments yesterday from the Minister, and they were welcome, but there should be a motion here today. We should be allowed to deal with this issue and pass a resolution. I am asking that this be facilitated today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The only thing I can do is bring it to the attention of the Ceann Comhairle immediately after the session. I know the Deputy said he has written. It is now a matter for the Ceann Comhairle. That is about as much as can be done.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I appreciate that. What I would welcome in the Government's response is an indication that it would be happy for such a resolution to come before us. We will work on the wording of the resolution with the Government. This should not go unpassed. We should not go into recess this evening when there are citizens in international waters being attacked by Israel through drones, including one of our own colleagues, Senator Chris Andrews. I ask the Government to say it is supportive of that. As I said, I welcomed the words yesterday from the Minister.

That was a point of order. I now move to the issue that I wish to raise today. Tá an Rialtas seo tar éis cead a gcinn a thabhairt dóibh siúd atá ag breith buntáiste ar dhaoine arís is arís eile. Níl a dhath déanta ag an Rialtas chun smacht a chur orthu ná chun stop a chur lena gcuid praghsanna atá ag ardú agus ag ardú arís eile. Má tá muid leis an fhírinne a insint, ní raibh na creidmheasanna fuinnimh riamh mar réiteach ná deireadh na bhfadhbanna. Bhíodar in ainm tuilleadh ama a thabhairt don Rialtas chun smacht a fháil ar an ghéarchéim seo, ach níl a dhath déanta. Arís is arís eile, tá moltaí curtha chun tosaigh againn ach déanann an Rialtas neamhaird orthu.

It is open season for price gouging and profiteering. Insurance companies, banks, large supermarkets and energy companies are making obscene profits on the backs of ordinary workers, all with the approval of the Government. Insurance companies are making two or three times more profits here than elsewhere. Bailed-out banks are making billions and paying no tax. We have the highest electricity prices in Europe yet, still, energy companies come forward and are hitting households with double-digit hikes in their bills in the coming weeks.

Last week, the Minister's party leader stood where the Minister is today and said: "I want people at home to know that we hear them on the cost of energy and know about the cost of living." He said that the Government would take action. The very next day, SSE Airtricity became the latest to announce massive hikes in its electricity prices - over 10% - on the foot of four other companies doing the same. These companies know they have nothing to fear from Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil because they have let them rip people off again and again. They have done absolutely nothing to rein in the companies and nothing to stop them hiking their prices up and up.

Let me be clear. Energy credits were never the full answer. They were supposed to buy the Government time. They were supposed to allow it time to get a handle on the crisis but the Government did not do anything. Arís is arís eile, we gave the Government solutions, including powers for the energy regulator to hold energy companies to account, oversight of hedging practices to protect against price gouging, regulation of standing charges, making the PSO levy and network charges fair, and stopping electricity companies profiteering from expensive gas. These could all have cut bills and taken the pressure off ordinary working people but, instead, the Government chose to do nothing.

Instead of ending the rip-off and getting prices under control, the Government is actually making things worse. Landlords are allowed to increase rents, there are carbon tax increases after carbon tax increases, and student fees and local property taxes are going up as a result of Government decisions. This has all been pushed on people at the same time that they are getting hit by double-digit increases in their energy bills. People feel like they are drowning in the cost of living crisis.

We have heard Minister after Minister this week and last tell us what they have done about this measure and that measure, and I am sure the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, will get to his feet and list off all of them again. I am not taking anything away from those measures. I am telling the Minister about the effect. There are more people today, as we speak, behind on their bills than ever before. That is the definition of things getting worse. Does the Minister accept there are more people today who cannot pay their electricity and gas bills than ever before? Will he do the right thing and put energy credits back on the table for this year's budget? Will he use that time to make the reforms that Sinn Féin has repeatedly called on him to make to ensure we end this rip-off on electricity prices and get costs under control?

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In the spirit of Deputy Doherty having raised an important issue on a point of order, I will respond to what he has said and will then take time to respond to his additional question.

I agree with him that what is happening with regard to the flotilla is a very serious matter. The Taoiseach and Tánaiste are currently in New York, concluding their work at the United Nations annual assembly. They have raised that matter within the European Union and with other Heads of Government. I have been informed that the Tánaiste has raised this specific matter with the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President Kallas, given the urgency of what is now taking place. We are well aware of the safety risk that is posed to all in the flotilla. I understand there are a number of Oireachtas Members involved in this as well. They deserve the protection of international law and they deserve safety.

I have not seen the wording of the motion, or maybe Deputy Doherty is still developing it at the moment. Therefore, I am not in a position to be able to give a commitment to him now. However, I am in a position to assure the Deputy that when he makes the point that this is a serious issue, we agree, and the Government is treating it as such. All deserve the respect of international law. There are citizens from many countries, including some public representatives, who are trying to play their part in offering direct support to the people of Gaza. That deserves to be recognised in the protection that they get. I am sure Deputy Doherty will engage with the Ceann Comhairle on the motion and I know the Government will too.

In relation to the substantive issue that Deputy Doherty raised on the cost of living, let me open by acknowledging the challenge that it is for many, and I absolutely accept that. For households and businesses, we have seen changes happen over the last number of years with the cost of living. We are seeing indications that the rate of price increases has considerably slowed down. However, that is not across our entire economy and we see some parts of the economy where the rate of price increase continues to be considerable. I also know that the point that the rate of price increase is slowing down can be of cold comfort to those who have seen prices go up by so much over the last number of years.

I know Deputy Doherty has already dismissed what I am about to do as reading out a list, but it is important to emphasise the degree of support that is already available. These measures were brought forward in anticipation of the cost of living continuing to be a challenge across this year. It is these kinds of measures that the Government will aim to build upon when the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I present budget 2026 on Tuesday week.

If we look at the measures that are being implemented across this year alone, we see the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance, a measure that has given needed support to 221,000 children. Very recently, we saw the free schoolbook initiative being rolled out to every child in primary and secondary school. We see all the efforts that are made every year to reduce school transport fees. We see the progress that has been made in recent years with the availability of free GP care, which is now available for all children up to and including the age of eight. We have seen the work that has happened with the reduction in the electricity PSO levy. We have seen the significant expansion of the fuel allowance and carer's allowance. In June this year, 138,000 carers benefited, deservedly, from the carer's support grant. This is in addition to other measures that have been built on year by year like free public transport for children and the work that has happened in relation to childcare costs. The public sector pay deal which was implemented again on 1 August mirrors the wage growth that we are seeing across our economy and is playing a role in assisting with the cost of living at a time when prices are going up.

On the particular issue that Deputy Doherty raised in relation to the cost of energy, the Government is very much aware of that. Much, though not all of it, is driven by where we are located and by the mix of energy that is used within our economy and country. We are aware of the impact this is having on our society and our competitiveness. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is completing work in this area looking at the structural changes that we may be able to introduce over time that can play a role.

In the answer that I have offered to the House today I have outlined the measures that are currently being implemented and rolled out that aim to make a difference for those for whom the cost of living is such a challenge. This is what is happening. What myself and my colleagues in government are working on now is determining the further measures we can bring forward that will be affordable and sustainable and will make a difference. A previous Sinn Féin policy in relation to this was the introduction of an energy price cap. Deputy Doherty might use this as an opportunity to explain whether that is still Sinn Féin policy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister will be well aware that in our alternative budget last year we argued that energy credits of €450 should be brought forward. The Government brought forward energy credits of €250. The Minister listed off various measures. As I said earlier, I am not taking away from those measures but what I am telling him is that things have got worse. The reality is that regardless of whether he believes he has protected people, there are more households than ever before - over 300,000 - that cannot pay their electricity bills. Regardless of what the Government did last year, things have got worse. The crisis has deepened and two things are about to happen. First, nearly 1 million households are going to see electricity prices go up, on average, by 10% in the next two weeks. Second, the Government and the Minister for Finance are going to withdraw the energy credits that those households were dependent on for the last three years. What I am saying to the Minister is that he should deal with the reality. The fact is that people are drowning under a cost-of-living crisis. Things have got worse in the last year - that is just a fact - and they are about to get even worse again because of two measures. One is the electricity companies ripping people off and gouging them again and the other is the Minister's decision to cancel electricity credits in this year's budget.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I gave Deputy Doherty the opportunity to confirm or at least explain to the House whether Sinn Féin is still making the case for an energy price cap, which it did in the last Dáil. I notice that he did not answer that question.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It did not work out so well for them over in Britain.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Indeed. In relation to the matters that Deputy Doherty has just raised, we are well aware of the challenge that the cost of living is posing for so many. I would make the point that for every budget I have brought into this House, he has always criticised me for not spending enough. He has always criticised us for running budget surpluses. If we had taken his approach in recent years, we would not have had the ability to intervene and help as we did in the last two years, let alone the ability to help again. The Government, for example, will be able to make a decision in relation to the VAT on gas and electricity which will play a role in maintaining the support that is available. That is a decision that will be considered in the context of the budget. We know that it is demanding for so many at the moment and what we want to do is bring forward measures that are targeted and that we are confident we can sustain in the time ahead.

Deputy Ged Nash: In less than a fortnight the budget will be announced. There is growing concern among commentators and experts that we are in a situation where spending is out of control and frankly, they are right. There is a certain faint whiff of 2008 around the place. The budgetary oversight committee has heard warnings from the ESRI, IFAC, the Central Bank and me that we cannot keep spending and cutting taxes and expect good outcomes. We have a Government that has no net spending rule. We had a medium-term framework published two weeks ago that had no spending ceilings, a threadbare national development plan published in the summer, and an opaque summer economic statement. We have no transparent way of accounting for existing levels of service. We have budgets that are, quite frankly, works of fiction, as Ministers trot into the Dáil at the end of every year looking for billions more to account for overruns. What is more, the budget process this year is cloaked in secrecy. When we ask questions in the Dáil and, as we did last night, at the budgetary oversight committee, about it we get no substantive answers whatsoever on clear spending plans. It is, frankly, unprecedented. A very serious credibility gap has emerged.

The summer economic statement is predicated on a €2 billion increase in capital spending next year, from €17.1 billion to €19.1 billion. As the Minister knows, the capital ceiling at present is about €15.8 billion, as per the August Exchequer returns. That leaves a further €1.3 billion in capital spending that must be spent before the end of the year. A Revised Estimate for the Department of Housing was tabled last night and included around €600 million in extra spending but we have absolutely no detail whatsoever on where that money is going. No updated departmental Vote group ceilings have been published and that is not good enough.

This morning the ESRI warned about overheating. Corporation tax is this Government's new stamp duty and is being used to fund more spending, with no tax increases on wealth or assets to pay for it. These windfall taxes are to this Government what stamp duty was to Charlie McCreevy and Brian Cowen. Rather than broaden the tax base to make it ready for the future, it looks like the Government will keep hollowing it out. The door is wide open for a massive VAT cut for hospitality but yesterday's National Competitiveness and Productivity Council

report showed that there has been a net expansion in the number of firms in the sector, as well as in employment and earnings, in recent years. We have had no evidence from the Government on the need for a VAT cut. The case, in truth, is thin. There is little evidence supporting the case but instead of widening the tax base, this Government is proceeding to do the opposite: to hollow it out despite all of the warnings.

Why is this year's budget process cloaked in secrecy? Why do we not have real budget transparency? Will the Minister publish the existing levels of service figures for 2026 and clarify what exactly is available for new current spending next year? What actual evidence does this Government have to support the case for a VAT cut for the hospitality sector? Will the Minister ensure that budget 2026 broadens the tax base rather than hollows it out?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank Deputy Nash for raising this matter. When I was preparing for Leaders' Questions here today, part of me thought it was unlikely that I would get a question about the Government spending too much money. I am really glad that the Deputy has raised this because it gives me an opportunity to respond on what are very important issues.

First, on the sustainability of our public finances and where we are, there is nobody more aware than me - although I suspect that Deputy Nash is nearly as alive to it as me - of what the risks of the past were and of the dangers of them playing out again. It is a matter of which I am aware every single day in the context of the individual decisions that I make and their accumulation.

In response to the charges made regarding the level of risk that is present in our public spending plans at the moment, first I would emphasise the point regarding the scale of the budget surplus we are now running. Second, I would point out that by the end of this year, €16 billion will be set aside in the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. That figure will rise to €22 billion by next year. That is the aim of the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I with regard to deposits in those funds. Third, Deputy Nash should note that when I began my work as Minister for public expenditure, debt as a share of national income was in excess of 120%. Today, it is just slightly above 60%. It has halved. That is the work that I have done. I have devoted much of my life over the last decade to the case for running budget surpluses with, I have to say, not a whole lot of support in this House for doing so. I have done that in anticipation of those risks.

I rarely take out my mobile phone in the Dáil. I always try to leave it aside out of respect for the proceedings we have here. However, I went onto the Labour Party website as the Deputy was making his points. Today on the website, Labour is calling for more spending with regard to equal early years programmes, public transport, housing and public sector pay. That is what the Labour Party is calling for at the moment. I accept the legitimacy of many of the cases the Deputy makes, but those who advocate care in relation to general public spending are always very eager to make the case for specific public spending proposals, sometimes of great value. While I do not believe he makes that mistake, Deputy Nash is surrounded by many who do.

The Government will bring forward a budget that will post another large surplus. Shortly after that, we will outline the plans we have to look at what we will do in the years ahead to moderate, in particular, current public spending and to get it to a more sustainable level of increases. I have no doubt that when we do that, it will be vigorously opposed by many.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Minister for his response, which was interesting from a number of perspectives. The Labour Party always makes the case for additional public spending, whether that is to meet the needs of demographic changes or existing levels of service. We do that transparently, especially when we are looking at the new investments we need to make our economy work and our society fairer. We are always honest that we simply cannot pay for the new services we require without looking at where we can raise revenue to pay for those services. That is the problem this Government and that which preceded it have had. The Government seems allergic to dusting down the Commission on Taxation and Welfare's report and identifying ways in which we can raise revenue in a sustainable way to support the childcare services we need, eradicate child poverty and build the homes we need in a sustainable fashion. In this budget, accepting that everybody in this House, regardless of their political persuasion, accepts that there is a need to increase public spending and target it properly, will the Minister accept that there is a need to broaden the tax base and that it is unwarranted and unjustifiable to hollow out the tax base by granting a VAT cut to the hospitality sector that is untargeted and that will disproportionately benefit those with very healthy bottom lines, such as McDonald's and other companies like it?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Deputy Nash knows I have the height of respect for him and the points he raises. He is correct in saying that the Labour Party is a rare exception on the Opposition benches in being willing to support, at times, sensible policies to broaden the tax base. He asked me my views on broadening the tax base. I will talk about what we have already done and what we are yet to do. There are: the changes with regard to PRSI to ensure that our pension plans will be better funded in the future; the changes we have made to carbon taxation, which, in fairness to the Labour Party, it has supported, to find better ways of funding the spending we need to make with regard to climate change; and the changes we have made in revaluing and extending the tax base with regard to local property tax, which, again, in fairness to it, the Labour Party has supported.

On the Deputy's point on narrowing the tax base, I am keenly aware of that, which is why the tax package we bring forward for budget 2026 cannot and should not exceed €1.5 billion. That €1.5 billion is approximate to the income that will be generated through our tax code by our economy growing. It is my strong view that those is the parameter within which tax changes should be made.

I really welcome the opportunity for a debate on these matters, including the broad economic policy of our country, but the budget surpluses we are running, where they are going at the moment, is a very strong response from this Government to ensure resilience and safety in our public finances.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The nightmare for the people in Gaza continues to worsen. For two years, they have been facing an Israeli genocide. More than 65,000 people have been killed, more than 20,000 children among them. Some 92% of homes have been destroyed or damaged. All the hospitals have been destroyed or damaged. Two hundred and fifty journalists have been murdered. Since March, famine has been deliberately created by Israel. Every single day, tens of people are gunned down while queuing for food. Gaza city is being invaded and people are being slaughtered. Al-Shifa Hospital, the last functioning hospital there, is now surrounded, with tanks 500 m away, all as part of a plan, consciously carried out, of ethnic cleansing.

All this horror could only be happening with the arms and money supplied by and the political support of the most powerful countries in the world. The US, Germany, Britain and many others are providing the weapons. Thousands of tonnes of these munitions have illegally gone through Irish airspace without the Irish Government doing a thing about it. In the face of this genocide, in the face of such complicity on the part of western governments, over 500 ordinary people have taken it upon themselves to try to sail to Gaza in order to break the siege and open a people's humanitarian corridor to provide aid and food to starving people.

What has been the reaction of the Israeli Government to this humanitarian initiative? It has been to label it a jihadist initiative, to refer to it as the Hamas flotilla and to call the participants terrorists. I spent two weeks in Tunis helping to prepare the flotilla. I assure the House that these are decent people from around the world who are looking to do whatever they can to try to stop the slaughter. The rhetoric being used was clearly designed to justify attacking the flotilla. On Tuesday night, 11 boats were attacked by drones, with explosive and incendiary devices and chemical substances inflicting physical damage. Yesterday, the flotilla received credible intelligence from multiple European governments that Israel is likely to escalate violent attacks on it within the next 48 hours, potentially using weapons that could sink boats and injure or kill participants.

The Tánaiste signed a joint statement on 16 September calling "on everyone to refrain from any unlawful or violent act against the Flotilla" and saying, "any violation of international law and human rights of the participants in the Flotilla, including attacks against the vessels in international waters or illegal detention, will lead to accountability". A violent act has now taken place. As a result of the pressure exerted by the Italian workers who went on strike on Monday in support of Palestine, two naval ships have now been sent by the Italian Government to the flotilla.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could you conclude, Deputy?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Spanish state has also sent a vessel to help protect it. There are 22 Irish citizens on board, including Senator Chris Andrews, with Deputy Barry Heneghan due to join him. Their lives are in danger. What is the Government going to do protect them? What accountability will there be?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You should conclude, Deputy Murphy, please.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Government at the very least send a representative to join the legal observer boat to be a witness?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising, as Deputy Doherty did, a really important issue regarding the protection of citizens on international seas and the rule of law with regard to them. The Government, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste are keenly aware of this. What are we doing with regard to it? We are taking diplomatic action. We are raising this matter with other governments within the European Union and at the international gatherings happening in New York. I reiterate that the protection of international law must be afforded to those who are at sea at the moment and those who are on the flotilla. Regardless of the conditions they are in, they deserve the protection offered by international law. That is

absolutely crucial. I do not have the first-hand experience Deputy Murphy has of the flotilla and seeing it prepare, but I have no doubt at all that those who are involved in it are motivated by a desire to send a signal regarding their human response to what is happening in Gaza and to play whatever role they can in offering practical support to the people confronting such terrible conditions.

As to what we have done, it is at a number of different levels. First, the Tánaiste, as I said earlier, has raised this issue with Vice President Kaja Kallas, who is the high representative of the European Union with regard to foreign policy, to make the case for the European Union having a collective response to this. He also raised it at the meeting in the past number of days regarding the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution in the context of the effort countries are still making for a two-state solution in the Middle East. The Department of foreign affairs, at a practical level, is doing all it can to provide consular assistance to our citizens who find themselves in such a difficult situation.

I am informed that our officials are in direct contact with a designated person in the Global Movement to Gaza delegation, which I understand is the organising group behind this flotilla. We will continue to maintain that contact and to raise this issue at the highest level we can, both diplomatically and politically.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I welcome the words of concern and support and the consular assistance being provided. Respectfully, I asked what are you going to do, not what are you going to say. This is a microcosm of the Government's position on Palestine in general whereby it is able to correctly say that what is happening is a genocide but the action does not necessarily follow. It is welcome that the matter is going to be raised at diplomatic levels and so on, but what are you going to do? There are Irish citizens who, as the Minister agrees, are doing their best to try to address and stop a humanitarian catastrophe and to bring baby formula and baby food to people in Gaza. They are in danger as a consequence. The Italian Government is sending two naval ships and the Spanish Government is sending one. I am not asking our Government to send a naval ship. Will it agree to send an observer who will not attempt to enter Gaza? The legal observer boat will stop before Gazan waters. Will the Government send an observer who will be present on a legal observer boat and who will be a witnesses and direct line of contact with it?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: For a country with our long-standing tradition in the context of respect for human rights and our neutrality, diplomacy is the way conduct our affairs. It is also the way we seek to influence the world and protect the rights of our citizens. Words are not powerless. Words are not an absence of action. Words are do not represent a lack of effort. Words and diplomacy are the way we seek to make our case with the respect we have for international law and with our long-established values. Words are our means of action and our tool of influence. I reject and refute the case the Deputy makes that communication and contact are not the same as action or something that can yield a result. Through the diplomatic action we have taken, we have tried to play a role in influencing and building up a coalition of countries that have recently taken larger action with regard to the State of Palestine.

In relation to the proposal the Deputy put to me, I will raise it with the Department of foreign affairs to see if there is a role for an observer. Taking his concern at face value, which, of course, I do in light of the importance of this issue, I cannot immediately commit that an official

can do this, but I certainly commit to following up on it. We are at one in wanting to ensure that any citizen involved in such a peaceful act gets the protection of international law.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland's pre-budget 2026 submission is a call for fairness, common sense and strategic investment in Ireland's commercial bus and coach sector. This industry is essential. It delivers over 95% of school transport services, supports 11,500 jobs and contributes €620 million annually to the economy. It carries 75 million passengers per year, including tourists, students and rural and urban commuters, yet is undermined by outdated policies and unequal treatment.

Let us start with the unfair exclusion of commercial operators from public fare reduction schemes. This has created a two-tier public transport system. Passengers who rely on private operators, many in rural and urban areas, are denied the cost-of-living supports offered to others. It is essential that commercial bus operators are treated similarly from a competitiveness perspective. This is not the situation at present as a result of the unequal and unfair application of the 20% fare reduction scheme to customers of NTA-licensed public transport services. If this is not addressed, it will further undermine the sustainability of commercial bus operators which are already under significant pressure.

I will share some key facts. Some 80% of private operators are based outside of Dublin, serving communities with limited transport options. Some 80% of Ireland's bus fleet is privately owned and half is less than five years old, thereby meeting EU emissions standards. The sector invests €80 million annually in new vehicles. One bus can replace 30 cars, thereby easing congestion and cutting emissions. Buses have the lowest carbon footprint per passenger of any motorised transport.

Another issue is the ban on drivers over the age of 70 operating school bus routes by imposed by successive Ministers. This is despite a national shortage of drivers. These individuals can legally drive children to matches or swimming lessons, just not to and from school in the morning or afternoon. This policy is not only illogical, it is discriminatory. It sidelines experienced and medically fit drivers who want to contribute and are badly needed. The Government must act now to lift this restriction and allow qualified drivers over 70 to return to school transport services.

I wish to make the Minister aware of a particular case - there are similar cases in communities throughout Ireland - namely that of the 20 to 30 children in Ballinadee, County Cork, who are eligible for school transport. The operator has no driver under the age of 70. He has a driver who is over 70 years of age and who is fully medically fit. However, that individual is not allowed drive a school bus. These children are being left on the side of the road with no way of getting to school. Budget 2026 must reflect these priorities. This is about fairness, common sense and ensuring that Ireland's transport system works for everyone.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy Collins for raising this important matter. Before I respond to the important and specific questions he raised in respect of the school transport scheme, it is important to put the matter in the context. In that regard, this is the scheme that, in 2024, the taxpayer funded at a cost of €512 million. In 2019, the cost was €219 million. The cost of this scheme has doubled in a short number of years, which, in terms of the

rate of public expenditure growth, is way ahead of spending on many other policy initiatives across our State at the moment.

The Deputy made reference to children who were not able to access the scheme, which I will discuss in a moment. I acknowledge the number of children who are accessing the scheme. Last year, 178,000 children and families accessed the scheme. That was a 3% increase on previous years. I am not making the case that there are not issues. The Deputy raised two of them. However, I want to acknowledge that this is a big programme that offers support to over 170,000 families and children, which is why it is always a policy area of such interest to the House.

On the matters the Deputy raised, on whether drivers over 70 should be allowed to drive school buses, my understanding is that this relates to a retirement age put in place by Bus Éireann. The policy perspective is to have the retirement ages aligned between Bus Éireann and those involved in providing that service. The Road Safety Authority is preparing a report for the Department of Transport with regard to the appropriateness of that age limit for the service.

I hear many different demands in respect of the expansion of the scheme. Some of the challenges in doing that are directly related to the fact the overall cost of the scheme has doubled in a few short years. I am certainly aware, as are the Ministers for education and public expenditure, of the need to ensure that as we make the scheme more broadly available, which I have no doubt will happen, it happens in a way that is economically sustainable such that we are able to fund the expansion of the service in the years ahead. I imagine that is playing in a role in relation to bringing more operators into the scheme.

Deputy Michael Collins: The expansion of the fare scheme to include commercial operators, specifically the inclusion of commercial operators in the free public transport initiative for the under-nines, is a must as we go forward. We cannot have a two-tier system, which will lead, if it continues, to private bus operators going out of business.

The Minister mentioned the school transport service catering for 178,000 people. However, hundreds cannot get a transport services for different reasons. Sometimes, it is almost impossible to get any communication from Bus Éireann. At one time, we, as public representatives, could get a response from it. Now, we cannot get a response from the Minister or Bus Éireann. I urge that someone in the Department at least get us answers for parents who have children stranded on the side of the road.

The over-70s issue has been kicked from pillar to post. We hear it is Bus Éireann's issue and then that the Minister will not make a decision. Someone has to stand up here and make a decision, and make it quickly. This has been going on for the nine years I am in the Dáil. People over 70 years of age having a medical certificate proving their health surely should make them eligible to drive a bus and pick up many of the children who have been left on the side of the road since the beginning of this school term.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: When we speak of children who are left on the side of the road, acknowledging there are issues we need to address, I emphasise to the Dáil that nearly 180,000 families and their children get support and the service they need through this scheme. This is

at an overall cost to the taxpayer of more than €0.5 billion in recognition of the issues raised by Deputy Collins today and raised often by Deputies on this side of the House.

Regarding his particular point on age, I assure him that assessment is being carried out by the appropriate body, which is the Road Safety Authority. It is entirely correct that the issue be assessed from a safety perspective, which the authority is doing. One way or another, the matter will come to a conclusion. I will make sure the Ministers for Transport and education are aware this issue has been raised. It has been going on for some time. The Road Safety Authority is the right body to make a final conclusion and we will be informed by its recommendation on the matter.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Michael Lowry: Caring for the elderly in our communities is both a duty and a privilege. Providing an older person with the support he or she needs for both physical and emotional well-being gives that person a sense of worth. During the Covid period, we got a sharp wake-up call on the importance of how we care for our older generation. As the number of deaths of elderly men and women increased on a daily basis, the magnitude of their value was brought into sharp focus. Their loss was enormous. The Covid pandemic left a lasting mark on our society, particularly our elderly. People are living longer and this increase in longevity means we must plan for the future. We must meet older people's needs and ensure they can live contentedly.

There has been a significant number of improvements over the years in ensuring older people receive the health services, care and support they require in their golden years. However, worrying gaps remain in the complete provision of all-round elderly care. As all elected Members know, supports such as home help and home care packages are struggling due to a lack of personnel to deliver them. At present, there are 4,800 older people sanctioned and funded for home help assistance who have no immediate prospect of support. Daycare centres, meals on wheels, nursing home respite care and basic health services within communities are invaluable for our older generation. However, countless elderly people are denied access to those services. Public nursing home places and step-down facilities to assist in recovery from a hospital stay are crucial to making life easier, safer and happier for our senior citizens. Yet, only a fraction of those who need them can access those vital supports. Often, their only option is to rely on family. This can be an onerous task for families and it demands total commitment. Carers' invaluable 24-7 work can go unseen. Without their selfless commitment, we would undoubtedly face an unprecedented crisis. As the Minister knows, our regional Independent group places huge importance on the role of carers. Our efforts have already brought about an increase in the income disregard for carer's allowance. In this budget, we are seeking a further increase in the income threshold, working towards the full abolition of the means test for carer's allowance in due course.

It is said that the measure of a country's greatness is how well it cares for its most vulnerable populations. Few are more vulnerable than our older people. There is much we can do to improve and enrich their lives. The Minister for Health, in these budget negotiations, requires an adequate budget to deal and cope with these issues. The Government has a moral obligation to plan ahead and resource the inevitable increase in demand.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. We are now very much in a phase where not only is the number of people living in our country growing, which is a great gift to the ability of our economy to grow and our society to grow and flourish, we are also seeing more people who are older and have the level of care need to which the Deputy referred. Growing life expectancy in our country - the growing length of life many of us have to look forward to - is unreservedly and positively a very good thing but it brings with it important consequences from a policy point of view that we are now beginning to experience particularly within our healthcare system.

In terms of what we are doing generally in this regard, we have put in place a commission on care, which is preparing a report for the Government on the effectiveness and adequacy of the healthcare supports for our elderly, conscious that they will grow in numbers in the years ahead and that they deserve the support we all want to give them. Regarding the here and now and what we are doing to help people year by year, the total level of spending currently going into old persons' services is approximately €3 billion. That is an increase of €349 million from the budget that went before that. I will give one example that helps to translate that figure into what it tangibly means for older people and those who love them and want to see them get the care they deserve. A total of 24.3 million hours of home care will be delivered in Ireland this year, ensuring that around 60,000 of our older citizens get the support they need and deserve within their own homes. It is fair to say that when it comes to providing supports, we continue to experience difficulties in getting and keeping the people we need to provide that level of home care support. That, in turn, feeds into the point the Deputy made regarding the waiting times people face to access that support in the first place. The Minister for Health will continue to look at how we can tackle this issue. We have seen a really big increase in funding for that in recent years.

I will end where I began by noting that our life expectancy is growing. Being able to live, work, contribute to our country and experience the benefits of longer life is unreservedly positive. However, it brings with it important policy consequences that we are dealing with budget to budget. The commission on care is the Government's effort to have a more strategic approach to this matter, which will define what our country looks like in the decades ahead.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I have a relevant question for the Minister on our ageing population. The Minister's own Department, the Department of Finance, published a report last week which created ripples of alarm. It predicted a population in the Republic of Ireland of between 6.5 million and 7.5 million by 2065. That depends on the level of migration. Such migration includes young people who left Ireland to study or work in recent decades but have plans to return home in the future. Ireland's pension system currently depends on having up to four workers to fund each retired pensioner. The pension system will be blown away and replaced by what economists define as a financial black hole at the heart of our Exchequer. This report suggests the State's old-age dependency ratio will increase from 23% in 2022 to 55% in 2065. Are the Minister and Government concerned about these predictions? What measures can be introduced to deal with what will become a very serious issue?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy. Of course, the sustainability of our social insurance scheme is an important concern of Government. What are we doing in relation to it?

First, it is important to acknowledge the Social Insurance Fund is in healthy surplus and is a big part of our overall healthy public finances at the moment. Second, this is the very reason we are going ahead with the auto-enrolment pension scheme. As we roll it out next year, it will pose challenges and costs because it is a transformational scheme. However, it is at the heart of ensuring sustainability in pension policy in the decades ahead. It is by encouraging and incentivising, in particular, those starting their working life to set money aside to complement a pension provided by the State later in life. Finally, an important element of it of all is that as we all, I hope, look forward to longer lives, if we have the opportunity to work for longer, as many want to do, that makes an important contribution to the dependency rate the Deputy referred to. It is an important issue the Deputy has called out and the commission of care report on this that will be out early next year will, I hope, inform a really good debate on the matter.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The new special needs assistant, SNA, review guidelines have been met with outrage. The guidelines are about one thing and one thing only: restricting the number of SNAs and rationing SNAs. Children will suffer if this goes ahead. A five-year-old girl in Donegal, Alissa, has had to leave school because no SNA has been provided and she is one of many children across the State failed by the Government.

Every year we have parents and school leaders fighting a system of bureaucracy to secure what is essential for children with additional needs. Schools are now afraid to apply for SNAs in case they are taken away. Schools are being pitted against each other, SNAs disrespected and children again left to suffer.

I ask that the Minister for education change tack. Does the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, agree the Government should scrap the new guidelines and re-engage with school communities so we can have proper guidelines that have the support of everybody, including existing SNAs and families of those with additional needs?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have seen at first hand the important role our SNAs play in classrooms all over the country, giving that little bit of additional support and help to young girls and boys who need it as they begin their school life and throughout their educational journey. There are 23,000 SNAs in our country. Compare that with where we were a number of years ago. In 2011, we had just over 10,000. There are now over 23,000. In the past five years, the number of SNAs has increased by 43% and they are needed. I just want to put that on the record of the House.

The work now under way is about ensuring we make best use of the SNAs available and respond to issues raised with us by representative bodies on the needs of SNAs. I will let the Minister for education know this matter has been raised here today. This work is all about ensuring the rapid increase in the number of SNAs is used in a way that brings benefits to those who need them most. I am very much aware of the sensitivity of the matter, as is the Minister for education.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I endorse the calls of Deputy Paul Murphy for an Irish representative on the legal observer post for the Global Sumud Flotilla. It is well within the tramlines of diplomatic action that we would do that.

I raise with exasperation and desperation the case of Barry Corcoran in my constituency. In 2019 Barry wanted to take part in a deep retrofit pilot programme. He did his due diligence, checked the SEAI register for approved companies and picked a company from that list. Unfortunately, when the company began the work, the SEAI realised it had not done due diligence on the company and took it off the list. The company walked off the job and for six years Barry's house has been a building site. The SEAI has washed its hands of it. The house requires €200,000-plus worth of repair works. His family has been raised in a building site and there is no one there to help him. This has been in the media and been with multiple Ministers. There needs to be a solution. He is not the only one. There are not many but he is not the only one.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy. I was not aware of the matter until he raised it. I can only imagine it is really difficult for somebody to live in a partially repaired home in which work has been going on for so long. I know the Deputy would not raise it if he did not think it was serious. I will make sure the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is aware of this. My office will contact him after this to pass it on. It sounds like a very difficult situation.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: This week the Government supported calls for the implementation of curfews on children and young people, for fines for parents and for a mini criminal assets bureau to be established to confiscate PlayStations, Xboxes and mobile phones. It was in a motion in the name of Deputy Gogarty. The Government allowed it through with no amendment. Tonight, RTÉ has a "Prime Time" show about antisocial behaviour which seems to continue to conflate such behaviour with criminal activity.

Will the Minister confirm categorically that the Government has no intention of implementing curfews for children and young people or of introducing a mini criminal assets bureau for children and young people? Will he acknowledge the root cause of antisocial behaviour and outline the services available if and when children and young people become engaged in criminal activity?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have to say that in most cases I find the line between antisocial behaviour and criminal activity is very thin. For those who experience antisocial behaviour, which I am sure the Deputy has to deal with in his constituency, it can be very intimidating and difficult but I accept some activity may well be outside the parameters of criminality.

We allowed a motion to be passed here for further discussion within the House but, as far as I am aware, the focus of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, at the moment is on continuing to support youth diversion programmes. I was at an event the Minister did at Belvedere Youth Club recently in relation to that. He is working to support efforts in our schools and to continue to ensure our gardaí have the resources and support they need to deal with behaviour that is truly criminal. For many young people, in particular, who are involved in this kind of activity, the response is not purely related to justice and is not purely from our policing authorities. It

needs to be supported by what happens in our schools. That is my understanding of what the Ministers, Deputies O’Callaghan, Foley and McEntee, are currently doing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: On a point of order, the Government did not allow a motion to be passed to be further discussed. That is not what happens. The Minister knows that. That might happen with a Bill but the motion was passed. The position of the House, with the Minister’s agreement, is these awful reactionary policies that were proposed.

The Simon Community is in the Dáil today to highlight the devastation the Government’s housing policy is inflicting on thousands of families. Over 16,000 live in emergency accommodation, including over 5,000 children, yet there is no mention of children in Housing for All and no sign of any new housing plan. There are strategies for ending homelessness or target dates for having no children growing up in homelessness. Instead, there are piecemeal policies that will make the housing crisis even worse. Slashing funding for the tenant in situ scheme, gutting the rent pressure zones – no wonder three in five young people are thinking of emigrating. Can the Minister offer them any hope that things will get better under this Government?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I do not need to be lectured by the Deputy on points of procedure and how this Parliament works.

1 o'clock

I was making the point that just because a motion was passed in the Dáil does not mean the Government was bound to implement every element of it. The Deputy knows that.

Regarding Housing for All, the Government, with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne at the heart of this, is preparing the next phase of our housing strategy. In relation to the action that is being taken, we know in recent weeks and months that due to the efforts of Government and local authorities, 8,000 families have either been prevented from going into homelessness or have been exited from temporary accommodation. However, we know more needs to be done. Too many families are still experiencing the risk of poverty and homelessness and too many children are still sleeping in conditions that the Government wants to be otherwise. When we bring forward not only the budget, but also Housing for All, that will be a key area of focus for us. In the last number of weeks, the Government made further funding available to focus particularly on families at risk of being homeless and to give them more permanent measures to avoid that trauma happening to them.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: On a point of order, seeing that my Private Members’ business was referenced, the motion asked for ideas from all Members of the House. All parties, with the exception of the Social Democrats, contributed in that respect. The Government allowed the motion to be passed to allow the ideas to be assessed and reported on in six months’ time. It was a motion on the consequences of antisocial behaviour.

I note the Seanad recently passed all Stages of the Health (Scoliosis Treatment Services) Bill 2024, which aims to set up a specialised scoliosis treatment service for children and adults, resourcing services within and outside the State, and creating maximum waiting time targets.

The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, said she really welcomed the Bill. She said it should not be necessary if surgeries were carried out, but at the time of the summer recess, 74 children had spent more than three months on the active spinal waiting list, or more than 50% outside the Sláintecare targets. So, while some progress has been made, it has been incredibly slow. It has caused devastation and heartbreak for many families. In this context, will the Government agree to move the Bill through Second Stage? It has been well debated in the Seanad and deserves further deliberation in this House.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for reminding the House of the nature and detail of the motion. He was calling for the consideration of ideas in this area. We should all be able to participate in that. The Government is certainly happy to do so.

Regarding the specific proposal around a Bill, I will have to consult the Minister, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. I take care around putting really important policy matters into legislation because, at times, it can undermine the ability of the Government to intervene and respond to issues that are complex. We have put so much in additional resources into trying to help the young children and their families who are dealing with the health condition of scoliosis. The Deputy is aware of the additional operating theatre that is available, the additional staff there, and the number of children we seek sought to prioritise for healthcare elsewhere. However, we know more progress needs to be made. We will certainly assess Deputy Gogarty's proposal in a generous way to see if it could make a concrete difference to the very important thing he wants to see delivered.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: It is not an exaggeration to say that the tillage sector in Ireland is facing an enormous crisis. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Heydon, is very aware of this. As part of the Government's climate action plan, it is intended that we will have 400,000 ha in tillage by 2030. We are not going to achieve that, particularly given that, since 2022, 1,400 farmers have left tillage. Despite a good summer harvest, prices are not there for tillage farmers. We are also facing the challenge of cheap imports from outside the European Union. This matter is also critical in terms of developing markets. The Minister will be aware of the hope to establish a commercial flour mill again in Ireland at Ballindaggan, County Wexford. The loss of tillage production has an impact on many other areas of agriculture. It is critical. I am not expecting the Minister to reveal what is in the budget, but I would like to hear assurances from the Government that serious consideration will be given to the crisis facing tillage at present.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy Byrne for raising this important issue. He touched on the heart of the challenge. It has been three really difficult years for the tillage sector, and for tillage farmers in particular, due to weather, prices and ongoing challenges. The tillage sector is an incredibly important component of the overall agricultural sector. Farmers are very dependent on one another. We are aware of that. Obviously, my budget negotiations are ongoing in terms of any financial aspects and my overall budget. Deputy Byrne touched on the processing element, in which there are opportunities we are exploring and want to see developed, for example, the opportunity in the use of native grains in our feed, the very positive impact that has on the carbon footprint for them and what that can mean for their customers, and the opportunity

provided through native grain use in Irish whiskey and making sure that is fully exploited. These are all key points that can add value along the way. Yes, there is the short-term pressure on price right now for the sector, but the long-term sustainability of the tillage sector involves all those components coming together. That is something I am determined to continue working on with colleagues across Government.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I support the lifting of the passenger cap for Dublin Airport. The expansion of that airport is critical, not just for jobs and growth, but for Ireland's standing as a global hub. It strengthens our economy and deepens the existing bonds we have fostered with international partners. I live in Drumcondra and we get overflights every now and then - it does not bother me and I do not think they make their way to Phibsborough - but I would call on the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, and the Government to engage with affected communities because there will be an intensification of flight activities if the cap goes. There are noise schemes already in place, but local residents sometimes find themselves just outside those schemes and just off noise contour maps, and the support goes off a cliff edge for them in terms of schemes. The Government needs to work with the DAA to engage and make sure those noise management schemes are fit for purpose.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: They do make the odd appearance over Phibsborough, but for many who live very close to the airport, it is an important matter. As Deputy Ó Muirí said, changing the airport cap at Dublin Airport is really important, not just for the airport, but for broader aviation and growth within our economy. Regarding how we are going to respond to the matters raised, it will first be by continuing to support the work done in the management of noise. We have an aircraft noise competent authority, which plays a role in the regulation of noise and the effect it has on local communities. Second, I understand we have a residential noise insulation scheme, as the Deputy raised, that is operated by DAA. I will raise Deputy Byrne's point with the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, relating to the operation of that scheme and the breadth of it. I have no doubt that, as we see a decision made on the operation of the cap, the issues Deputy Ó Muirí has raised will only become more intense.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In the face of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis and a student accommodation crisis that has seen more students and families forced to pay upwards of €14,000 for a single year's accommodation, and despite having contested the general election on a platform of reducing college fees, the first action the Government took was to announce an increase of college fees of €1,000 per year. Now, the Government is flying the kite that it may only put up the fees by €500, no doubt expecting plaudits on budget day from those whom the Government is only screwing over by half as much as it had originally planned. Sinn Féin has called for fees to be scrapped. Will the Minister meet this commitment? Will the Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil Government do this or is helping students something it only talks about during elections?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The last thing we are looking for in preparing the budget is plaudits, particularly from Sinn Féin. I do not hold out any hope of us ever getting them from Sinn Féin. If we were to, I would be convinced we were doing the wrong thing.

Regarding what we are looking to do, the Government's track record on trying to help students is pretty clear by this point. For example, the work done by the previous Minister, Deputy Harris, and-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Government put up their fees by €1,000.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----the current Minister, Deputy Lawless, is clearly building on that. Efforts have been made to look at eligibility for SUSI grants to ensure they can play a role in the cost of living for students going to college. The Government is well aware of the sensitivity of the decision we will make about registration fees for students. No decisions have yet been made, but all of the Government, and not least the Minister, Deputy Lawless, is well aware of the importance of the decision, and we will make it. However, I will make a broad point that we have to ensure that, in the round, we have some ability to be able to pay for everything we do into the future. We got a sharp warning today from the ESRI about that. That is an important factor in how we put together this budget.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: So, the Government is putting up fees.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): They are more than £4,500 in the North.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy McGrath.

Deputy John Cummins: Is Sinn Féin cutting them up there?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Minister of State, please.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Government is putting up fees. Just to clarify, we are in the South and the Government is putting up fees.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, we have moved on to Deputy McGrath. Please have respect for him.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Thank you.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I raise the rent a room relief scheme. It is a good scheme, but I wish to discuss its income threshold of €14,000 in particular. We are in an acute accommodation crisis and this scheme could play a greater role in better utilising existing properties and empty rooms. Single person accommodation is extremely difficult to secure and student accommodation is also difficult to secure. The exemption limit of €14,000 was put in place in 2017. Since then, rents have doubled. The average rent then was €1,000. It is now €2,000, so it makes logical sense to move this income limit in the budget. I ask the Minister, in the upcoming budget, to look at raising the income limit in line with inflation in the rental sector so that we can see a better utilisation of the scheme.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy's raising of this matter gives me an opportunity to remind us all of the value of the scheme. It now stands at a value of €14,000 per year. In recent years, we have seen a considerable increase in the number of taxpayers who are availing of it. It went from being roughly 10,000 per year to 16,500 in 2023. It is playing an important role in the availability of additional student accommodation. The Deputy will be aware of the need for all of these things to add up and be affordable on budget day. It is in that light that we will have to consider this measure to see whether it can be strengthened. However, at the very least, the Deputy's raising of it today has given me the opportunity to explain to anyone who is listening that this scheme is available. It is quite generous and for those who are availing of it, it helps with the student accommodation needs we know are there at the moment.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I refer to the commitment in the programme for Government to launch a new town and city infrastructure investment fund to replace the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF. Regional towns such as Clonmel cannot access the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, or the town and village renewal scheme, so this new fund is crucial. Clonmel has a shovel-ready project. Matched funding has been set aside. Can the Minister give any indication of when the Government might launch this fund? Crucially, will a specific allocation be set aside for regional towns so that the big cities will not dominate the allocations?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I remember being in Clonmel with the Deputy during the summer. On what was otherwise a bright and great morning, the Deputy walked around the centre of Clonmel and pointed out to me the number of properties that were not being used and were on the verge of dereliction.

I cannot give him an exact timeline for when this fund will be available, but I can assure him of two things. First, the capital funding that is available to the Department of housing is continuing to grow. Within that, the Department will prioritise the roll-out of either the URDF or its replacement. Second, we will continue to look at the grants that are available to address dereliction because, while I can see them working in some parts of the country, I could clearly see on that day in Clonmel with the Deputy the challenges that were still there. We have to do better on those because it is vital to show the local communities the Deputy represents that we are giving them the place and environment they deserve in their towns.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I raise the case of Rebecca from Kildare. Twelve years ago following treatment for cervical cancer, Rebecca experienced early medical menopause. Women with cancer in remission are unable to use traditional hormone replacement therapy, HRT, but thankfully, a new drug for cancer survivors by the name of Veozah has been developed. This drug would be a game-changer for young women like Rebecca. However, it is not available under the new HRT scheme and it costs €75 per month. This is a cost that, unfortunately, Rebecca and other women cannot afford. Will due consideration be given to adding Veozah to the HRT scheme to make it accessible to all cancer survivors who need it, not only those who can afford it?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue on behalf of Rebecca. I will ensure that the Minister for Health is aware of the status of this medicine, Veozah, and that

it is given the consideration it needs. I cannot second guess or answer on behalf of the independent bodies that look at the variety of available medicines and whether they are appropriate and can be made available in a sustainable way in Ireland, but I know that these are sensitive matters and for someone who has survived cancer, as Rebecca has, and wants to have a long and healthy life ahead of her, I am sure this is really serious. The Minister, Carroll MacNeill, will be aware of this. I will pass the Deputy's concerns on to her and thank her for raising it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome the decision to fold CHI into the HSE. We called for it a number of months ago. However, a number of serious issues have not been dealt with yet.

First, I raised the case of Harvey Morrison Sherratt with Simon Harris about a year ago when he was taken off the waiting list for surgery. Simon Harris told me he would find out how many other parents and children had been taken off that list. A year later, I have not received that information. Critically, 230 children are currently on that waiting list. In January this year, €11.6 million was given for those children to be able have operations abroad. Right now, no children are scheduled to have operations abroad. Despite the fact that we have gone through an horrendous summer as regards difficulties children have had and that the money is sitting there, some dysfunction is stopping those children going abroad for those operations. CHI has still not published its 2024 report, which is quite incredible, the Minister must agree. I understand CHI is also sitting on a big pot of money that it is not using for the benefit of these children.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have seen few people who care more about children with scoliosis and their health needs than Simon Harris. I have seen at first hand the commitment he has had to making a difference to their lives and health.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have seen few people who are moved more by the pain they are in and the needs they and their families have than Simon. I absolutely refute some of the things Deputy Tóibín has said about him and tell him that some of the claims he has made are cynical.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Like what?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: They devalue the commitment-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am sorry, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, but claims like what?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----the Tánaiste and the current Minister for Health have to making a difference to those who need support.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Like what, Minister?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: In relation to the points the Deputy made, the Government has made available - because we know it needs to be done - additional operating capacity in Ireland to support families who need that healthcare and we have put in place the surgeons and support to do it. I will certainly follow up on the status of the need for children to travel abroad to get that healthcare, but in many cases it can be driven by clinical considerations. We have to respect those who make the decisions. Let me emphasise that the Tánaiste and the rest of the Government are absolutely committed to doing all we can to put the supports in place for the young children who need the support.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Rice.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, it is poor performance by the Minister to make an allegation in relation to things I said and when I ask him to indicate what it was I said, he does not give that information. It is very poor.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Tóibín, you can write to the Ceann Comhairle about your complaint. This is not the place for it. I call Deputy Rice.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I am seeking leave to introduce a Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. That will be later on and not now.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: We are looking forward to the new community nursing unit in Thomastown. It is being completed at the moment. It will be a purpose-built facility to support the older population of south and central Kilkenny. It will support discharges from St. Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny and University Hospital in Waterford. It will be a lifeline for many and a gamechanger for the region. When does the Minister envisage this new community nursing unit in Thomastown will be fully completed and operational?

I am aware workforce planning is progressing across all staff disciplines to ensure the required competence and skill mix of staff is in place to facilitate the operational schedule but there are vacancies in speech and language therapists in Thomastown that have not been filled for the past two years, so much so that it is on its brochure that it currently has vacancies in speech and language therapy. Obviously, that cannot continue. I am looking for assurances from the Minister that this will be looked into as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising this. As he said, I know there is a new 95-bed unit that is now located in Thomastown providing really important health services to the community he represents. He is correct, unfortunately, to say that there has been a delay with regard to the recruitment of speech and language therapists. The post has been advertised on two different occasions and it has not been possible to get the therapist needed by the community. A campaign is under way for the post. The HSE will continue to focus on how that role can be filled. I agree with the Deputy that it is really important that it happens.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: We have made considerable strides in improving the public transport network in rural county Cork through the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan. We

have seen successful roll-out of bus services from Mallow to Fermoy, Charleville to Mallow, Mallow to Mitchelstown, Killarney to Macroom and the latest one, the 243 bus service from Newmarket to Cork. Today I am inquiring about the roll out of the Mallow to Killarney service which will service villages like Ballydaly, Cecilstown, Ballyhass, Castlmagner, Kanturk, Botherbue, Knocknagree and Rathmore. I believe TII is working with the Department on the roll out in this quarter. I would appreciate an update.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The rural transport scheme has played a really important role in connectivity between our towns and villages. The note I have here indicates that in 2024 passenger numbers went up to 5.8 million, which is great. It is so important we have a local transport service that directly links up the towns and villages in our country. Cork has been a big beneficiary of this. There has been a 50% increase in the passenger numbers on rural bus services in Cork with 230,000 journeys recorded last year.

The specific route mentioned by the Deputy is being considered at the moment. I will make sure the Minister for transport is aware of what he raised.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Earlier today I attended a briefing by the Family Resource Centre National Forum. I think we can all agree that FRCs are tremendous services. They are holistic, engaged, progressive, they provide vital interventions for families and individuals at all stages of life. In Waterford city we are very fortunate to have three excellent centres, Sacred Heart, Brill FRC and St. Brigid's, but there is a glaring gap if one looks at the map of FRCs on this island. A contiguous area covering much of west and mid Waterford, south Tipperary and east Cork, towns like Dungarvan where there is demonstrably huge need are left without any family resource centre. In recent weeks, there have been 49 applications made to establish new FRCs and only five of those, around 10%, were approved.

Existing centres are under huge pressure just to keep going. They are seeking €240,000. I am sure they have been in touch with the Minister's Department on core funding a proper capital scheme to invest in new centres and funding for counselling supports. Will the Minister commit in his budget to giving the family resource centre sector the support that it needs and urgently requires?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy. I am very much aware of the importance of family resources centres. We have a number of them in the area of Dublin that I represent and, in particular, there is a great one on Hill Street. I see the great work it does in supporting our diverse communities and all the work it does there. I am very familiar with Dungarvan. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is well aware of the issue the Deputy has raised. I will raise this with the Minister, Deputy Foley, who has responsibility for this, if there is anything that we can do to increase capital funding in this area. There are many demands for family resource centres across our country. Maybe, year by year, if we could gradually increase their availability, it would make a difference because I know they do really good work.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why is the red carpet being rolled out for the NFL in this State this weekend? Why is every second level school in the State being supplied with an American football starter pack and flag for a sport steeped in militarism, racism and macho culture? Why has the Irish Government agreed to fork out €10 million to allow the richest sports league in

the world to play a game in Croke Park? This is for NFL owners, by the way, who are collectively worth almost \$1 trillion.

This is the most jingoistic league in America. It celebrates the military at its games, has men and women marching in uniform, it prays for the Israeli army and it sends players over to the IDF while a genocide is taking place. It has received money from the US army to do so. The Government will say that this will generate a huge amount of income in the future but at what cost? The NFL is removing “end racism” signs from its grounds. It ended Colin Kaepernick’s career for taking the knee and it has multiple lawsuits for gender, race and age discrimination.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The NFL is a model for how sport has been hijacked for propaganda and profit and playing on grounds that are meant to be amateur and a community space. It is an absolutely rotten sport to be promoted in this country.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: It is because sport brings people together. Because in the world we are in at the moment, where there are so many things that can bring people apart and so many things that are capable of dividing us, sport and culture are one of the few common grounds we have by which we can unite people and bring them together in a way that respects athletic endeavour and joins people together in admiring what goes on in the sporting pitch.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We have our own sports.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: That is the reason we are doing it. This weekend will see our country and our city, in particular, full of American people who are coming to Ireland for the opportunity to see a game happen. I think that is a good thing. It will lead to extensive economic benefits for Ireland, that will happen, but for me there is a broader reason we do it. With all the causes we have at the moment that are pulling us apart and all the tensions there at the moment, sport and art offer the ability to bring people together. The money that is being used by the Government to support this is money that will be well spent.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: And so the Minister ignores all the issues I have raised about racism, militarism and Palestine then.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Last weekend I was delighted to attend a ceremony celebrating a centenary of light, 100 years of LauraLynn providing palliative care for children, celebrating beyond the establishment of LauraLynn to the legacy bodies that it worked with, the children’s Sunshine home and, indeed, Ella Webb who started treating children with rickets in 1925. Tá mé comh bhródúil. I am very proud that all this work has been done in my home constituency of Dublin Rathdown in Leopardstown. LauraLynn provides crucial work. It is the only organisation in this country providing palliative care for children. It gives children choice at the end of life and dignity and it provides families with the opportunity to create memories. LauraLynn and many other organisations in the community and voluntary sector operate on threadbare budgets despite the fact that they provide these short gaps that the State does not provide. These are crucial services up and down the country. Will the Minister commit in

budget 2026 to providing multiannual funding, core funding, to finally allow us to move away from this philanthropic model of 100 years ago to a modern State which properly funds these organisations to adequately support families up and down the country?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am very familiar with the work of the LauraLynn foundation and the really important care and support it provides to young children. On the Deputy's particular request for multiannual funding, I do not believe the budget will deliver that. This House passes budgets year by year. It is therefore very difficult, and I do not believe it should happen, that we can give current funding commitments that go beyond the budgetary commitments of a single year. The only places that we make multiannual funding available are with regard to capital investment but that is needed to deliver big projects that we all depend on. What we do see happen in core funding and current funding in general is year by year it does go up. I cannot comment on what is going to happen with regard to LauraLynn for 2026 because it all depends on the budget. I recognise the work it does and I am explaining why multiannual funding is just something that is, for good reason, difficult for us to commit to.

Public Health (Alcohol) (Amendment) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 by restricting the advertising of alcohol-free and low-alcohol products bearing any statement of any trade description or designation, or a display or other publication of a trademark, emblem, marketing image or logo, of an alcohol product with the aim or direct or indirect effect of promoting an alcohol product.

The Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 was landmark legislation designed to reduce alcohol use in Ireland. A key objective of the Act was to limit the amount of alcohol marketing that children were exposed to. To help to achieve this, the Act included important restrictions on alcohol advertising near schools, playgrounds, public transport, cinemas and shops and during sports events. Just as these measures came into force, big alcohol brands began brand sharing, that is advertising zero alcohol products using the same parent branding, logos and colours. Unsurprisingly, the onslaught of zero alcohol advertising has been at its most intense in the very places where the 2018 Act restricted alcohol advertising, spaces which were specifically chosen to protect children.

Some may say these companies are entitled to advertise their 0% products in these spaces but I do not believe this is the case. We must remember the zero alcohol versions of major alcoholic drinks share identical markers to their master brands, they just have a 0% tag at the end. When people see the advertisement for a major drinks company, even with a "0%" slapped on, they see the alcohol brand and it is the flagship product they think of. In the 2018 Act advertising is defined as any form of commercial communication that directly or - this is the important point - indirectly promotes alcohol products. Surely, at a very minimum, what the drinks industry is doing constitutes the indirect promotion of alcohol products, which is prohibited under the 2018 Act.

A recent example of the alcohol industry flouting the law is the Six Nations rugby championship. Anybody watching the home games would have seen the Guinness logo emblazoned all across the field of play with a "0.0" tag at the end. The Guinness branding and logo are iconic. Anyone who sees them, even with the 0.0 included, sees the full-strength alcohol product and the alcohol industry knows this. Why else would drinks companies so aggressively promote products that account for just 1% of the total alcohol market? In 2022, zero alcohol advertisements made up 25% of the spend of alcohol brand advertising in outdoor spaces, where most of these restrictions are in place.

I take it that everybody in the Dáil believes that zero alcohol products are not suitable for children. Why, then, do we think exposing them to zero alcohol product advertising is? I have no issue with zero alcohol products but let us not for a second think the alcohol industry is pushing them because they want people to drink less. Obviously it does not but it has identified a loophole in the law and it is exploiting it. Why would it not? No one, including the Minister for Health, is stopping it. We cannot allow it to continue to just add 0% to the end of advertisements with absolutely no change to the branding, name or colour. These are blatant alcohol advertisements wearing a very thin disguise.

I am of the firm belief that what the alcohol industry is doing with zero advertising is already illegal. Since the Minister for Health will not stand up to the alcohol industry, I am tabling this legislation to remove any ambiguity, or the so-called loophole, in the 2018 Act to ensure it is implemented as intended. The Bill would amend the existing Act to explicitly include alcohol free or low alcohol products in the advertising provisions. In doing so, I simply want to make explicit what is already implicit in the law. We cannot stand back and allow vested interests to trample all over public health measures in the pursuit of profit.

The unfortunate reality is there is not a family in Ireland that has not been impacted by alcohol in some way. Beyond addiction, there is a growing understanding that alcohol is deeply damaging to the nation's health and well-being. Alcohol is a group 1 carcinogen, which means it causes cancer. According to the HSE, alcohol is one of the most preventable causes of cancer after smoking. Every year in Ireland, 1,000 people are diagnosed with alcohol-related cancers. The less you drink, the lower your risk. Therefore, any suggested association between sport and alcohol sends the wrong message to children. This link must be broken. According to Alcohol Action Ireland, approximately 50,000 children take up drinking in Ireland every year. Starting to drink as a child, which is the norm rather than the exception in this country, is a known risk factor for later alcohol dependency. In fact, the Irish drug and alcohol survey found that 37% of 15- to 24-year-olds had an alcohol use disorder. This should be setting off alarm bells.

We also know that every day in Ireland on average four people die from drinking, and more people end up in hospital due to alcohol-related harm. The Government's own research estimates that alcohol costs our health service a staggering €1.5 billion per year. Therefore, I hope the Minister and the Government agree the 2018 Act should be enforced as intended. I hope the Government will work with me to progress this legislation. Yesterday in the House, the Minister for justice said that if the Social Democrats tabled legislation, the Government would give it serious consideration and I hope it does.

I thank Sheila Gilheany and Eoin Ryan from Alcohol Action Ireland, who are in the Gallery today. They have been campaigning on this issue for some time. I thank them for their

persistent advocacy and work in developing this legislation. I also thank Jake and Juliet in my office for their ongoing work and support.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.36 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.16 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.36 p.m. and resumed at 2.16 p.m.

National Social Enterprise Policy: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Members of the House for participating in these wonderful statements on our national social enterprise policy. I pay tribute to those involved in social enterprises across our country. As Minister of State at the Department of community development, I am very conscious of the work that is being done. I am delighted to be here today to speak on this important policy, which was launched in 2024 and is in keeping with programme for Government commitments.

Social enterprise has the objective of achieving a social or environmental impact rather than maximising profits for owners or shareholders. As we see all over Ireland, such enterprises are frequently about working together to support disadvantaged groups and people such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities and our Traveller community, or addressing issues such as food poverty or environmental matters. I had the privilege of being with the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Councillor Ray McAdam, at the Dublin city social enterprise awards just two weeks ago. To see the brilliant awardees that night would give you hope. In my own county of Cork, IRD Duhallow does tremendous work. Social enterprises are part of the wider social economy and they make a valuable contribution to the social and economic progress of Ireland through the creation of jobs and the delivery of a broad range of services in areas such as home care, childcare, employment activation, retail, hospitality and catering, environmental services and social housing. They are innovative, entrepreneurial and are increasingly utilising new technologies and creative approaches to address social, societal or environmental challenges.

Members of the House and, I hope, members of the public watching and listening will be familiar with social enterprises that work in our communities such as FoodCloud, which redistributes surplus food from supermarkets to those who need it. To see what it does at first

hand is extraordinary. I could also mention Rehab Recycling, which employs people with disabilities in waste recycling, and Speedpak, which provides customised packaging and distribution services for other companies as a means of providing work experience and training to the long-term unemployed. There also more locally based enterprises such as the Aran Island Energy Co-operative, which is working towards making the Aran Islands self-sufficient for energy by harnessing wind, wave and light. These are all supported under my Department's policies. They are about transforming communities, offering opportunity and hope, inspiring all of us and empowering people.

Many people hearing the term "social enterprise" might ask what it is about. It is relatively new in our country but we have a long and proud history and tradition of non-State intervention in community and social life, which is very much consistent with the ethos of social enterprise. Many social enterprises emerged from the community and voluntary sector and built on the work of that sector in addressing social challenges.

A significant number of social enterprises in Ireland are governed by voluntary boards. In other cases, social enterprises have been established by entrepreneurs who have chosen to use the social enterprise model to maximise their social impact and their contribution to society. I thank all of the volunteers who give of their time and those who are risk-takers in this social enterprise space. Before 2019, we had no formal or national policy for social enterprise. However, there had been research in the area, including a number of regional studies and a comprehensive report published in 2013 by Forfás, *Social Enterprise in Ireland: Sectoral Opportunities and Policy Issues*.

Collectively, those documents highlight the need for a cohesive policy to support the development of social enterprise and assist in realising its potential. This research consistently highlighted the potential for growth and the benefits this growth could bring to our society, the importance of access to finance for social enterprises, the importance of capacity building and business supports for social enterprises, the need for leadership and good governance in social enterprises, the benefits of enhanced networking and collaboration and the need for better measures and awareness of the impact of social enterprises.

In July 2017, the Government assigned policy responsibility for social enterprise to the newly established Department of Rural and Community Development, as it then was. This assignment provided an unprecedented opportunity for policy and that social enterprise space to be developed in a co-ordinated and integrated way, alongside other initiatives to support organisations in terms of providing services or tackling social and environmental issues in our communities. The first national social enterprise policy was developed in partnership with the sector and was underpinned by a joint research project undertaken by the Social Finance Foundation and my Department in 2017 and 2018. It was informed at a key national level by a bilateral series of meetings with key stakeholders, discussions and workshops and a public consultation process at international level by research papers and took the key learnings from social and enterprise policies published in other jurisdictions.

One of my predecessors, Michael Ring, was the Minister in charge when the first policy was published by my Department. *Trading for Impact* was published by the former Minister, Heather Humphreys, in July of last year, to follow on from the first national social enterprise policy. It was designed to cultivate and sustain a strong and impactful social enterprise sector in Ireland that enriches the social, environmental and economic well-being of our communities.

This policy has five objectives. The first objective is to build awareness of social enterprise to generate wider public and institutional understanding of social enterprise and its potential, including through awareness-raising initiatives in education and youth engagement. The second objective is to grow and sustain social enterprise, which will allow social enterprises to benefit from supports to improve their growth and sustainability, including improving access to existing enterprise supports, developing new tailored supports, improving opportunities for access to markets and improving the capabilities of social enterprises. The third objective is to support the green transition to help social enterprises to contribute towards the green transition and deliver on climate action targets. This includes ensuring social enterprises can access relevant circular economy funding opportunities and avail of renewable energy and bioeconomic opportunities. The fourth objective, in respect of national and international engagement, will focus on actions that will develop and deepen our engagement and alignment on social enterprise policy on a national, regional, EU and international level. Enhanced engagement at national level is also targeted through co-ordination between public sector organisations and embedding social enterprise considerations in local and regional policies. The fifth objective, impact measurement, will focus on actions to improve the levels of quality of social enterprise data, provide access to social impact measurement tools and deepen engagement with academic institutions. This includes commissioning research and providing support for impact measurements to expand on the original baseline data collection exercise. It also points to convening a social, economic and academic engagement group.

Members of the House will be aware that my officials engaged extensively with stakeholders when considering the new policy and were careful to take a partnership approach with the sector in its development to ensure it reflects learnings from the first policy and developments since that time. This engagement included a series of bilateral meetings with key stakeholders, including Departments, representative bodies and networks, as well as a number of regional stakeholder engagement events and a public consultation which received submissions from 43 stakeholders. In addition, a number of reports and reviews were undertaken in order to develop a new strategy. The findings and recommendations of these reports are reflected in the policy.

In 2021, my Department commissioned the OECD to undertake an independent review of the first national social enterprise policy which consisted of a team from the OECD undertaking a week-long study visit to Ireland in 2022. The team from the OECD met over 60 social enterprise stakeholders and visited a number of social enterprises. Information gathered from this visit proved to be very insightful and provided officials with international perspectives on the development of social enterprise in our country and a valuable resource in developing the current policy.

The former policy committed my Department to improve data collection relating to the extent of social enterprise in Ireland and the areas in which it operates. The resulting first national baseline data collection exercise of social enterprise Ireland formed an important part of the foundation of the new policy and was published in July 2023. The findings of the baseline report were invaluable to understanding how important the sector is in Ireland. It highlighted that over 4,000 social enterprises operate across the country. The total income from social enterprise in 2021 was €2.3 billion. Over 84,000 people are employed by social enterprises, which is 3.7% of the workforce. Almost 75,000 volunteers participate in the sector, over 30,000 of which are board members. Some 60% of social enterprises employ people in active labour market programmes and 15% of social enterprises report they operate internationally.

Since the launch of the first national social enterprise policy, the social enterprise unit in my Department has spent over €16 million on supporting social enterprise policy in Ireland. As Members will know, the Dormant Accounts Fund has a particular focus on supporting members of the Traveller community, migrants, former offenders and other marginalised groups and improving the quality and delivery of services for disadvantaged communities. Some €14.9 million in dormant accounts funding has been used to provide capital support schemes, capacity building schemes, training and mentoring programmes and awareness raising to support growing and sustaining social enterprises.

A total of €1.3 million has been used to provide current expenditure to support the implementation of policy, including spending on an annual national conference, networking events, research, awareness raising and capacity building. This year, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I announced the Dormant Accounts Fund "growing social enterprise" scheme, which is worth €4 million. This scheme provides funding of between €1,500 and €97,000 to 125 social enterprises that will enable them to expand or deliver other goods and services to their communities. It is about supporting projects such as building works, repairs and refurbishments or the purchase of new machinery, vehicles or equipment.

Several other programmes delivered by my Department provide substantial financial and development supports. They include the community services programme, which provides 430 community-based organisations with support to provide local social, economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model. The programme supports about 1,700 full-time posts and 340 managerial posts. The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, has since 2018 supported 1,063 social enterprises by providing training for disadvantaged groups. Its supports for social enterprises include the provision of advice, business supports and grants up to a maximum of €2,500 per annum. We all agree the programme is a phenomenal success.

During the delivery of the LEADER 2014-22 programme, 351 social enterprise projects were awarded over €16.9 million in funding, and it is anticipated that social enterprises will continue to be supported under its economic development and job creation theme. The recently announced new solutions social innovation fund aims to further enhance the social innovation ecosystem in Ireland and is open to organisations that operate in the social economy. As Members will know, it is co-funded through the European Social Fund+ 2021-2027, a European initiative aimed at reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion, with an emphasis on disadvantaged groups. Phase 1 will establish a social innovation hub to develop the social innovation ecosystem in Ireland and support innovative projects, including direct supports to projects funded under phase 2 of new solutions. Phase 2 is a complementary call for pilots and scale-up social innovation projects. These projects will be supported by the social innovation hub through targeted supports including mentoring, capacity building supports, access to information and financial support programmes. Social enterprises through their innovative nature will be a key beneficiary of this programme.

The second element of the ESF+ 2021-2027 being delivered by my Department is the Achieve Together social innovation coaching and mentoring programme designed to enhance the business expertise of organisations supported by the community services programme, CSP, and test and scale up their innovative business models to develop their social enterprise and provide an enhanced service. It is expected that this programme will increase the capacity of

organisations to apply for and manage supports from other sources, be those local, national or at European level. Under the programme, organisations will be provided with mentors and coaches for a 12-month period. It is expected that about 50% of the 430 CSP-supported organisations will take part in this programme over its five-year lifetime.

My Department is also overseeing the implementation of the national philanthropy policy that aims to accelerate engagement with philanthropy for social good. We recognise the synergy between policies and the ESF+ new solutions social innovation programme, and we will be developing an enabling environment where social innovations, including social enterprises, can avail of opportunities arising from philanthropic and corporate social responsibilities to support social enterprises. It is recognised that such partnerships and philanthropic investment can provide unrestricted supports where Government may be restrained, and we will focus on growing this collaboration over the lifetime of the policy.

Through the delivery of the actions in trading for impact, my officials will continue to engage with colleagues across Government to ensure the improved access to the funding and supports needed to support social enterprises. Supports in this area include those from Enterprise Ireland, which works with companies to help them start up, grow and innovate, and a high-potential start-up, HPSU, team to provide hands-on support and advice to early-stage companies that need it, especially around innovative products, services or technologies. Members should know that those social enterprises that meet the criteria and have a company legal structure that allows for equity investment may be supported through this initiative.

In addition, the 31 local enterprise offices, LEOs, across the country that carry out enterprise development functions for Enterprise Ireland are the first-stop shops for providing information on all Government supports available for the SME sector. The LEO policy statement sets out clearly that social enterprises are eligible for LEO assistance, provided they operate on a commercial basis and meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme they wish to apply for. All social enterprises can access LEO training courses and LEOs have included events for social enterprises as part of their local enterprise week programmes in the past, including in the year just gone. A key focus for us in this area is ensuring a consistency of approach across the 31 LEOs when interacting with social enterprises and the active labour market programmes such as the community employment programme, the rural social scheme and Tús, which are of critical importance to social enterprises, with 60% of social enterprises with paid staff employed through these programmes.

Social enterprises in Ireland can take a variety of legal forms under the Companies Acts as well as under legislation governing co-operatives. The most common legal form for social enterprises is the company limited by guarantee, CLG. Over 75% of social enterprises are CLGs. In addition, the majority of social enterprises report holding charitable status. A 2021 report, *Research on Legal Form for Social Enterprises*, found there was no compelling need or great demand for this to be prioritised, and so the co-operative societies Bill 2022 is being drafted by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to consolidate and modernise the existing legislation to ensure there is a clear and more favourable legal basis for the co-operative model in Ireland. This would improve the options available for establishing social enterprises, and the views of the sector have been taken into account in drafting that Bill. Over the lifetime of the policy, further clarity and guidance will be provided to help social enterprises make informed decisions regarding the most suitable legal form or legal status to

suit their needs. As the sector grows and matures, the needs and challenges of social enterprises that arise from their legal form will be monitored and reviewed.

Since 2021, my Department has sponsored the "Partnering with a Social Enterprise" category at the Chambers Ireland sustainable business awards, one of which is for partnering with a social enterprise. This recognises the valuable work done and supported by businesses up and down our country in partnering with social enterprises. My Department is also engaging at European level in the context of the Luxembourg Declaration that gives a commitment to the social economy as a driver of modernisation within the Single Market and has been adopted by 20 EU member states since 2015. The core commitments include: increasing visibility and recognition for the social economy; promoting a balanced development model to support the economic, social, and environmental aspects of the social economy's growth; ensuring financial support and a favourable ecosystem that leads to the expansion of the sector; championing social innovation; and encouraging and integrating social innovation and innovative public policies through high-level dialogue and mechanisms like the European action plan for the social economy.

Officials from my Department recently travelled to Spain to participate in a Luxembourg Declaration meeting and were pleased to be able to relay to the senior officials gathered there the work being done in Ireland to support social enterprises. I am delighted we can do that because it is important to be twinned with Europe. In line with EU objectives, partnership with the sector was evident through the development of Trading for Impact and continues through its implementation. Implementation of the policy will be informed and assisted by a stakeholder engagement group made up of key participants from the sector, who are very active. This group, made up of representatives from Government Departments, networks and representative bodies and social enterprises, will continue to meet regularly and help to ensure the various lead bodies listed in the policy are held accountable for the delivery of their actions. Overall responsibility for the delivery of the policy will rest with my Department, which will co-ordinate and facilitate its delivery to support and develop the sector.

The group has met and work is progressing well, including the establishment of working groups under the policy including a social enterprise social finance stakeholder group comprising representation from social enterprise and social lenders. The group will engage on the funding needs of the sector to investigate if the current financial instruments adequately address the needs of the sector. The process for undertaking a census of social enterprise in Ireland has begun. This census is a follow-on of the baseline data collection exercise that took place, as I said earlier, and will no doubt be very helpful in informing the delivery of the policy.

Actions under the policy also call for enhanced co-ordination and consolidation of social enterprise representative bodies and for my Department to commission a partner organisation or organisations to support the delivery of social enterprise policy actions. In line with these actions, and following a competitive procurement process, my Department commissioned a consortium, made up of Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland, SERI, the Irish Social Enterprise Network, ISEN, the Local Development Company Network, LDCN, and the Wheel, to deliver a number of actions under the policy on their behalf. These include: two national social enterprise conferences, the first of which was held in Dublin Castle last year and the second of which will be held in Ballinasloe in November this year; a national social enterprise awards event to be held in Dublin next month; a series of regional networking events that took place

in March and April in Sligo, Galway, Limerick, Cork, and Dublin; and a pilot awareness-raising programme for transition year students.

In line with the policy, my Department has also commissioned a pilot programme to investigate the challenges and merits of utilising a dedicated voluntary accreditation or quality mark for social enterprise. Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland is administering this pilot on behalf of my Department, and it is being run in association with an international body called the Social Enterprise World Forum. Over 70 social enterprises, including one credit union, have already been awarded the People and Planet First accreditation through this pilot, which it is hoped will make it easier for social enterprises to secure business supports, public procurement contracts, philanthropic funding, grants and more by providing a trusted mark of approval for individuals and businesses thinking about doing business with a social enterprise. The purpose of the pilot is to road-test how the verification will operate in an Irish context and will highlight its benefits and potential to social enterprises.

For me as the Minister of State with special responsibility in this area and for the Government, supporting social enterprise is not just a policy priority - it is a statement of intent about the kind of Ireland we want to build. Social enterprises do not wait for the conditions to be perfect; they act. Quietly and practically, they create jobs, unlock talent, build local resilience and reimagine what inclusive and sustainable growth can look like. Trading for Impact represents a strong commitment by the Government to social enterprises and recognises the value and potential they bring to making our communities and environment stronger and more sustainable. Through funding, supporting strong frameworks and deeper collaboration, we are committed to creating the conditions where social enterprises can do what they do best: serve, include and empower.

As we look to the future, with all the challenges and opportunities that will no doubt come our way, we need more people and leadership who believe in the power of local action to shape national outcomes. I see huge potential for growth in the sector in the years ahead. I am convinced that, through delivery of the actions contained in Trading for Impact, we will strongly support the development of the sector in the years to come. Having met many in this space, I am greatly warmed by their commitment and dedication.

I look forward to hearing the view of the Members opposite. I thank them for being here. I know they will raise many interesting points. I thank the Members for being here this afternoon. It is important that I listen to their comments. The Members have experience as well. I am opening to listening to Members and to participating with them.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the opportunity to discuss social enterprise policy. I appreciate the updates the Minister of State provided. I will have a good look at his statement. Sometimes, it can be difficult to ingest what a Minister of State is saying across a 25-minute contribution.

Social enterprises are an important part of our communities. They need support to help them to flourish and grow. I hope the policy will develop into a framework of the practical, namely how to set up and how to run social enterprise. I am interested in the piece around the LEOs, which I had not heard previously. That is something that needs a little more investigation on my part because it could be very useful.

In my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson on social enterprise, I have had the honour of visiting many social enterprises across the city. There are a number, even in my constituency, such as Phoenix FM, Base centre and Huntstown resource centre where, if he ever visits, the Minister of State will get a nice breakfast and a cup of tea. I also visited a couple of others that struck a chord with me in terms of how we can grow and develop the social enterprise sector, which covers a multitude of different policy areas and areas that we need to discover. For example, the Rediscovery Centre in Ballymun is an incredible place. It has research and education. It has: an eco store; rediscovery paint; the Boiler House Café; Rediscover Furniture, which is about upcycling; and Rediscover Fashion, which also is about upcycling. It is about getting things, for example, something as simple as the flags that are up here at the weekend that Dublin City Council put up along the quays, and making them into handbags, shopping bags, etc. It is innovative use. They also do a lot of education courses and workshops, working with local communities in the Ballymun and wider area.

When you look at the rediscover paint piece, for example, and we are talking about the circular economy and working with people, people bring their paint to their recycling centres. The centres get the paint and they have the facilities and the people, who they train, upskill and employ, to reuse it. People can then buy it as cheap as a tanner for 10 l. Everybody knows the cost of paint. It is a hell of a lot more expensive than that.

Something like this provides an opportunity to make a difference in communities. Not only that, but it shows the community what we do. We are very much in a throwaway society. Washing machines and other appliances nearly are designed to last only two or three years. We need to get away from that, so we need the necessary facilities. Social enterprise gives us that opportunity, not only to provide employment, training and education but also to provide good-quality jobs. It also helps the environment in the context of the climate measures that we need to put in place. It is something that needs to be supported. It also needs to be replicated. Every area should have a rediscovery centre.

Another social enterprise which I visited is the Priory Market in Tallaght. I do not know whether Deputies have been there recently. It has only opened up in the past few months. It, too, is a phenomenal space for the people of Tallaght. I desperately want one in Blanchardstown. There should be one in every constituency. It is a hub. An old factory where electronic equipment was being produced has been transformed. The company that owned it closed down. When it did so, those involved with the Priory Market looked at the space and asked what could they do with it. They have redesigned it to cater for those who produce and sell artisan food and drink. It has its own brewery. Local people are involved. One hundred and thirty people are employed there. They have their own businesses, all within the Priory Market, and they provide a range of foods. I can attest to the fact that the food is absolutely outstanding. I have not tried the beer, but the food is outstanding. It is one of things. When we are talking about social enterprises, we look at it maybe in the older context of social enterprises about what we do and getting people into employment. This is new. It is innovative.

One of their key asks that struck me when I visited related to seed or capital funding. Those involved would have never got the capital funding - it cost over €2 million - if it were not for a really innovative way of getting that funding.

There is a lot to cover and, unfortunately, I have only five minutes. I could literally talk for a lot longer, but I will give way to my colleagues.

There are a couple of quick questions I would like to ask. In the programme for Government-

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Grace Boland): The Deputy is eating into his colleagues' time.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I appreciate that. When will details of the seed funding be announced? It was in the programme for Government. Also, Rethink was awarded a five-year €4 million contract for delivering social innovation supports without any public tendering. Maybe we could find out, because no other sectoral bodies could apply for it, why the contract was not the subject of a public tender.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I agree with everything my colleague Deputy Donnelly said. We have spoken about this matter in the past. The Minister of State knows my feelings on it. Social enterprises are at the heart of rural and community life. They create jobs and roll out services. They foster innovation, but too often they have been treated as an afterthought by the Government. They have not been given priority and have been left without the enabling mechanisms and investment they need to thrive. What is needed is a change in attitude to recognise their role, reward their contribution and invest in their future and I truly hope that this new strategy will come with the enabling criteria that is required.

There is an exciting example in my county, where communities in the Comaraigh area of County Waterford have come together as part of the Comhar Comaraigh initiative. The latter is a holistic network bringing together villages, towns and townlands, including Annestown, Ballylaneen, Ballymacarbry, Ballyduff, Boatstrand, Bunmahon, Carrickbeg, Clonea Power, Dunhill, Faha, Fenor, Fewes, Kill, Kilmacthomas, Kilmeaden, Kilrossanty, Modeligo, Mothel, Newtown, Portlaw, Rathgormack, Stradbally, Touraneena and Kilbrien. It is important to mention all of them, not so as I can rattle off a list of villages in my constituency but to show the breadth of what this community group and this new initiative is trying to do. These communities are pooling resources, sharing their experiences and developing common approaches. They are linking existing social enterprises, such as the Dunhill Multi-education Centre, the Copper Coast geopark, Kilmacthomas Social Enterprise Group, the Bunmahon community development and, pretty much, every GAA, camogie and ladies' Gaelic football club in the region. They are bringing them all together to harness their innovation and collective strength. Once again, however, Government is behind the curve.

Communities are miles ahead. They are building these networks, finding the solutions and creating the opportunities and it seems Government is not even playing catch-up a lot of the time. Earlier this year, I asked the Minister of State's colleague, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to provide pilot funding for a full-time co-ordinator to support this ground-breaking new initiative. Communities cannot run on goodwill, strategies and platitudes. They need sustainable funding. They need support and they need it in a structured and structural way that they can depend on and plan for. The Minister's reply to that simple request, which would not have cost a lot but which would have had a big impact in the area - and possibly across the State if the model gained currency - was that there was no money this year and there probably will not be any next year.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Grace Boland): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: That is not good enough.

I look forward to the remainder of the debate. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other Members. Hopefully, the strategy, as I said, will be followed by a framework for action.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Social enterprise policy is incredibly important. It is something that we all see in our constituencies. The crucial aspect here is it includes many people and communities that are often very much excluded. If we are serious about it, I ask the Minister of State to look at how we do procurement and how we use social clauses in the context of procurement. The biggest spender in the State is the State. We need to use the resources of the State in our communities in order that there is a knock-on effect in terms of the local economies and these types of enterprises as well.

If we are serious about areas and communities that are excluded, we also need to look at those areas and communities that do not have the basic infrastructure to allow them to have successful enterprises. I will take the west of Ireland as an example because it is where I know best. If we look at areas like Connemara, the basic infrastructure is literally at breaking point. The Minister of State will see this if he travels across Connemara, where he will see poles tilted to the side and cables on the ground continuously since Storm Éowyn. Renvyle has been without drinking water for two months and it lost electricity for a day. Basic things like this need to be sorted out if we are serious about being able to have social enterprises or any other type of enterprises across the west of Ireland so economies can thrive.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am pleased to speak on national social enterprise policy. The purpose of social enterprise organisations is to sustain the social and economic well-being of people living in our communities. They are essential in delivering social inclusion and the provision of opportunities to some of the most marginalised groups in our society, such as the long-term unemployed. Across the State, they represent almost 4% of the workforce, with over 84,000 people in employment, the vast majority of whom are women.

We often talk about economic growth but for many communities, unfortunately, some that I represent, this growth has not produced any real social or economic benefit. My home city of Limerick still has seven of the top ten unemployment blackspots, which is an incredible statistic. We have communities that rightly feel abandoned and isolated from the rest of society. It is in these circumstances that social enterprises have a critical role to play.

One such enterprise group, and there are many more in Limerick, is the Our Lady of Lourdes Community Services group. It provides services and supports to needy people living in the Ballinacurra Weston community and its surrounds. The community is filled with some of the most decent, fun and kind people you would ever know, but it is a community that is socially and economically disadvantaged. The service seeks to help them, and it has become part of the fabric and a place of refuge. It is just one example and there are many more. They offer a wide range of services to users of all ages, from early years education to youth services and an assortment of other benefits, all provided with the needs of the community at the forefront.

There is, however, a sense of foreboding in the four Limerick regeneration communities of Moyross, Ballinacurra Weston, St. Mary's Park and Southill. This is because a crucial part of the Limerick regeneration programme was the economic and social intervention fund, which supported many social, educational and economic initiatives to strengthen local regeneration areas. There are plans to cut this funding from €4 million annually to €500,000 in 2028. There is great concern that many important community initiatives will end due to lack of funding. This should be a wake-up call for the Government. The Department of housing and local government has stated that the funding should be transitioned to a sustainable model under the auspices of the council. With many community groups and leaders, I am worried that the level of funding needed cannot be sustained without Government support. I am putting this on the record of the Dáil today.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are all happy that we are having a conversation about national social enterprise policy. However, it is the case that seeing is believing. Like my colleagues, I know there have been many successful but also some unsuccessful social enterprise operations within our constituencies. Some of that is due to the fact that supports and the framework have not necessarily been in place as we would like to see them. In fairness, the Minister of State plans to visit my constituency. Muirhevnamor community centre is one of the places he will be visiting. When we have that sort of community infrastructure, it is a matter of making sure we utilise it. Whether we are talking about training initiatives or social enterprises, as I said, some have been successful and some have not. In some cases, we need to make sure we have not only resources in the sense of the seed money that is necessary, but also what additional supports are necessary to bring these enterprises to a level where they can be successful.

Some of my colleagues noted that this can be a particularly innovative process. Where people have been at a remove from training and employment, these are the type of people that we need go get into this area. We have seen the huge strides that have been taken in regard to education. Lifelong learning has been facilitated to a degree, although there are still some people locked out who we need to facilitate. Whether it is the PLC route or other avenues that offer opportunity, these did not necessarily exist before. If we are serious about this, it will be a case of trying and testing, and doing what we do not always necessarily do, which is to review the policy and then make the changes that are necessary.

Deputy George Lawlor: I am glad to speak on the issue of Ireland's national social enterprise policy and to reflect on its deeper promise, its transformative potential and the urgent need to elevate it from policy to practice, from vision to reality. This should not be just a policy. It should be a philosophy which says that business can be more than profit, that trade can be rooted in purpose and that communities can be empowered not by charity but by opportunity.

Social enterprises are the quiet revolutionaries of our economy. They are the community cafés that employ people with addiction issues or those disabilities, the recycling hubs that tackle both waste and unemployment and the youth programmes that give hope to those who have been told they have none. They are the organisations that see a problem and build a solution, not for profit alone but for impact. As the document says, social enterprises play an important role in promoting social inclusion and equality, providing supports and employment opportunities to more marginalised groups and minorities, such as the long-term unemployed,

people with disabilities, migrants, the Traveller community and former offenders. They can address societal issues, such as food poverty, housing provision and the environment.

With this policy, Ireland has taken a bold step. However, it will only be a bold step if we make a concerted effort to make it work. We have recognised social enterprise as a distinct and vital sector. We have committed to raising awareness, improving access to supports and building capacity. We have acknowledged that social enterprise is not a fringe idea but is central to the kind of Ireland we want to build. Let us be honest, however. We are only at the beginning. This policy is a foundation, not a finish line. It sets the stage but our performance is yet to come.

If we are serious about unlocking the full potential of social enterprise, we must go further. We must be braver and bolder because the challenges are very real. Social enterprises face barriers that traditional businesses do not. They often operate in areas of deep disadvantage, with limited access to capital, infrastructure or skilled labour. They are driven by mission but constrained by resources. We ask them to do more with less. Yet, they persist, they innovate, they uplift and they transform.

I have spoken before in this Chamber about the wonderful Kafe Konnect in Wexford and how it transforms the lives of people and, at the same time, operates a top-class social enterprise in the heart of Wexford town. It is essential that we continue to invest, not just in projects, but in people. Social entrepreneurs are among the most passionate and resilient leaders in our country, but passion alone cannot pay the rent. We need the dedicated funding streams that support start-up, scale-up and sustainability. We need the multi-annual funding models that allow for long-term planning, not short-term survival.

We must also reform procurement. Too often, social enterprises are locked out of public contracts because they cannot compete on price alone. What about value? What about impact? What about the social return on investment? We must embed social clauses into procurement policy so contracts reward not just efficiency but equity. We must build ecosystems. Social enterprises thrive when they are connected to mentors, to investors and to policymakers. I was delighted recently to bring Kafe Konnect together with the Wexford Chamber with a view to it acting as a mentor for the team. Collaboration like this brings so much more than business mentoring. It breaks down barriers and develops relationships and respect that might never have happened. We need regional hubs, incubators and networks that foster collaboration and innovation. We need to ensure that rural social enterprises are not left behind, that minority-led initiatives are uplifted and that every corner of Ireland feels the benefit of trading for impact.

3 o'clock

We must also educate. Social enterprise should not be a mystery. It should be a mainstream option. We must integrate it into our schools, universities and business courses. We must inspire the next generation to see business not just as a career but as a calling. We must also measure what matters. Impact is not always visible on a balance sheet but it is felt in lives changed, communities strengthened and hope restored. We need robust frameworks to capture that impact; to tell the stories, prove the value and make the case for continued support because, as we know, the case is very strong.

Social enterprises also create jobs, often for those furthest from the labour market. They tackle social inclusion, rural isolation and environmental degradation. They build community

resilience and foster civic engagement. They can be and often are the engines of equality and they do so with dignity. I personally know young women who have found employment in social enterprises in Wexford after years of addiction. There are dozens of people like them who have been given an opportunity, a second chance that they grabbed with both hands. These are not just stories. They are transformations and they are happening every day thanks to social enterprise. Imagine what more we could do with real investment, support and belief. Imagine a country where every town has a thriving social enterprise hub, where every school teaches the principle of ethical business, where every Department embeds social value into its contracts, and where every citizen knows that trade can be a tool for justice. That is the Ireland we must build together because social enterprise is not just the responsibility of one Department. It is the opportunity of every Department. It touches health, education, environment, justice and enterprise. It is cross-cutting, cross-sectoral and cross-community and I am delighted to say that it is growing.

Across Europe, social enterprise is gaining momentum. Ireland must not just follow but can and must lead. We can and must be the country that proves that business can be inclusive, that trade can be transformative and that impact can be the bottom line. Let us not just settle for policy on paper. Let us deliver policy in practice. Let us fund, support and celebrate social enterprise, not as a niche but as a national priority. Let us be remembered not just as the people and the parliamentarians who talked about impact but as the people and the Parliament that traded for it. When we invest in social enterprise, we invest in people, potential and progress. We invest in the women who start sewing co-operatives in their community, the man who turns his prison experience into a mentoring programme for at-risk youth, the young people who build climate solutions from the ground up. When we are doing this, we are investing in this country, in an Ireland that is fairer, greener, kinder and stronger. Today, we must say to all social entrepreneurs that we see them, believe in them, stand with them and, most of all, invest in them. Let us act, lead and trade for impact.

Deputy Joe Neville: Today, I want to talk about something that I firmly believe in and have worked in. I have seen the effort involved in our own communities. The Minister of State has been leading on this since taking up his position in recent months. I have met him a number of times in north Kildare and know that he has been all around the country because he believes in what he is doing. He believes in the importance of social enterprises and in this Trading for Impact project. I met him in Clane and he will be coming to Lullymore soon in the context of working with social enterprises. I have been involved in social enterprises myself that came in different guises. We have spoken here about community centres and cafés. I have been involved in my local community centre in Leixlip and have seen the benefit of it. I was chairman for a number of years. The centre was started in the community 40 years ago and now has a number of employees. It has provided some people with work opportunities that they may not have otherwise had. Others gained work experience there and moved on to career paths. That is what is enabled in community centres around the country.

Specific groups like the Clane Project Centre have delivered something way beyond their initial capability through fundraising initially, followed by good investment decisions. They have been able to give to their community in a number of different ways. They have helped other local groups by taking them under their umbrella. Groups like the Clane Men's Shed, whose members met the Minister of State, have been able to utilise the vision, wisdom and

effort of the people who started the Clane Project Centre a number of years ago. McAuley Place in Naas is another good example. It has looked after the elderly and other vulnerable groups who need care. Another example is the Mill in Celbridge, which provides a forum for various groups, including sports clubs and community groups, to utilise its facilities.

I recognise the difficulty of what we are trying to do as well as how difficult it can be to grasp what we are trying to do. In essence, most of these groups come from the ground up but we are trying to put a policy in place from the top down, from the Government. We are trying to encapsulate and direct what people do on the ground, in the community. Ultimately, that will be very hard, if not impossible, to deliver. What the Minister of State is trying to do with this policy is to put guidelines in place for people. That will bring its own complications because not every group has the skill sets required, whether that is in relation to financial support, financial knowledge, fundraising ability or how to deal with children in the case of a youth club, for example. All of those things require very specific skill sets and we need to ensure, through this policy document, that local groups know what to refer to or where to go to ensure they are going in the right direction. Ultimately, what we are dealing with is ordinary people in their communities who see a gap, who see that something needs to be put in place and who go out to fix it. They are not going to have all of the solutions and that is where the Government has to come in. That is what the Minister of State is attempting to do with this policy document. By learning from others, we can help new people to get involved.

On Monday, I was lucky to go to Kildare town to meet members of the Kildare LEADER partnership, including Tara Lane and Rioana Mulligan. They were setting things up for lots of other groups to learn about where they could potentially avail of funding. The LEADER group in Kildare has been very innovative in terms of how it deals with social enterprises. The Minister of State will be going to Lullymore soon to speak with members of the Kildare LEADER group.

I grew up in an urban area but I know that social enterprises can fit in especially well in rural areas, where services and businesses might not be operating to the scale they could be. We see people in these areas getting fully behind the enterprise. In a growing region like north Kildare, we do not necessarily have all of the facilities we need. We have housing but we do not necessarily have all of the other facilities that we need. Social enterprises can be tailored and can provide community solutions that larger organisations or the Government cannot get involved with initially. The Trading for Impact policy is about unlocking the full potential of social enterprise. This is not about charity. It is about supporting those groups, funding those groups and ensuring that the people involved can be drivers of sustainable jobs, inclusion and innovation in their communities. Ultimately, without those people and without some policy direction, communities will be left behind. We must also be conscious of the fact that not every community or sector will have those people - they just might not be there - and that is when we must ensure that we look for and fill the gaps in different areas using a more top-down approach, when effort is not coming from the ground up. We need to ensure that social enterprises provide employment for people. I have seen the benefit of this for people who are long-term unemployed or for migrants who are new to an area and want to get involved in the locality. Social enterprises can be key in that regard.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on this. I welcome the work done on it and the Minister of State's effort. I can see the hands-on approach to what he is doing. I thank him

for his time in listening to the points I have made. I know he will continue to engage with me on areas of north Kildare, and indeed, if there is any way I can assist him on the national policy, I would be more than willing to do so too. I thank him for his time today.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am delighted to have this opportunity and a little surprised that there is not more interest from speakers across the House on this really important issue. I will cover some of the things we talk about when we think about what a social enterprise is, the contributions they make to society and to our economy and then some of the gaps that I believe still exist in this strategy. I really welcome that the Minister of State has invited from us those suggestions and I trust that he will give them adequate deliberation and consideration.

What is a social enterprise? It is worth going back to brass tacks on this because everybody has a different understanding of it. They are businesses that operate as a business but to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact. This allows them to contribute positively to the community in ways a normal business simply cannot. They can prioritise affordability, giving employment to those who are usually excluded by the labour market or demonstrating that businesses can be eco-friendly.

I have had the privilege over the course of my career of working in the corporate sector and in the public sector. I have worked with social enterprises, NGOs and civil society in providing consultancy directly into them and overseeing funding streams and support programmes to build them up and allow them to flourish. This is, therefore, a concept I have thought a lot about over the course of my career. I still think that, unfortunately, a lot of this Government's policies are informed by a reliance on a private sector, for-profit model of business. I still think that, as a society, we hold a binary view that it is either that or a charity and there is no in-between. Social enterprises are therefore crucial in bringing about a level of sophistication of thinking about how we can combine businesses, but ones that are more sustainable, that serve our communities better into the future and where we can actually see their societal impact.

Even today I was in the audiovisual room looking at a presentation about employee ownership trusts. They are facing tax barriers to even just allowing for that worker-management model within normal businesses. Earlier this afternoon, I spoke on Leaders' Questions and Questions on Policy or Legislation to ask about the multi-annual funding that so many organisations in our civil society are crying out for as well as for core funding. We still see these organisations as charitable organisations that do good in society but which we should be grateful for rather than seeing them as viable organisations that provide crucial State services, public services, seirbhísí poiblí, that we all rely on day to day up and down the country. They contribute to society and form a vital part of our community. I often hear from constituents in my area, for example, about the frustrating lack of spaces in our communities for people to come together, to socialise, to interact, without spending loads of money.

One of my favourite social enterprises has taken that challenge head-on. I will use it as an example of what we really value in a social enterprise. Third Space is a café in Smithfield that was founded by Sean Mullan and which provides affordable food in an increasingly gentrified area, an area in north-inner-city Dublin which is just lacking that third space. That is what it is named after. We have workspaces and dwelling spaces but we no longer have community spaces to come together. That is what Third Space is, and not only that, but it also provides employment to those who might otherwise find it harder to get employment. It works with

NGOs and community and voluntary organisations within the area to help it fundraise. It has a square meal programme whereby everybody comes along and pays what they think that meal is worth and everything goes towards that charity. It does so much to bring about a sense of community in a space that is otherwise starved of it. It provides great food, great service and that space for artists, community groups, musicians and many more to come together. These spaces reduce antisocial behaviour, reduce loneliness and promote healthier, more vibrant communities. The whole community benefits from this, whether or not they engage directly with a social enterprise or not. Tá siad fite fuaite inár bpobal, agus caithfimid tacú leo.

Often overlooked when we speak about social enterprises, though, is their contribution to the economy. That is, I think, because we still have that mindset of charity, particularly as they do not fall under the Department of enterprise. They are extremely valuable to our economy. Those who work in this sector form part of our income-based tax, a tax base that is much more stable than corporation tax. The money spent in this sector and any surpluses generated go directly back into our local communities instead of feeding offshore corporations or sitting in shareholder investment accounts around the world. In sectors which face issues around high costs, pricing out consumers and squeezing wages, social enterprises offer the possibility for cheaper prices for consumers and better wages and conditions for workers because they do not constantly place profit margin above their social purpose - all this while they continue to run viable businesses. There is also huge opportunity for the State, which often pays a high price for corporate profits in public procurement, to save taxpayer funds by having more contracts with social enterprises.

I welcome this strategy and I believe it contains many worthwhile aims and commitments. We see a very important shift in formalising and consolidating supports, providing new finance tools and pushing for the visibility of social enterprises. Under this strategy, however, we are still not yet seeing that crucial pivot away from short-term grant-dependent supports. For any business and enterprise, this makes it incredibly difficult to scale its work, to ensure that it will continue to operate and to aspire to its full potential. By contrast, we have a much more sophisticated structure around other businesses and supporting their viability and longevity. Particularly disappointing is that social enterprise is not mentioned at all in the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity. It is a missed opportunity when social enterprises can be both productive and extremely competitive, just not the traditional model of what we think of as an enterprise. I would encourage much closer collaboration with the Department of enterprise as we are really missing out on huge potential benefits in this area. On this strategy, we need to do much more to change the system to sustainable, long-term, diversified funding, including through public procurement. If we build capacity in this sector, we all stand to benefit as communities, taxpayers and consumers.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive statement and for setting it out. I welcome that. I also welcome the policy, which is just the second policy on this in the history of the State. The first policy started in 2019. Significantly, that was the year we promised transformative action and declared a climate and a biodiversity emergency. We never really got that transformative action. I will look at this first and ask maybe some practical questions and then go back to pick up on some of the themes the last speaker spoke about.

The policy was launched a year ago and it has taken us almost longer, a year, to discuss it, which is significant in itself. It is 58 pages long and contains five key objectives and 57 actions. I welcome that there is a stakeholder engagement group to provide oversight. Has that stakeholder engagement group met? If so, how many times has it met? Are minutes available? It is stated that an annual report will be published on the implementation. Has an annual report been published? It is over a year since the strategy was published. Where is the annual report?

Picking up on the previous speaker's contribution, we were promised transformative action, and that transformative action really has not come. I am very positive about this strategy but I am worried about its implementation and about it being sidelined to the main growth economy that results in business as usual. We know from Covid and from the climate emergency that we cannot continue with the same model, with endless growth for growth's sake. There is a complete difference between a growth economy and a thriving economy. The social enterprise and the strategy that the Minister of State has outlined here are not just a small part of that; they have to be a fundamental part of it. It is interesting that we had no figures until 2023, when his Department rightly commissioned a report on the data. It took until 2023 to get that. That gives an indication of how little value we put on social enterprise. That research told us that there were 4,335 social enterprises nationally. The total income of social enterprises in 2021 was €2.34 billion. Almost 85,000 people are employed by social enterprises. That is 3.7% of the Irish workforce. There is huge scope for an increase in the number of people employed. There are also the volunteers who work alongside them, nearly 75,000, without whom social enterprises could not succeed. Women make up the vast majority, at almost 70% of the total workforce in social enterprises, with 68% concentrated in four sectors: child care, which is dominated by women; community infrastructure and local development; health, youth services and social care; and heritage, festivals, arts and creative industry. All of these areas are vital to a thriving economy. Some 75% of social enterprises focus on a local market. In rural areas, 84% focus on a local market. Last week or the week before - I am losing track of time and dates - I was with the Talamh Beo group, which grows sustainably. Its members pointed out to me that there is no policy for sustainable growth in that manner where they supply the local community, local areas and local businesses. That is a gap. The social enterprise expansion and development, SEED, allocation needs to be looked at and worked on as well. Most staff are employed under community employment schemes or Tús. There have been repeated efforts to reduce the money and importance paid to Tús community employment schemes and rural schemes, which work with very little money and struggle from year to year. I would like to see a transformative change under the Minister of State's watch. He made a good attempt with a very good opening statement. I would like to see it mean something. Transformative action is required so that our rural communities can survive.

A point was made earlier by my colleague in Galway West, Deputy Farrell, about Carraroe having no infrastructure. One might ask what that has to do with social enterprise but if there is no sewage treatment plant to allow houses to be built and for small enterprises to develop, we are in serious trouble. Social enterprises can only come along with basic infrastructure. We have wonderful examples of social enterprises in Galway such as the Galway Artisan Workshop and Bounce Back Recycling in Ballybrit, which does mattress and furniture recycling. Twenty-five years ago, there were presentations in relation to recycling mattresses and many other materials that were never put into action. I welcome that this is happening but the people were way ahead of us in Galway city. We have Galway Online Community Radio, which is really

important as a social enterprise. It aims to give ethnic minorities a voice in Irish media. We also have the SCCUL Sanctuary in Clarinbridge - I cannot read them all out - An Mheitheal Rothar and the Galway Community Circus. There is the Green Bean Café in Athenry. All over the islands, there are examples of co-operatives working together for energy or to organise the various schemes that keep the islands going.

The previous speaker said it better than me: my worry is that this is simply looked on as a sideline or an addition. Labour activation schemes are talked about in such narrow terms. Private companies are brought in that should have nothing to do with social enterprises or labour activation schemes. We have seen what happened in England. We put an emphasis on narrow criteria and do not value what social enterprises do for the environment in relation to the sustainable goals, which were laid out by the UN, which we all treasure and must comply with. They have to be mentioned at every opportunity.

I praise the opening statement but I would like to see a hands-on approach. I would also like to see the annual report or a date for it and the published oversight minutes. There have been so many strategies and plans in so many areas without any accountability or constant review. Most of all, I would like to see economists, who treasure their role as economists, put a value on the matters they have put no value on, social enterprise being top of the list. An economy cannot thrive without carers being paid properly. Again, it is dominated by females. The cost of domestic violence to the Exchequer has never been valued. At a conservative estimate, it is €2.5 billion. One might rightly ask what that has to do with social enterprise. It has everything to do with this male-dominated economic view - I apologise; some males - of valuing certain aspects of an economy and ignoring the really important aspects that are never given an economic value.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the opportunity to speak on social enterprises. I welcome the Minister of State's opening statement. It is important that we support social enterprises. I will highlight some of the great work in my constituency to emphasise the valuable work happening across Mayo. One example is the Kilmovee community housing centre. It is a small community but the social enterprise there is doing tremendous work. It is an approved housing body, runs social homes in the community, provides meals on wheels, runs after-school clubs and promotes heritage activities. It also supports young people with a homework club. It runs a Thursday club where it offers hot meals and bingo to senior citizens. In an age when we are trying to combat social isolation, this type of work in our communities is important. It has also done great work on the AstroTurf in the community. The loop walk is a huge asset. There are plans for ten more houses in the area as well as a group home. I commend the great work of the manager, Trisha Duffy, and Tommy Horan, the chairperson of the board, who has done tremendous community work. During the storm, Tommy Horan, a number of other people and I delivered hot meals to people in the community without power. Without these types of social enterprises, the local knowledge of elderly people, senior citizens and vulnerable people would be lost. These organisations are under constant and significant financial pressures. I welcome the Minister of State's opening statement and his commitment to this sector. I will work with him to ensure this happens and is felt on the ground. I also commend the work of Sheila Hunt, the former manager in Kilmovee, who laid the foundations for the great work that has happened.

Closer to my own area is Brickens Meals on Wheels, another social enterprise. It is a fantastic organisation run by the wonderful Lorraine Lowry. Brickens is the epicentre of hundreds of meals on wheels that go out to elderly and vulnerable people across my part of Mayo. It does tremendous work. During the storm, the organisation was at the front in assisting people in the worst number of weeks at that time. Eugene Waldron, a local engineer, was and remains a driving force behind Brickens Meals on Wheels.

Clár IRD runs social homes and assists elderly people, senior citizens and vulnerable people in the Claremorris area. Indeed, it administers and assists with the warmer homes scheme as well, which is a very important aspect of its work. Clár IRD should be commended on the great work it does.

I draw the Minister of State's attention to the great work taking place in Mayo Abbey, a small community that is producing some wonderful activities. The training centre in Mayo Abbey is a force for young people and all types of people in terms of the activation of the labour market. It is doing wonderful work with its organic centre, social homes and so on. Another wonderful organisation is Castlebar Social Services, which is doing tremendous work delivering hundreds of meals across the Castlebar area. I met people from the organisation recently in Buswells Hotel. They talked about the financial pressures they face. Balla Community Centre is the hub of its community. It is a wonderful area and community. Balla Community Resources Development is doing tremendous work in Balla as well.

There are many other such organisations right across Mayo. One of the major issues they consistently raise is to do with the community employment scheme, the rural social scheme and the Tús scheme. The Minister of State is from a rural constituency and will be very familiar with those schemes. The issue consistently raised is that it is particularly difficult to get individuals onto the schemes. We are in an economy of full employment, which must be mentioned as a factor. However, there is a significant issue also in terms of the money. The threshold needs to be increased because it is simply not enough to ensure these schemes are viable. People on the RSS, Tús and CE schemes do tremendous work. They are the people preparing meals on wheels, cleaning our graveyards and cleaning the streets. It is really important work but we are not offering them enough to stay on those schemes. I spoke recently to a man who is on one of the schemes and was doing great work in the local cemetery. However, notwithstanding the additional money for being on the scheme, he was losing money by the time he drove to the different locations where he is required to work. That needs to be addressed. In Ballindine, the Meals on Wheels service had to close recently, one of the reasons being manpower issues. The fundamental factor was that the service could not find individuals to recruit onto the schemes. I believe the Minister of State is sincere in wanting to support these wonderful organisations. The manpower factor is a fundamental part of addressing these issues. These organisations have staff but a huge bulk of their work is done by individuals on the CE scheme, RSS and Tús.

When wage increases happen, when there are improvements to employment and so on, the social enterprises do not receive additional funding from central government. That places significant pressure on them and it needs to be addressed. These organisations are doing tremendous work and they must be protected and supported. We cannot afford to lose the wonderful organisations that are the glue in our communities.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I am delighted to contribute to these statements. There are great examples of social enterprise organisations throughout the country, all of which are doing fantastic work, including Offaly Local Development Company in my constituency of Offaly. The company, which we in the county are fortunate to have, supports voluntary groups and individuals all across Offaly who are already running or thinking of setting up a social enterprise. These supports come in many formats, from individual staff or board member mentoring guidance to the provision of facilitated relevant training, information or networking opportunities that enhance the skills of those involved in a project. I encourage all my constituents who are thinking of setting up a social enterprise to contact Offaly Local Development Company or go to its website. It has already played a significant and important role in respect of Birr swimming pool, Pullough Community Shop, Moneygall Community Gym and a Meals on Wheels programme that serves south and west Offaly. One of the main supports it provides is assisting in the accessing of local and national financial supports such as grant applications. This can be very useful and helpful for groups of people thinking of setting up a social enterprise. It is a vitally important service. As we know, trying to access finance is one of the most time-consuming and challenging aspects of getting anything done at community level. It is great that we have the benefit of Offaly Local Development Company to assist.

I was interested to note some facts about social enterprises that really highlight their ongoing value and importance in all our communities, particularly rural communities. Of the 4,300 social enterprises nationally, 43% are based in rural areas, where they support a significant employment contribution. That factor is really significant. It is so important that we protect and maintain these enterprises in rural Ireland. They are predominantly composed of women, who represent 69% of the total number employed in social enterprises. These facts are valuable insights into the very positive role social enterprises play in many rural communities such as my own in County Offaly. It is absolutely vital that we support the great work these social enterprises are doing. We must ensure they remain active and are financed and supported in every way possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Members for their contributions. Deputy Nolan is right that we must support social enterprises. That is the fundamental point and it is what I will do as Minister of State.

Deputy Donnelly spoke about Rethink Ireland. It was formerly Social Innovation Fund Ireland, SIFI, which was established by the then Government in 2012 to set up a €100 million fund in collaboration with philanthropists. Its establishment was a commitment on foot of a recommendation in the report of the Forum for Philanthropy and Fundraising. The contract the Deputy mentioned is fulfilling that commitment and, as the target is being reached, the amount is being reduced accordingly.

Again, I thank Deputy Donnelly and other Members for their contributions to this very exciting debate. We all agree on the need for a shared ambition and vision for the social enterprise sector. I will be happy to visit any of the places the Deputies mentioned. I look forward to going there with them. These social enterprises are good news stories. They are absolutely fantastic and the people one meets there are phenomenal. I do not share the view

that some in the Chamber have expressed regarding private enterprise. This is about giving people an opportunity and revitalising and empowering them.

Deputy Donnelly spoke about supporting social enterprises to flourish and Deputy Nolan made the same point. Their contributions are the bookends in this debate and that point is what we must be about in a circular-economy world. Deputy Donnelly and I might disagree on many things but he is 100% right on this. As Minister of State, working with the officials in my Department, I am very clear on the importance of social enterprises and the gargantuan positive impact they have on communities across the country. Deputy Donnelly was half joking about the washing machine analogy but that is where we are at.

Deputy Connolly spoke about mattress recycling, painting, cafés and culture. All of that is positive for our country. The Deputy has left the Chamber but she asked about the minutes of meetings of the stakeholder engagement group. The minutes of the first meeting have been approved and the second meeting has been held. The minutes have been uploaded on *gov.ie*.

I have taken notes of Deputies' contributions. I will go around the country. I will be up with Deputy Ó Murchú in County Louth in a couple of weeks. The points made today are valid and pertinent. I will take them on board, particularly those relating to procurement. That is one we need to look at further.

It is clear from today's statements that there is an immense impact in our communities. We are talking about are businesses, but I have to disagree with Deputy Gibney. They are businesses with a heart, a social conscience and a social consciousness. That challenges everybody. They are transformative. The policy will be supported. It is about opportunity. I recognise their importance to our communities. I was involved in the community network before I became a politician. I understand the clear pathway that exists.

We can look at the impact social enterprises had on our communities during Covid. Deputy Lawless mentioned Storm Éowyn. These enterprises delivered services, hot meals, connectivity and vital supports in challenging times for the people who needed them most. During his tour of Mayo, the Deputy forgot to mention Ballina Costume Company, which pivoted from being a costume-making and rental company to being a producer and supplier of protective clothing for use in hospitals and care homes. That was done with no thought of a reward; it was just the right thing to do.

It is more important than ever that we in government deliver for people. That is why the programme for Government contains a commitment to support the vital role of social enterprise, recognising its value to local economies and society in general. It is my intention, working with all in this House and my colleagues in government, to deliver on that commitment through the implementation of the Trading for Impact social enterprise policy, which will provide critical support for people. Deputy Donnelly is right. Opportunity to make a real difference in our communities is what this is about. I stand for that.

The policy is a blueprint for sustainable growth in the sector in the coming years and is a testament to all the people and organisations who contributed to its development. I congratulate everybody involved in the social enterprise space for the many long hours of dedication and hard work that make this policy a real, lived reflection of this sector every day. It is more ambitious in scope than the first policy and will help to cultivate and sustain a strong and

impactful social enterprise sector, one that will enrich the social, environmental and economic well-being of our communities.

The considerable outreach undertaken in developing the policy was worthwhile. As a result of the stakeholder engagement that occurred, we know, as part of the policy, what people want and what we can accomplish. The objectives of these engagements identified for inclusion in the policy are truly important and fitting as the sector continues to develop. The hard work begins now: putting in money and support and keeping the priority there. I look forward to working with the policy stakeholder engagement group and its various subgroups and delivery partners who will oversee delivery of the policy and who have already started work on that.

As I visit social enterprises across the country, I see thriving, sustainable organisations adding billions to our economy while helping and supporting people and working to create a better world and better communities. I look forward to further concrete evidence, details and data collection. I am a big believer in data collection and impact measurement, which is not about reducing programmes but about targeting and getting things right for people.

I do not know what some people are saying, but I do not believe it can be denied that my Department continues to invest considerable resources in the growth and development of the sector, not only through the Dormant Accounts Fund but also through current funding. This funding will continue to be directed at growing and developing the capital supports required by enterprises, as well as soft supports such as capacity building, leadership development, strategic planning and increasing readiness for more mainstream financial supports to help these companies grow and prosper.

I am proud of the support my Department gives the development of these enterprises which do much to help our communities. We are all familiar with the CSP projects operating in communities throughout Ireland, as well as the SICAP and LEADER programmes, and the impact they are having. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I are mindful of the significant support provided by other policies under the remit of our Department - the volunteering strategy, the philanthropy strategy and the broader rules strategy - which provide a strong foundation to help enterprises to thrive.

I will continue to work with people in the sector. As I travel across the country, I look forward to continuing my work. I attended the Dublin City Council Social Enterprise Awards ceremony a couple of weeks ago. I was struck by the fact that eight social enterprises were recognised. They are thriving and bringing life-changing opportunities to their communities and people. They often provide opportunities where none previously existed. I want to continue to work with people. I will travel to the National Social Enterprise Awards in October. I will engage at the national annual conference in Ballinasloe in November.

As we conclude proceedings, we can agree, I hope, that the debate has been positive. There are challenges and issues raised that we must look at. As a Minister of State in the Department, I look forward to figuring out solutions, working on the problems and meeting with and hearing from people first hand.

Our social enterprise policy represents an ambitious step forward in the Government's ongoing commitment to social enterprise. As Minister of State with responsibility in this area, I am, along with the Minister, committed to ensuring support continues and grows in a targeted way, led by the actions contained in Trading for Impact. I look forward to seeing the impact

these enterprises have on our people and communities. I also look forward to working with every Member of the House. I again thank Members for their contributions.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): 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 Grace Boland - To discuss the national fare structure for train fares announced by the NTA.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the distribution of the shingles vaccines for the over-66 population.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the lack available childcare places in Kilcullen, County Kildare.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss the 3011 school bus route.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss the NCSE's SNA review process and the 2025-26 allocation guidelines.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss waiting lists for speech and language therapy in CHO 9.

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 for 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 Paul Murphy - To discuss adequate funding for the Irish language.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss financial support for a neurorehabilitation unit in Cork.

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

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the establishment of the national office on artificial intelligence.

Deputies Paula Butterly and Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the NCSE's SNA review process and the 2025-26 allocation guidelines.

The matters raised by Deputies Mark Wall, Paul Murphy, Paula Butterly and Darren O'Rourke, and Malcolm Byrne have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Childcare Services

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, for coming to the House. I want to talk to her about childcare, particularly in Kilcullen, County Kildare, in my constituency. It was the end of July when I was contacted via email and phone by a number of families in Kilcullen about the lack of childcare in that growing town. I met with a large number of mothers on a very sunny day outside a local community centre. I was immediately struck by their concerns and the problems they were facing. I was informed about the Kilcullen Needs Childcare group following that first meeting and set about finding the extent of the problem facing those mothers and their families, many of whom are new to the town of Kilcullen. In the last two months, that survey has identified 110 families facing childcare difficulties in Kilcullen. This figure translates into 153 children in need of childcare or after-school places in Kilcullen. Kilcullen is a growing town and only last Saturday I was delighted to be invited to the official opening of the field of dreams, which is a brilliant €1 million development by the local GAA club that will future-proof the GAA needs of the town and provide a community walkway, which is already getting great use. However, there is no doubt that there is a problem regarding childcare. This problem will only worsen. Local reporter Brian Byrne reported today in his *Kilcullen Diary* blog that 74 more homes were seeking planning permission.

It is always important in a debate like this to detail the human story, what these families are facing and the pressure they are under in the town of Kilcullen. I want to provide some examples. One mother said her son was three months old. She was still on maternity leave, but she had not yet found a place for him for when she returned to work. She decided to take extra unpaid leave for an additional two months. After this time, she would either need to find a private childminder and see her husband reduce his work hours or for him to become a full-time carer and give up his career, as they were unable to afford a full-time childminder. They were on more than ten waiting lists and had to apply outside the county, too. Another mother said her baby was not born yet, but she already knew she would have to travel outside Kilcullen for childcare until a place opened up for their little one. It makes things much trickier for work and socially for their child, whom she wants to be with the kids she will be going to school with when she grows up. Another mother says she has a six-year-old son and is struggling to find an after-school place for him. Her partner has a full-time job and she had to quit her job to take care of their son due to the lack of after-school places for him.

I could go on and on. In total, we had 110 families experiencing childcare problems in this town. I have previously spoken with the Minister for children in relation to this problem, and she is aware of it. I have raised it at every opportunity I can and the community group continues to raise it with every public representative in the Kilcullen area. What we need to see is an intervention by the Government for public childcare places to relieve the problem. We cannot continue to build houses in the town of Kilcullen unless we have the childcare provided there. Another mother told me she was considering leaving the town because the only childcare she could get was some 70 miles away where she was actually born. She travels three days a week in order to avail of that childcare.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank Deputy Wall for raising this important issue. He has raised the issue specifically around Kilcullen in County Kildare. Truthfully, however, the issue he has raised is more widespread than that. It is not so specific to Kilcullen, but I appreciate he is advocating for the parents in that local area who are left without childcare as an opportunity to allow them to go to work and to fulfil their daily lives and their careers. It is an issue we see nationally. However, this Government is committed to core funding being introduced to all of our childcare units around the country and trying to invest in childcare. There are myriad community childcare facilities around the country, as I am sure there are in County Kildare, and privately owned ones, too. All of them have seen a transformation in how childcare is operated and delivered upon. More than anything else, providing capacity and ensuring that parents living in any area have childcare places is critical. Deputy Wall makes very valid points. It is an argument that could be replicated in lots of places around the country. County Kildare is nearly a suburb of Dublin now, with lots of parents are commuting everyday. It impacts mothers particularly when they do not have facilities or places available to them.

I will relay the issues that Deputy Wall raised pertaining to Kilcullen to the Minister with responsibility for children and disabilities, Norma Foley. I will liaise with the Minister and ask if she will meet with Deputy Wall on this specific issue around Kilcullen to see if anything more can be done in the community care setting and the private care setting to grow capacity and ensure parents in Deputy Wall's area have the childcare places they need to fulfil their daily lives.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. She is right; it is a problem in County Kildare and a problem throughout the State, but it is particularly bad in the town of Kilcullen. Nowhere else that I know of has 110 families facing childcare difficulties in the one town. The population of Kilcullen is just over 4,000, so one can imagine the percentage of families seeking childcare.

I have given the Minister of State some examples, and she is right about them almost all being women. Women are giving up their work and careers. We had physiotherapists and gardaí at that meeting who now have to give up their jobs. That is going to have an knock-on effect for us all and all our communities if it happens. As the Minister of State and I know, the waiting list for physiotherapy is long and the need for gardaí around the country is great at the moment. If these women give up, we will all be in trouble. It will add to our social problems right around the country.

I welcome that the Minister of State may be in a position to set up a meeting with the Minister, Norma Foley. I have already made her aware of this but, unfortunately, we have not had any progress in identifying a centre to cater for these families and the 153 children. The Minister, Deputy Foley, suggested using primary schools and the school setting for after-school services. I am not sure if that is an option in Kilcullen, but it is something we should pursue, because this is an emergency. I cannot, as a public representative, not bring this to the attention of the Minister of State or the Minister. Kilcullen is a fabulous town. There is a great community spirit in it. However, when there are new people coming to the town who, within six months, say they have to leave because of the childcare problem, it is an issue we all need to get involved in.

I welcome the Minister of State's response. I look forward to meeting the Minister, Deputy Foley, as would the families and the Kilcullen Needs Childcare group, because we need action for the families living in the town.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Deputy Wall for raising what is a pressing matter for his area and people in Kilcullen. As he said, it has a population of 4,000, but 110 families are affected and 153 children are without a place. Kilcullen has a growing population. When a population is growing, we want to keep that population because of the impact on enterprise, including small and medium businesses, around the area and on schools, given that populations feed primary schools. Schools depend on bums on seats to have the teachers and resources, so it all has a knock-on effect.

I appreciate the Deputy raising this issue about his area of Kilcullen in County Kildare. I will follow up with the Minister, Deputy Foley, about it. The two-stream solution has to be looked at. For example, what options are there for providing a community childcare facility? Maybe it should be attached to the local primary school. I do not know, but those solutions must be teased out and the correct place to do so is with the Minister, Deputy Foley. I will ask her to facilitate a follow-up meeting with the Deputy to discuss the particular issues pertaining to Kilcullen.

Irish Language

Deputy Paul Murphy: There was a huge protest on Saturday in Dublin, called Cearta. The streets were dearg le fearg with 25,000 people coming out to demand action on funding for the Irish language and the Gaeltacht as well as action on education, the housing crisis and language rights. The turnout speaks to, on the one hand, a moment for the Irish language of a renewal or resurgence from below, with more and more parents wanting to send their children to Irish-medium schools, for example, and a complete failure of the Government to act on the other.

4 o'clock

We have historically low levels of funding for the Gaeltacht, an absence of investment in the Irish language and a continuation of the crisis. The budget is two weeks away. Will action be taken in line with the wishes of all those on the protest and, I believe, the wishes of the majority of people in the country? Will the State and the Government recognise the historic inequality of baseline level funding for the Irish language and the Gaeltacht and the resulting negative impact that has had on the realisation of language rights for the public over many years? Will the funding gap be addressed?

The figures are striking. In 1956, only 0.15% of total State expenditure in the South was on the Irish language and the Gaeltacht. In the past number of years, this has fallen to just 0.1% for the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. An Plean Fáis 2024-2029 has been agreed and endorsed by over 130 Irish language, Gaeltacht and other groups, to tackle the impact of unequal funding, but will the Government agree to fund it? Will it agree to provide €55 million in additional funding for the Irish language and the Gaeltacht, based on the proposals in An Plean Fáis? For example, Foras na Gaeilge, taking into account the effect of inflation, has 45% less funding than it had 20 years ago, while the number of

community groups it is in turn funding has grown significantly over the same period. Does the Government agree that Foras na Gaeilge needs to be properly funded?

The housing crisis is right across the country, but it is particularly acute in Gaeltacht areas. The figures are striking. There are approximately 1,000 Airbnbs available in Gaeltacht areas and ten properties available to rent on *daft.ie* or whatever platform. This is a housing crisis, but it is also a language crisis as a result. There are only slightly more than 20,000 daily Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht. This is evidence of a 12.8% reduction in the number of such speakers between 2011 and 2022. If young people growing up in the Gaeltacht cannot find somewhere to live in the Gaeltacht, if they cannot find affordable, decent accommodation, they will not be able to stay there and that will cause a crisis for our Gaeltacht communities. Will the Government agree to provide Údarás na Gaeltachta with the power to purchase land or property for housing and social and cultural facilities? Will the Government agree to provide additional funding to Údarás na Gaeltachta to establish a housing department to facilitate a Gaeltacht population and housing strategy for each Gaeltacht language planning area?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. No more than was the case in his area, busloads of people left Cavan-Monaghan at the weekend to support all things Irish language. It is heartening to hear. The Deputy is right. There is a groundswell of support for the Irish language and for seeing it adequately and properly funded as our national tongue. A day of protest, as the Deputy alluded to, was held last weekend by Irish language and Gaeltacht organisations from across the island, North and South, to highlight a range of issues, including funding for the language, language rights in the North, the implementation of the language legislation and access to public services and housing in the Gaeltacht.

Levels of funding for Foras na Gaeilge are a source of frustration for six main lead organisations in the Irish language sector as they receive core funding from Foras na Gaeilge. The Irish Government provides 75% of Foras na Gaeilge's approved budget annually with the remaining 25% coming from the Northern Ireland Executive in accordance with the funding ratio agreed with the North-South language body as established. Funding for the North-South language body, including Foras na Gaeilge is approved by the North-South Ministerial Council and requires matched funding to be agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government cannot unilaterally amend the budgets or ratios of the North-South implementation bodies, but the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is acutely aware of the different economic and political circumstances that exist in the two jurisdictions. Officials from the sponsoring Departments in both jurisdictions are in weekly contact at this stage in an effort to resolve the issue.

Notwithstanding this, the Irish Government has provided significant additional funding to the Irish language and the Gaeltacht each year since 2020, with baseline funding doubling in the past five years. While Foras na Gaeilge has not been able to benefit directly from this, the Department has initiated a variety of schemes and programmes to ensure the funding reaches the organisations working on the ground with Irish language and Gaeltacht communities across the country. A significant amount of funding is being provided to some of the Irish language led organisations, which are also part-funded by Foras na Gaeilge. The Government has also approved over €2 million in additional funding for Foras na Gaeilge to specifically support the Irish language publishing sector under Clár na Leabhar Gaeilge, a programme that is not subject

to co-funding arrangements and is entirely funded by the Irish Government. The Government has also approved significant funding for a series of initiatives being delivered by local organisations including Conradh na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael and Gael Linn, which receive core funding from Foras na Gaeilge, but are limited by the financial challenges with it. This funding is helping to alleviate some of the financial challenges faced by the leading organisations.

Initiatives currently funded by the Government include the Gaelbhratach scheme for schools. Glór na nGael is promoting the use of Irish in the home. We have the latter, the careers roadshow for schools and universities and clár céad míle fáilte, which introduces migrant communities to the language, funding to provide an Irish-medium early years sector and Oireachtas na Gaeilge, which gets significant funding to develop language-based arts and the Irish language Network for the Public Service.

I had the pleasure of visiting a little national school in Munterconnaught in my county. The principal, Mr. Vincent Mulvey, and his team have done incredible work, in particular on the programme where pupils are encouraged to use the Irish language. It is not a Gaelscoil, but the idea is to introduce their native tongue for simple everyday use, whether it is to go to the toilet, do their activities or whatever. Those kinds of schemes are having a real-life impact.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I dealt with funding and housing to some degree in the introduction, so I might now deal with education and language rights, which are the other two features of the protest and the demands of the movement. The striking thing in education is the mismatch between parents' aspirations and wishes and the reality of school availability. Almost one in four parents say that if they had the option in their local community of sending their children to an Irish-medium school, they would do so. The previous Government pledged to work towards doubling the number of pupils attending Irish-medium education, but the numbers actually fell by 3%. More parents than ever are saying they would like to send their children to Irish-medium education, and the numbers are falling. Only 6% of pupils receive education through Irish. This in contrast to Wales. The more I learn about the struggle for the Irish language today, the more I see that Wales is a consistent example of how things should be done. In Wales, currently 23% of children go to school through Welsh and there is a plan that 40% will by 2050. It is a clear, ambitious and measurable goal. What we need from the Government is a similar target, to have an ambitious target - for example 20% over a period of 20 years - and then provide for that with funding and legislation. Similarly, there are 50,000 children in secondary school who are exempt from learning Irish and there is no plan whatsoever to address that.

We have a national plan for Irish language public services, which was published in 2024, but we have no plan for its implementation. When will the action plan to implement that be published? Will it include such things as the Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR, being implemented in the education system, Irish language courses aligned with the CEFR, increasing the number of third level courses through Irish from less than 1% to 5%, the establishment of a scheme to provide Irish language courses aligned with that and increasing the provision of education, which I spoke about?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: As I said, I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this. It is really important that we discuss the funding and vision for our national tongue here in our Parliament. Up to now, it has really been a groundswell of support. Some counties are doing fantastic while

others do not have the same opportunities. For example, in County Monaghan, for example, there are four national schools and one secondary school. I do not think I would be wrong in saying those national schools have been championed for years by people like Brendan O'Duffy. A new Gaelscoil will open in Castleblaney in the coming weeks. That is how it should be so that in all our towns, all parents have the option of having their children go through school with Irish as their principal language and having their primary education in that. I wholeheartedly agree with that. Then coming to my county, County Cavan, it has only one primary school and we do not have that secondary school. Again, there are people like Pádraig Ó Cuinneagáin have done enormous work in championing that from the ground up. We have, of course, a responsibility as a government to make sure that the people who are so passionate about it are facilitated and enabled whether it is primary schools, Gaeltacht areas in the local area and having public services through their local authorities. Having all that in place is incredibly important. The protest we saw at the weekend demonstrates to me how passionately people feel about it. It was heartening to see that.

As I pointed out earlier, the Government in this jurisdiction cannot unilaterally amend the budgets or the funding ratios of the North-South implementation bodies. There are obviously issues as regards the funding arrangements for Foras na Gaeilge. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, is acutely aware of these issues. In light of this he has requested that his officials keep in regular contact with their counterparts in the Department for communities in an effort to resolve the matter. Government investment in the Irish language and the Gaeltacht has seen major increases over the last five years with the baseline funding doubling since 2020. I am sure the Deputy and I are on the same page in saying that we need more for the organisations on the ground. I welcome the Gaelbhratach scheme where schools which are not Gaelscoils have every opportunity to nurture our native tongue in everyday scenarios in their classrooms and we want to see more of that.

While Foras na Gaeilge has not been able to benefit directly from the funding I alluded to, the Government has initiated various schemes and programmes to ensure the funding reaches the organisations working on the ground with the Irish language and Gaeltacht communities across the country. The Minister has serious ambitions for his Department. He is a Gaelgeoir himself. Unfortunately, I only have a cúpla focail but I always make the effort where I can. It is great that the Minister is so proficient with the language. He is a great advocate for it too. He has serious ambition for the Department over the course of the programme for Government and he has the full support of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and the coalition partners in that regard. I have no doubt that the Minister will be kicking down doors to ensure there is an increase in the allocation for the Gaeltacht and the Irish language in budget 2026.

Disability Services

Deputy Paula Butterly: I wish to discuss the NCSE's new guideline review. In the last three days, my office has been inundated with emails and the telephone lines have been choked by calls from concerned parents, principals and SNAs. The guidelines have actually sowed confusion among the school community and among parents. As a parent myself, I consider it a huge privilege to be able to give my son the best education and to meet his needs how and where possible so when I get concerns from other parents, SNAs, teachers and principals on the education they will be able to give their children and pupils and their concerns about

meeting the needs of the pupils and their sons and daughters, I am sure the Minister of State will agree, it is a huge concern to us all. I accept that very often, circulars and guidelines can be misread, misconstrued or interpreted in one way or another. I am here asking for clarity about these guidelines. The query, first and foremost, we have received is whether this will result in job insecurity for SNAs. Will the care for those daughters and sons who are currently receiving it be diminished in any sense? Is there a risk that their child in the school setting will no longer receive care? There are indications in people's interpretation of these guidelines that the criteria will be stricter and it will be harder to access an SNA. That is hugely concerning for any parent. I would welcome any clarity on the issue.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There are widespread concerns in relation to this new set of guidelines for the review of SNA allocations, specifically, the narrowed criteria and rigid timelines. The application window now for school-led reviews is limited for a six-week period from 15 September to 24 October and excludes mid-year needs, and there is the issue of unification and redeployment risks. SNA allocations are now unified across mainstream and special classes. This removes the protection autism class resources had while setting up internal conflict and resentment of autism classes within mainstream schools. The level of need in autism classes is often higher and if mainstream SNAs are withdrawn to meet those needs, many children will be left less supported which could breed tension within classes. The narrow definitions of complex needs and level-3 care needs is a very important issue that needs to be resolved. These definitions exclude many children who require support. The dismissal of behavioural care needs is completely at odds with the realities staff face every day. By omitting SNA support for behavioural needs, schools will be forced to push families towards seeking a diagnosis for children in order to access help. This will unnecessarily label children and add to already severe backlogs in diagnostic systems.

On barriers to proper implementation, schools must evidence implementation of the new NCSE Relate programme within the six-week review window. As of now, there has been little training or preparation in relation to the Relate programme. There is a real fear that this new set of guidelines is about one thing and one thing only: it is about restricting access to SNAs. There is a fear that SNA support will be reduced rather than increased in schools.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Deputies Butterly and O'Rourke for raising this important issue. I think all our offices have been flooded which tells its own story of the concerns and fear out there among SNAs, parents, schools and everyone involved. We need to defuse that but more importantly we need to give the information so that people are clear about what the guidelines will mean. I apologise on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, that he cannot be here this evening.

At the outset, it's important to say that the Government is fully committed to supporting children with additional needs to achieve their full potential and the programme for Government makes a number of commitments to deliver on this objective. The Department has been steadily building on the number of special needs assistants in our education system. I think we can all agree on that. This month sees over 23,000 SNAs allocated to schools. This is the highest number ever.

As all Members of the House know, these SNAs play a central role in the successful inclusion of students and are committed to supporting and nurturing children with additional needs. I

assure them that the Department and the NCSE, through all policy and guidance, including resource allocations, take a child-centred focus to ensure that all children in our schools with additional care needs are provided with a supportive environment and the resources needed to help them develop and be prepared for life after school. Furthermore, and contrary to some commentary in recent days, I reassure the Deputies that the allocation of SNAs for special classes and mainstream schools has not changed. The NCSE guidelines that were issued relate solely to SNA reviews. There is no change to the allocation process for schools or special classes.

Schools can apply for a review where they require additional SNA support. We encourage schools to contact the NCSE in this regard. Schools can apply for a SNA review from 15 September to 24 October via the NCSE school portal. This is to support the earlier announcement of allocations for the 2026-27 school year to align with the release of the annual staffing schedule, which was requested by schools to allow them to plan better. It also supports our SNA workforce and the implementation of SNA redeployment schemes. It is crucial to state that where an emerging requirement for future SNA support arises after 24 October, a school can contact their NCSE special education needs organiser, SENO, as in previous years, to discuss the need for an SNA review. This has not changed. Where additional SNA resources are necessary to support the needs of students in a school, this will be provided as it has been in previous years.

The NCSE requirements for SNA reviews for 2025-26 are based on existing parameters and circulars relating to the role of the NCSE. The criteria for the determination of a school's allocation have not changed and are outlined in Circular 30/2014. Any school which has a special class or is opening a new special class will be allocated the base number of SNAs according to class category and this will not be reduced. The NCSE has confirmed it will be contacting school representative bodies and school leadership in the coming days with further clarification on all issues raised since publication.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I hope it reassures principals, teachers, SNAs and, in particular, parents, because this has been an issue, as the Minister of State said, which has worried hundreds if not thousands of people across the country. I am particularly thankful that the NCSE will be contacting schools in the coming days to clarify the position because, while I appreciate the reply, I am not sure how many people are tuned into Oireachtas TV. Despite our best efforts to reply to everybody, literally hearing it from the horse's mouth would have more value than anything else.

While I am still on my feet, I would like to advocate for early intervention. The earlier we can get care and assistance to our children the less need they will have for it later. We really have to focus on a model of early intervention. If we do not, the expense and need will continue to grow. I ask that the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, take this on board, particularly in the context of the upcoming budget.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I have the guidelines in my hand. They need to be withdrawn, because what the Minister of State has said and what we heard at the committee yesterday from the Department are directly contradicted by what is in the guidelines. The guidelines give rise to real concern because they state:

NCSE reviews are conducted on a whole school needs-based analysis. To be clear, this can include mainstream and special class allocations.

As a result, a review of the SNA allocation of a special class in isolation is no longer operational. This means all SNA reviews will review the total SNA allocation to a school on a whole school basis.

That circular needs to be withdrawn. There is nothing there in black and white which indicates that there can be a midyear review. How did the Department end up issuing this circular? It needs to be withdrawn. I welcome the fact that clarification has been provided and that schools will be contacted. In my firm opinion, however, the circular needs to be withdrawn. Not only that, there is continuing reference to the 2014 criteria. Those criteria are completely out of touch with reality; they need to be reviewed and updated. There is a commitment to do this, but it needs to happen before there is any reissuance of guidelines.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Deputies Butterly and O'Rourke again. No more than them, I have had many meetings with principals. Prior to the guidelines being printed over the summer or the beginning of the school year, the allocation of SNAs was a source of concern and upheaval for schools. Principals were ringing around trying to make sure they had everybody in place. I take on board what Deputies O'Rourke and Butterly said and I will relay their suggestions to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee. I was not privy to the committee meeting yesterday, which they referenced, but I will relay their concerns.

I thank the Deputies for raising the issue and for giving me the opportunity to discuss it. As they know, the NCSE has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on education provision for children with special needs. Clarity is very important. I hope our school principals, leaders and, most importantly, parents will, through the SENOs on the ground, be given clarity on this and will not have this concern in the new academic year.

As I mentioned earlier, there has been increased investment in the provision of SNAs throughout the country in recent years. The numbers have doubled in the past ten years. I do not see this in any way being depleted; I see it as increasing. Far be it from me to say, because I will not be at Cabinet during the budget discussions, but I think we all agree it will have to be increased. It increased by 43% in the past five years alone. Any school that may have a concern should contact the SENO to discuss the matter. The NCSE is available to schools to support them with the deployment of the SNA resource allocation to support their pupils with their care needs. The Department of Education consults all stakeholders, including parents' groups, advocacy groups, schools and representative bodies on any new policy changes relating to special education.

I could continue reading the script, but I want to say in earnest that I appreciate this has been a difficult and challenging time. The communication has upset parents and got them very worried. All of our inboxes are full. The Deputies have articulated their concerns very well. I will relay them to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan. I hope we can bring clarity and peace of mind to the parents affected.

Artificial Intelligence

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for being here to address the question of a national office on artificial intelligence. It is very much within her brief. I welcome the commitments she has made to open a national office on artificial intelligence, establish an AI observatory in order that we will have evidence-based research on the social and economic impact and potential of and the opportunities presented by AI and host an AI summit during the course of Ireland's EU Presidency in the second half of next year.

The Minister of State is aware that the committee on artificial intelligence is very keen to have this AI office established. I have spoken to her about it several times. Our colleague Deputy Ó Cearúil has even brought forward legislation in this regard. It is critical that we get to know how the office will function. It is important in the long term that it is independent. In the early days following its establishment, it will require a lot of support from the Department.

I see it as having two main roles, which the Minister of State might outline further. There is the regulatory function, which will be to oversee the implementation and enforcement of the artificial intelligence Act. Equally, there is the information and support function, particularly for SMEs and small organisations, to enable them to innovate and support them in being able to avail of the potential of AI. There is also the element of how we can use AI in the public services for the more efficient and effective delivery of public services.

I would like to hear from the Minister of State how she envisages the governance structure of the national office on AI. Will it be similar to some of the other regulators? It will need to be a body that has the respect of other regulatory bodies. It will obviously be critically important that the named bodies that have responsibility in this space liaise with the national office and that the national office will also identify where there are cracks in the system where data is being used so that it can take action. It is also important that the voices of children and young people are heard in establishing the office. I urge the setting up of a youth advisory panel similar to the youth advisory panel in Coimisiún na Meán, the media regulator. That is a good model. The Office of the Ombudsman for Children also has a youth advisory panel. Two representatives of that panel came before our committee this week. They were very effective and informed witnesses.

We should not underestimate the scale of the operation that will need to be established. I have looked at the national AI office in Spain. As the Minister of State knows, this was established two years ago in September 2023. There are many divisions within that office. It has departments for innovation; AI aimed at public administration; certification, instruction and supervision; trend identification and social impact; alignment and co-ordination; and awareness, training and promotion. As I have said, that is also critical because this cannot just be a department of "Thou shalt not" but must be a department of "Thou shall, this is how and this is how we are going to help you".

I welcome the Minister of State's announcement that we are proceeding with this office apace but, particularly as we are now implementing the AI Act, it is important that we hear from the Minister of State the detail of how this office will operate.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I congratulate the Deputy on the work he is doing in the artificial intelligence committee. I listened in to most of this week's meeting. As the Deputy has said, the young people who spoke were very articulate and great advocates for the young person's perspective on artificial intelligence and the impact it will have. I thank the Deputy and the

committee for the work they are doing. They are doing us all a service in interrogating the issues in this area.

As the Deputy will be aware, the EU AI Act entered into force in August 2024 with a very ambitious timeline for national implementation. The role of AI across our economy and society is of crucial importance and provides all of us with huge opportunities while also necessitating guardrails around its deployment. I believe that is what the Deputy is referencing when he talks about our sandboxes and that national AI office. It is about having space for innovation and creativity. Start-up companies must be very clear on the guardrails but the development of such companies or the AI apps we will see in the future should not be inhibited. That is an ambition of mine. It should be a positive rather than a negative. It should not be a regulatory body that just says "No, you cannot do this" but a place where people can experiment and be certain that what they are creating and devising is human-centred and will not provide any harmful content. As Chair of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, the Deputy will be fully aware of the need to drive innovation while also protecting our citizens.

While the details of the AI office are being finalised and my Department has retained professional consultancy services to assist, four clear functions for the AI office have currently been established. The first is to co-ordinate the competent authorities' activities to ensure consistent implementation of the EU AI Act in Ireland. I had the pleasure of facilitating one of those meetings last week. We had the 15 competent authorities in the room and all on the same page with an ambition to do this. The second function is to act as a single point of contact for the EU AI Act and the third is to facilitate centralised access to technical expertise for the competent authorities, as required. The final function is to drive AI innovation and adoption through the hosting of a regulatory sandbox and to act as a focal point for AI in Ireland encompassing regulation, innovation and deployment.

My officials are currently developing the general scheme of the regulation of artificial intelligence Bill. This general scheme will provide for the implementation and enforcement of the AI Act at a national level in domestic legislation, including the establishment of the new AI office as an independent statutory agency. I take the Deputy's point. In its infancy, the office will be set up under my Department but, as the Deputy knows, the final creation will be an independent statutory entity. The Minister, Deputy Burke, will bring the general scheme to Government in the next four weeks.

Detailed work plans have been developed to ensure the AI office is in place by August 2026. These are informed by research and analysis prepared for my Department by leading professional services firms. Funding for the new office will be determined as part of budget 2026. The implementation of the AI Act is truly a cross-government initiative. As the Deputy himself has said on many occasions, this cannot be something that happens within the Department of enterprise alone. A whole-of-government approach must be taken. I was delighted to see the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, launch guidelines on the implementation of AI within public services at the beginning of the summer. The implementation of the AI Act is truly a cross-government initiative and I look forward to working in a very collaborative way across government to ensure Ireland achieves its ambition of being a centre of regulatory excellence and maintaining its place as a leader in human-centric and responsible AI.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State very much. I very much welcome the fact that the general scheme is going to be coming before Government, that we will see legislation in place to underpin this office by next summer and that the office will be in place by August 2026. As the Minister of State knows, resourcing is critical to this. During debate on the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, the Minister of State and I talked about Coimisiún na Meán and ensuring that it was adequately resourced. I am not just talking about budgets but also about putting in place qualified personnel. It needs to be an office that will command respect. Working with those other competent authorities is critical. The commitment to have the office in place by August 2026 is important.

I do not know if the Minister of State can outline how she envisages some of the governance structures. Does she see there being a board? How will that board be formulated? The Minister of State praised the young people I mentioned. I ask that she commits to a youth advisory panel as part of this to ensure we hear the voices of children and young people along with everyone else in society because this has to be human-centric.

I certainly envisage that, if the office is in place, it will have input into the creation of the observatory because having evidence-based data to inform our policy decisions and to be prepared for trends, whether disruption to employment or opportunities in healthcare, is important. It will obviously be critical for the AI summit the Minister of State and her Department will be hosting during the latter half of next year. It is very ambitious. I welcome and applaud the Minister of State's ambition. I just need certainty that we are going to be able to achieve it.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I think the Deputy knows my work rate and work pace. I certainly intend to be a driving force to ensure this happens. As he has said, three big things have to happen as quickly as possible in the lifetime of this Government. The first is the establishment of the AI office. The second is the establishment of the AI observatory, which is critically important to predict the impacts AI will have, including where jobs will be created and where they will be displaced, so that we can be resilient rather than just reacting. On the third piece, I am happy to confirm to the Deputy that we will be holding an AI summit in October 2026 as part of the European Presidency. I look forward to the Deputy and his committee collaborating with me on that. We can work collaboratively on that.

The EU AI Act is a pivotal regulation that is horizontal in nature, that is risk-based and provides the necessary guardrails for transparency and the ethical adoption of AI to protect our citizens. The AI Act also supports AI innovation and will have a positive impact on our economy and our society at large. That is a critical message I would like to deliver today. This should not be seen as a negative. The many start-ups I have met so far are all very keen to see the regulation in place. They do not see it as a negative. They see it as a positive. We are seen as a country of excellence when it comes to regulation. AI will be no different because it gives people a pathway. They know what they can and cannot do. They know what the expectations are. We will drive that as a place for innovation and not stifle creativity in any way.

The Government is committed to ensuring that Ireland is a leader in the digital and AI economy and recognises that harnessing the potential of AI and digital technologies more broadly is vital to maintaining our competitiveness, driving productivity and ensuring that Ireland maintains its position as the location of choice for doing business. When I say that, I

mean globally. I thank the Deputy for his comments and questions and look forward to working with him on the three big ticket items.

Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy George Lawlor: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

It is a privilege to be able to bring this vital Bill before the House on Second Stage. We have a chance today to make clear our commitment to standing up for the most fundamental of rights, the right to bargain collectively for better conditions, pay and a fairer workplace. This is also an opportunity to protect a long-standing successful institution by righting a wrong. Joint labour committees, JLCs, and their precursors have been an important pillar of collective bargaining in this country for over a century. Due to legal proceedings a decade ago, their very viability stands at risk. An employer's veto over the operation of JLCs undermines their purpose. That is what we are left with following that legal case.

The Bill would provide a fix and in doing so would protect this important part of our industrial relations framework for the future. By enacting a simple backstop allowing the Labour Court to step in where there is a refusal to engage with a JLC, we can not only protect the rights of every worker to collective bargaining but ensure that the express will of the Oireachtas can no longer be subverted.

As we debate this Bill today, it is important that we be cognisant of the wider landscape of collective bargaining in Ireland in 2025. Sadly, Ireland's voluntarist system marks us as outliers in the industrialised western world. The weak legal protections we provide to workers with regard to collective bargaining allow employers to simply refuse to engage with trade unions or workers. Of course, that is not just bad for those workers; it is bad for our whole society. The economic, social and environmental benefits of collective bargaining have long been clear.. When employers deny employees the chance to bargain collectively, they are not just denying the rights of those workers in particular; they are actively holding our country back and suppressing wages across whole sectors.

Ireland has a particularly low rate of collective bargaining coverage. Just 34% of our workers currently benefit from collective bargaining arrangements, compared with an EU average of 56%. We know the EU directive on adequate minimum wages calls on member states with low coverage to lay out their path to 80% and that the Government is soon to unveil an action plan to that effect. When that action plan comes, it must be ambitious and clear and do what it says on the tin, namely, contain real and measurable actions.

The Bill before us represents one simple action we must take by ensuring that JLCs can once again function as they were always intended to. We can take a big step towards ending the race to the bottom that we see far too often in far too many industries. Well over 100 years ago, it was the Government in London that recognised that across Britain and Ireland there were too many workers in industries that were subject to chronically low pay and poor conditions. Those industries typically had very poor or, indeed, non-existent trade union representation.

That reality led to the genesis of the trade board system, which aimed to guarantee minimum standards and conditions across those industries by providing a form of collective bargaining to the workers in those under-unionised sectors. These trade boards took the form of bargaining bodies, including representatives of employers and workers. They were empowered to set binding minimum wages and conditions across a particular sector. That system proved to be durable and was further refined with the Industrial Relations Act 1946.

That Act saw the trade boards become JLCs. Their members would be appointed by the Labour Court after the Minister had established that a particular sector had inadequate machinery to effectively regulate pay and conditions. It was an effective way to make sure that workers in sectors with low levels of representation benefited from collective bargaining and were able to negotiate for better wages and conditions. However, it relied on certain assumptions.

Whether it was the somewhat unlikely figure of Winston Churchill in 1909 or Seán Lemass in 1946, the originators of the law that underpinned the first trade boards, and then the JLCs, clearly understood that these were bodies aimed at providing the opportunity for bargaining in the sectors with the lowest levels of representation and some of the worst conditions. They clearly understood these as operating across industry and sectors and with the involvement of employers and workers. However, what they clearly did not have in mind was an employer's veto.

How could the system ever have got off the ground if it would all collapse where the employers refuse to tog out? That is, unfortunately, what we have been left with after the legal proceedings brought a decade ago by the Irish Hotels Federation when the then Minister aimed to reconstitute a JLC in the hotel sector. In preparing to oppose the Irish Hotels Federation case, the State effectively conceded that in the absence of employer's representation, the JLC could not be constituted and, furthermore, that the decision to take part in negotiations under a JLC framework was voluntary.

The legal proceedings were struck out and the case ended before it reached the court. Those legal proceedings cast a long shadow. We are now left in a situation far removed from what the original drafters of the trade board or JLC system envisaged. We are left with an employer's veto and, with that, the reality that powerful employers can simply sidestep and ignore what should be a crucial pillar of our industrial relations infrastructure and a crucial tool for underpaid and under-represented workers to get a place around the table to negotiate for a better deal. We are all the worse off for it.

In some sectors, like security and childcare, JLCs have continued to work well. We have seen their results in legally binding employment regulation orders, setting fair floors for wages and working conditions. They have helped to root out rogue operators and stop unfair competition based on low pay where a bad employer is undercut by a worse one. The hotel sector is a case in point. In this and other sectors, employers are actively boycotting the JLC process, undermining this keystone of our industrial relations system and depriving their employees of their right to collective bargaining.

The Irish Hotels Federation years-long boycott has left workers in the hotel sector without a voice at the table. That is a travesty for those workers and it is bad for the sector's good employers that want to play a fair game. Boycotts like that leave us with a race to the bottom.

That is why I believe the Bill is so vital. It would enact new provisions on the constitution of JLCs. These will apply in a case where the Labour Court seeks to consult an organisation of employers or workers but is met with refusal to engage on the appointment of members to a JLCs. When facing such an impasse, the court will then be able to appoint the people it views as representative of the interests of the relevant employers or workers.

The key purpose is to emphasise that while the members appointed will be representative of the interests of the employer or workers' side, they need not necessarily be their representatives. That crucial distinction would make clear that there can be no veto on the employer's or worker's side. The court would review the membership of the committee from time to time to ensure it continued to be representative. If the court was satisfied it was not possible to appoint such representatives to a JLC and that the employers or workers concerned were operating in a way aimed at ensuring effective regulation of pay and conditions could not take place, the Bill would allow the court to make its own proposals for an employment regulation order. Those proposals would need to take into account the legitimate financial and commercial interests of the employers in the sector, the desirability of fair and sustainable minimum rates of pay appropriate to the sector and the general level of wages in comparable sectors.

When the court has finished those proposals, it would then forward them to the Minister, who would deal with them just as though they were the proposals of a JLC. Thus, the unfortunate loophole that has emerged since the Irish Hotels Federation legal proceedings would be closed. Under this Bill, employers would no longer be able to veto the establishment of a JLC simply by refusing to play ball. Of course, we would all hope the backstop powers given to the court by this Bill could be used sparingly and employers would engage with the JLC process in the correct spirit. We must be clear, however, that where they fail to do so, we would step in to ensure the workers in those underrepresented and often underpaid sectors that need JLCs the most get their shot at a fair deal. Without this Bill, JLCs will be forever hamstrung. We will lose a crucial pillar of our industrial relations framework and will fall yet further behind our neighbours on workers' rights.

In October 2022, the high-level group on collective bargaining, which included IBEC and ICTU, published its final report. It made it clear that the robustness and effectiveness of this statutory mechanism had been impacted by employer disengagement in relation to the operation of the JLC system in several sectors. The time has never been more urgent to stand up for collective bargaining. The Government has delayed and dithered too long. We cannot sit on our hands any longer while too many workers are left voiceless in the face of low pay and poor conditions. The Government has promised an action plan, as it is required to deliver under the terms of the EU's directive. That is very much welcome. Today, however, the Government has the opportunity to take real, decisive action by backing this Bill. I will come clean and say it: there is nothing radical in this Bill. We are not asking for any major overhaul of the industrial relations system here. All we are asking for is a simple, common sense step that will make a real difference. It is a step that will restore the original intent of the Oireachtas from when joint labour committees were first legislated for back in 1946. It is a step that will give so many workers across the country the seat at the table they deserve. It is a step that would benefit all of us. I urge colleagues across the House to stand up for collective bargaining and workers across the country by supporting this Bill. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank Deputy Lawlor for moving his Bill. I do appreciate the concern he has around this issue, and it is laudable. I stand before Members to debate a Private Members' Bill that proposes to amend provisions governing the operation and constitution of joint labour committees. This Bill seeks to address situations where employers or workers fail to engage in consultation with the Labour Court, by granting the Labour Court additional powers to appoint members to the JLC whom it considers representative of either side's interests, without requiring them to necessarily be employers' or workers' representatives. It also provides for a scenario where such appointments are not practicable that the Court will formulate its own employment regulation order.

After careful consideration, the Government will oppose this Bill for several compelling reasons, and I will set these out. I will also share the Government's broader plans to strengthen support for collective bargaining in Ireland over the coming years. The programme for Government sets out a clear commitment to publish an action plan on the promotion of collective bargaining by the end of 2025. This initiative will be in line with the EU directive on adequate minimum wages. The directive is before the Court of Justice of the European Union, but Ireland has reaffirmed its strong commitment to workers' rights by proceeding with the development of this action plan, regardless of the outcome of that ruling.

As outlined in the directive, the action plan will establish a clear timeline and concrete measures to progressively increase the rate of collective bargaining coverage. The process will have full respect for the autonomy of the social partners and ensure ongoing engagement with all relevant stakeholders. Officials in my Department are actively working with the social partners in shaping the content and overall direction of the action plan. Moreover, a public consultation was held from April to May of this year to gather broad input on its content. The Government believes that introducing major legislative changes at this early stage risks undermining the integrity of the consultative process. The action plan is intended to be comprehensive, identifying both legislative and non-legislative measures that can enhance collective bargaining while promoting competitiveness, supporting productivity and ensuring a level playing field for all employers and workers. Any sort of premature legislative intervention at this stage will be a disruption to the balanced, inclusive approach this Government has always been committed to.

Deputy Lawlor, in his proposal, highlights the challenge posed when the employer side exercises a veto, potentially stalling progress on setting rates of pay and conditions of employment for employees in certain sectors. On this point, I acknowledge that a very similar proposal was made by the LEEF high-level working group on collective bargaining in 2022. The LEEF report recommended that decision-making powers would be transferred from the JLCs to the Labour Court in an instance where parties from the employer and-or employee sides will not engage in the JLC process. The LEEF report then recommended that the Labour Court, after giving the social partners an opportunity to engage, make a recommendation to the Minister to adopt an employment regulation order for new pay rates and terms and conditions in the sector.

My Department's analysis of this LEEF proposal indicates that implementing this proposal would require significant legislative reform. It would fundamentally alter the role of the JLCs, moving them away from forums of voluntary and independent collective bargaining and into

something quite different. Moreover, it also raises complex questions regarding the type of evidence that would be required by the Labour Court to justify such a recommendation. It would also have to be considered how this process would differ from the existing sectoral employment order mechanism, which already allows substantially representative unions or employer bodies to initiate a review. It has been the consistent policy of successive Governments to promote collective bargaining through both legislation and the development of an institutional framework supporting a voluntary system of industrial relations premised upon freedom of contract and freedom of association. Ireland's long-standing voluntarist system has served us well over the decades, helping to contribute to industrial peace and stability. It has also enhanced Ireland's attractiveness as a major investment location and led to a co-operative environment for resolving disputes.

The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015 defines "collective bargaining" as comprising voluntary engagements or negotiations with the object of reaching agreement regarding working conditions or terms of employment, or non-employment, of workers. The freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively are also guaranteed in a number of international instruments that the State has ratified and is, therefore, bound to uphold under international law. For example, Article 6 of the European Social Charter provides a right to bargain collectively that is to be promoted through joint consultation between workers and employers. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights also explicitly guarantees a right to collective bargaining and action by affirming that both employers and workers have the right to negotiate collective agreements and to take collective decisions to protect their interests.

5 o'clock

The WRC and the Labour Court are both independent statutory offices under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. They are central pillars of Ireland's industrial relations and employment rights frameworks and play crucial roles in maintaining industrial harmony and resolving workplace disputes in Ireland. They provide impartial mechanisms for resolving disputes and only intervene when voluntary efforts have reached an impasse. In particular, the role of the Labour Court is to act as a court of last resort, making recommendations where all other avenues have been exhausted. Likewise, the WRC intervenes only in exceptional circumstances and at all times, ensuring that the autonomy of the social partners is not compromised.

I believe that a strong and well-functioning collective bargaining system supports productivity and fair wages, especially in low-paid sectors. To give one example, the 2024 SEO for the construction sector came into effect on 1 August and will introduce higher rates of pay for craft and general construction workers. Their pay increased by 3.4% in August 2025 and will increase again by 3.2% in August 2026. The sectoral employment order process is a statutory wage-setting mechanism provided for in the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015 and based on the principles of collective bargaining.

In addition, this year a new employment regulation order came into effect covering workers in the security sector, and a new ERO will come into effect for the contract cleaning sector in October 2025. These agreements demonstrate how effective the joint labour committee scheme can be when representatives of employees and employers voluntarily negotiate together to identify a mutually beneficial agreement.

Turning once again to the legislative proposals raised by Deputy Lawlor, I must express concern about the significant administrative burden that would be placed on the Labour Court and the WRC if these proposals were introduced. If the Labour Court were to assume decision-making powers in the absence of engagement from either side, several issues would arise. First of all, the risk of litigation would be high as employers may challenge the validity of orders made without proper consultation. There is also the risk that any employment regulation orders that lack sectoral buy-in or proper consultation from any particular industry representative or employees may be ignored or contested. This would effectively undermine the core functions of the Labour Court and WRC as they begin to face increased volumes of contested cases. Such proposals could erode the voluntary nature of our industrial relations scheme, replacing it with a more adversarial and less effective model.

This Government has upheld workers' rights through a comprehensive suite of employment legislation. Our laws in this area are kept under review to reflect both national and international developments, including at European Union, Court of Justice and International Labour Organization levels. Some recent employment law developments include the introduction of statutory sick leave, the right to request remote work, protections for workers' tips and gratuities, and the recent substantial increases in the national minimum wage. This year will also see further progression with the introduction of a new seasonal employment permit, the introduction of an automatic pension enrolment system and the expansion of the gender pay gap regime. These demonstrate the Government's continuing commitment to a safe working environment, fair treatment and fair wages for the lowest paid workers in our economy.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: In Sinn Féin, we stand in solidarity with workers across all sectors who, through their hard work, keep our economy moving. Far too often, though, workers face insecure pay, unstable conditions, and a bargaining environment that favours the few over the many. That needs to change.

I thank Labour for bringing this Bill forward and I want to give my strong support to ensuring robust, fair and enforceable collective bargaining for every worker. Central to this effort are joint labour committees that set legally binding employment conditions and rates of pay for workers in sectors such as childcare, cleaning, security and hospitality. When joint labour committees function effectively, they raise standards, protect workers' rights and provide a level playing field for employers who commit to fair labour practices.

The current situation is troubling. In some industries, the formation and operation of joint labour committees hinge on the willingness of employer bodies to engage in consultation. Where those bodies refuse or fail to participate, the joint labour committees process can stall, giving a de facto veto power to those who would rather race to the bottom than invest in decent pay and safe, regulated working conditions. That is not acceptable in today's modern economy when so many workers are dealing with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

The Bill seeks to address this by empowering the Labour Court to appoint employer or worker representatives to a joint labour committee when the relevant organisations fail or refuse to engage. In practical terms, this means no more breakdowns in communication due to a single party's veto and the balance of power is realigned to ensure workers' voices are heard.

Credible collective bargaining is the backbone of fair work. It reduces the race to the bottom, where pay and working conditions are undercut in pursuit of cost cutting, and it strengthens the

social contract between workers and the businesses that rely on their labour. It provides certainty for employers who compete on quality and reliability, not just on cheapest bids.

We must also recognise the broader context; the need for legislatively protected collective bargaining has never been greater. The Minister, Deputy Burke, is expected to make an announcement in the near future and workers and unions are hoping it is a step in the right direction for collective bargaining, a pledge he signed before the general election.

A strong, enforceable framework gives workers a seat at the table, ensures that pay and conditions reflect the true value of their labour, and helps create stable, productive workplaces with fewer turnovers of staff. It also signals to the economy and to international partners that Ireland is serious about fair working standards. We want to empower and support workers, and rebalance the power dynamics that govern industrial relations.

Recently, SIPTU wrote to three Ministers calling for their urgent intervention to ensure the reappointment under warranty of a Labour Court deputy chairman and warned that failure to do so would seriously diminish that body's effectiveness and likely lead to a greater number of industrial disputes. I am urging the Minister of State to stop turning away from workers and their rights and ensure protections are always in place for workers. Turning a blind eye to these services will affect thousands of workers across the country who will be denied the right to a prompt resolution of their personal workplace issues under employment law.

Strengthening joint labour committees is a commitment to fair pay, decent working conditions and a more resilient economy. It can also create a safe working environment and protect workers from corporate manslaughter and dangerous working conditions.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: This debate comes at a rather important time. Yesterday, in the audiovisual room, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions had its Respect at Work campaign. One point that it raised that struck me is that we are still in this position, in 2025, where we have a constitutional right to join a trade union but we have no legislative right to collective bargaining or to halt union busting, which undermines the rights of workers.

The joint labour committee process was created to address this problem by setting out minimum pay and conditions where workers were poorly organised and vulnerable. Historically, the JLCs were seen as protectors of poorly organised sectors, but instead of advancing real collective bargaining rights, the Government seems happy to hide behind a volunteerist JLC system, holding a carrot-and-stick approach to workers rather than legislating for genuine collective bargaining or transposing the EU directive on adequate minimum wages and legislating to remove the effective employers' veto within the current JLC system. As these flaws within the system are plain to see, it will currently only work if both representatives from employers and trade unions come to the table in good faith.

For example, the early years sector is seen as having a successful JLC as the unions manage to get employers' representatives to the table but, because of the volunteerist nature of the process, every employment regulation order has been held up while waiting for employers' bodies to meaningfully engage. The first EROs only came about with Labour Court intervention. The third wage deal, which was due to take effect on 1 September, still has not been signed into law. Educators are missing out on their pay rises and providers, many acting in good faith, are already paying these rates. It needs to be signed into law as soon as possible.

Some €45 million in public funding has been allocated to cover this cost but, because of the delay and the volunteerist nature of the current JLC process, €800,000 of taxpayers' money goes back into the Exchequer each week instead of reaching the educators and the good providers. This should have been implemented on 1 September.

That is not fair to the workers or to the good employers who have engaged in the JLC system. It makes a mockery of the Government promises to bring respect and to support collective bargaining. That is why this Bill is so essential. It would finally end the employers' boycott, restore the original intent of the JLC system and make sure that vulnerable low-paid workers get the protection they deserve. This should only be a first step. We also need stronger legislation to deliver real collective bargaining, like that available in most progressive European countries, in line with the EU directive. This would guarantee that workers have a genuine voice in shaping their pay and conditions.

Passing this Bill is about fairness and dignity at work, and respecting the contribution of workers in sectors too often overlooked. It is disappointing that the Bill is to be opposed. I welcome the commitment to publish the action plan for the promotion of collective bargaining in line with the directive. We know that in the transposition of any EU directive, it can be transposed at the high end or the low end. It is my fervent hope that the Government chooses to transpose at the high end.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank colleagues for raising this. I know they are here on a Thursday evening to raise this matter because they feel passionately about it, and they have raised it in a very articulate and passionate way. Unfortunately, the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, cannot be here this evening. I have taken copious notes on the issues that all three Deputies have raised in case clarity is needed on anything. However, the position of the Government will still be to oppose it.

Deputy George Lawlor: I appreciate that the Minister of State has been somewhat thrown under the bus on this by her Fine Gael Government colleague.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I would not agree.

Deputy George Lawlor: I never thought I would see the day when I would stand in this august Chamber and say that Winston Churchill appeared to have more affinity and commitment to the workers of Ireland than the Fianna Fáil party and this Government. In 1909, Winston Churchill brought in the trade boards so that underrepresented, undervalued and underpaid workers could be represented by the trade boards. In 1946, this was dealt with by a man who must be spinning in his grave, a man who sat in this Chamber, a man of the Fianna Fáil Party who did so many wonderful things for this country at a time when we needed it most, Seán Lemass. He must be spinning in his grave as he hears that the Government is opposing this long overdue Bill and, in doing so, is effectively supporting powerful employers to ride roughshod over undervalued and underpaid workers in this State.

As I said, I do not think the Minister of State's heart is in the response she gave, to be honest. I do not think that, when reading it, she was committed to what was in that response. As I said,

I think she has been thrown under the bus. This is a shocking admission by the Government that it is not going to support underpaid and undervalued workers, and it is going to facilitate powerful employers to veto a structure that was set up in 1946 by Seán Lemass to facilitate workers being represented at JLCs.

The Minister of State spoke about it being adversarial. What is adversarial is when powerful employers refuse to engage in a mechanism that has worked in other sectors. In her response, the Minister of State spoke about the childcare and security sectors, and how they had seen great improvements in their conditions. The reason they saw great improvements in their conditions was because both sides engaged with the JLC process. The Minister of State is sort of arguing against herself, or the piece of paper she is reading from is arguing against itself, by saying that that was great but, God, we cannot allow adversarial situations to come up, and we must avoid any legal proceedings that may take place following a binding agreement that is reached in a JLC in a respectful manner. We could do with Winston back - the British bulldog - to say to Irish workers: "I will represent you". This Government is clearly not representing workers in areas like the hotel sector.

The Minister of State said it is premature. In 1909 and 1946, mechanisms were introduced into this country, even when we were under British rule and later by Seán Lemass, to ensure that workers in low-paid sectors got their representation. They were not looking for the moon. They were looking for decent, honourable representation. How did the powerful employers get around that? They said they would ignore the whole set-up, employ their legal advisers to tell them what to do, and ignore the whole set-up and not play any role or part in it. Therefore, for the little guy - the man or woman working in a hotel on low pay – the employers can walk all over them.

That is what we are doing. That is what the Government is acceding to by refusing to accept this non-radical, very simple proposal of a Bill to improve the lot of workers and workers' rights. I urge the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, to go back to the Fine Gael Minister of State who has thrown her under the bus. I ask her to get him to reflect. I knew when the Minister of State was reading it out that her heart and soul were certainly not in the text that was on that sheet. That is not her style. I urge her to go back to her colleagues in government and ask them to respect the rights of low-paid workers in this country, in a sector that needs it most. I ask her to reflect on the history of the great party that she comes from and on a man who did so much for this country. He wanted to establish mechanisms to support workers' rights. I ask the Minister of State to reflect on that before the vote next week.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 1 October 2025.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.18 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m. Dé Máirt, an 30 Meán Fómhair 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.18 pm until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 30 September 2025.