



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Toghadh Uachtaráin - Election of President	653
Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil	653
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	654
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	667
Finance Bill 2025: Financial Resolutions	680
Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage.....	683
Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]	722
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	747
Early Childhood Care and Education	747
Educational Disadvantage	749
Irish Language.....	751
School Staff.....	753
Schools Building Projects	756
Education Policy	759
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	761
School Facilities	761
Special Educational Needs	763
Schools Building Projects	766
Public Sector Pensions	768
Oideachas trí Ghaeilge	770
Schools Building Projects	772
Departmental Funding.....	775
School Funding	777
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	779
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	780
Naval Service	780
Closed-Circuit Television Systems.....	782

Bus Services	785
Hospital Staff	788
Turf Cutting.....	792

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 4 Samhain 2025

Tuesday, 4 November 2025

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

2 o'clock

Toghadh Uachtaráin - Election of President

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we proceed to Leaders' Questions, I have a short announcement to make to the House. It is the first time since 1973 that a sitting TD has successfully contested a presidential election and it is the first time in the history of our Constitution that a sitting female TD has successfully contested a presidential election. In accordance with the Presidential Elections Act, I have received formal communication from the Presidential Returning Officer confirming to me that he had, on 25 October, declared Catherine Connolly to be elected President of Ireland.

Members are also advised that, pursuant to Article 12.6 of Bunreacht na hÉireann, the President-elect ceased to be a Member of the Dáil on her election and a vacancy now exists in the constituency of Galway West, to be filled in accordance with law.

President-elect Connolly is the first sitting TD since Erskine Childers in 1973 to be elected Uachtarán na hÉireann. On behalf of the House, I wish the President-elect every success in her new role as Uachtarán. Guím gach rath uirthi.

Members applauded.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: I would also like to take this opportunity, and I am sure Members will join me, in extending condolences on the death of Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy yesterday. We all know what an extraordinary impact Sr. Stan had on Irish society. She led a life dedicated to the service of those in need. I offer my condolences to her family on behalf of Members and many friends. Thank you.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Déanaim comhghairdeas ó chroí lenár gcara, an iarTheachta Catherine Connolly. It is a truly historic achievement. Our warmest congratulations go to our Uachtarán-elect, Catherine Connolly.

I would like also to pay tribute to Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy, who passed away yesterday. Sr. Stan championed social justice, advocated for the homeless and spent her entire life standing on the side of those in need. She gave gentle yet powerful voice to the voiceless. She never stopped working for a fair and equal society. She leaves an incredible legacy of compassion, activism and hope. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam.

The Government's energy task force published its interim report yesterday, confirming people's worst fears. Households will be hit with massive electricity bills this winter, with average yearly bills approaching €2,000. The barrage of electricity price hikes from big energy companies puts people under huge pressure in the run-up to Christmas. Three hundred thousand households are unable to pay their electricity bills. Household energy arrears have almost doubled in the last four years. Many more will now be pushed into this awful situation. The Government's decision to strip away energy credits was a terrible call in a terrible budget - a budget of €9.4 billion that has left working people worse off. That is some going.

While people are so brazenly ripped off, what is the Government's big idea? It is a promise to make an announcement of a plan sometime next year, with action to follow God knows when, if at all. Households are being fleeced, right here and right now. These huge bills are already landing and yet the Government pretends like it is not happening.

Government failure to tackle energy rip-offs leaves people in desperate situations, with families using prepay meters going days without electricity and households relying on organisations such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to keep the lights on. The Government sits back and allows big energy companies to rip people off at every opportunity. Now, as the days get darker, families will be forced to cut back on necessary electricity use, counting the cost every time they use the washing machine and feeling pressure every time they flick on the light switch because they know it is costing them a fortune. Is that an acceptable way for people to live?

The big question for me is this: how many wake-up calls does the Government need before it acts? Four energy companies announce big electricity price hikes but the Government does nothing. The International Energy Agency reports that energy companies are fleecing Irish households but the Government does nothing. The CSO releases figures proving that people are being ripped off but the Government still does nothing. Now the Government's own task force confirms that households will be hit with massive electricity bills over the coming weeks but the Government still does nothing. Worse still, the Government actually has the neck to tell people to wait until next year for some pie-in-the-sky plan. Not alone is this Government inaction woefully out of touch, it is downright lazy.

This is a lazy do-nothing Government incapable of understanding how these huge bills impact on people's lives so it does not even muster up the effort to do anything about it. That is not good enough. The Government's job is to stand up to those companies, to end this energy rip-off and to support households mar tá geimhreadh lán de bhillí leictreachais ródhaor in ann do theaghlaigh. Caithfidh an Rialtas seasamh suas in aghaidh na comhlachtaí móra fuinnimh agus tacú le teaghlaigh. Given the scale of this crisis, will the Government now act to reinstate energy credits to help households and what action will the Government take to reign in energy companies and to put an end to the scandalous rip-off?

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): On behalf of the entire Government, I sincerely congratulate and offer my best wishes to President-elect Catherine Connolly following her election victory. It is an enormous victory for her, her family, all of her supporters and many people across County Galway and beyond. Catherine commanded a huge vote following a really successful campaign.

President-elect Connolly served with distinction in these Houses as Leas-Cheann Comhairle. In all her contributions, she demonstrated enormous integrity and professionalism. When I previously held the brief as Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, she was someone who was always constructive in her contributions. She will be a President that we can all unite behind and I wish her well as she commences her new role in the coming days.

I will speak to the loss of Sr. Stan, who had such a positive impact on so many people for so long. Sr. Stan dedicated her life to working with care and compassion on behalf of the poor and the vulnerable across the country. She showed that innate desire and unflinching determination to support those who needed the most help. Hers was a voice of charity, of care, of compassion and of devoted service to people and our thoughts are with her family on her loss today.

On Deputy McDonald's question, this Government did take action in the budget when it came to the issue of energy. That is why the work the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, did in keeping the 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity is a significant part of our overall tax package. The fuel allowance being increased by €5, and expanded for those in receipt of the working family payment, made it a targeted approach to those who are feeling the pressure of energy prices across our economy. As a result of another Government intervention, an additional 50,000 households will be eligible for fuel allowance, which will mean that 460,000 households, or 26% of all households, are now eligible for fuel allowance. We have made wider interventions in supporting children and families, including the increase in the child support payment, and there are other measures in the context of the Department of Social Protection. Next year, that Department will have an overall allocation of over €28 billion. On our overall broader spending across our economy, this Government made a €2 billion package in social protection in budget 2026 to respond to the pressure many households face and target it to those most in need. That is the context in which we set about trying to help to mitigate the impact of energy prices.

The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has done extensive work as part of the national energy affordability task force. That has set out a number of recommendations in the context of the programme for Government, where we have set out changes in assessment of the overall regulatory model for energy prices in our economy. That is work he will undertake. In the

national development plan, there is our continued investment in the warmer homes scheme, with hundreds of millions of euro to support families, and many other interventions to support low-income households.

We made significant interventions in the budget as part of our social protection package, including the retention of the 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity. We made a decision not to continue one-off temporary payments because we have to be honest about managing the overall budgetary parameters and the need to manage expenditure policy out to the medium term. We want every decision we make to be sustainable, affordable and permanent. It is not sustainable to continue one-off payments over the existing allocations. That is why we made specific and targeted interventions in the context of our social protection package.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I will tell the Minister what is not sustainable. It is not sustainable to tell families that are struggling so badly now that his only response is to refer them to the national development plan, budgetary parameters and whatever other political jargon he has got written down and has placed on the record of the Dáil. Does he understand how widespread this experience is? He keeps talking about targeted measures. Does he understand how widespread the experience is now for households that cannot make their bills? I have told him already, and he knows, that 300,000 households are already in arrears. I have told him that energy companies have hiked their prices upwards and upwards with no real substantive challenge from anyone in the Government. They can do what they want. I have told him that in the run-in to Christmas, families now - not next year but now, in November and December - cannot make it and the Government simply sings dumb. I find it astonishing that the Government is so out of touch. We need action now. We need the energy credits as an immediate response, but the Government needs to take on these energy companies and face them down.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I fully understand the issues and pressures families face. I reject the Deputy's assertion of jargon and waffle talk she mentioned. We absolutely understand the pressure. That is why the social protection package was significant in this budget when it came to fuel allowance, the changes in rates we made and the changes the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, made when it came to the 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity. I will not take lectures from the Deputy on the economy. A magic money tree-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am talking to you about families.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----does not work.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am talking to you about families.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy's alternative budget amounted to nearly €16 billion. Her party's economic approach would wreck our economy, lose jobs-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is your answer. Wow.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and deplete our country of resources. Its false promises and its reckless approach to economic management would not provide any future for any family and would seriously exacerbate poverty for many people.

Deputy John Brady: The Minister is not representing part of his party when it comes to taxes.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will not take any lectures from Deputy McDonald on economic management.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister should take the lecture from someone.

(Interruptions)

A Deputy: We will not take it from Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We make changes that are progressive, fair and targeted at the lowest income households and the social protection package reflects that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is lamentably out of touch.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I extend a comhghairdeas mór to our new Uachtarán na hÉireann, Catherine Connolly, on her historic landslide win. I know as President she will do us proud just as Michael D. Higgins has done.

I also want to acknowledge the loss of the great Sr. Stan. She did the State immense service through her work on social justice and she leaves a truly remarkable legacy. May she rest in peace.

I condemn in the strongest possible terms the attack on an IPAS centre in Drogheda on Friday. The lives of children were seriously endangered in the setting of a deliberate fire. Two babies, including one who is only 20 days old, were hospitalised in what was a hideous criminal attack. I know my colleagues in Drogheda, Deputy Ged Nash and Councillors Michelle Hall and Pío Smith, are working to support all those affected. I pay tribute to the courage of the firefighters who saved lives on Friday night.

In the context of that horrific attack and the awful riot in City West, I want to raise two matters today. The first is how we stamp out racist violence and the second is the way in which Government policy and rhetoric emanating from Members of this House can stoke anti-immigrant sentiments that form the thin end of what is a wicked, violent wedge.

More than 300 IPAS and Ukraine accommodation centres operate across the country. They are people's homes. Dozens of times in recent years, residents have faced attacks and violence in what are modern-day pogroms. In my own constituency, I work with volunteers who are dealing with knife attacks on men who are forced to sleep in tents due to the Government's failure to house them. The State must step in. The Government must now undertake an urgent security review of all centres where refugees or people seeking asylum are living. Completing

this work in advance of the second anniversary of the Dublin riots would be an appropriate deadline.

We also need a reflection on and a review of the language used and policies implemented by the Government. The conflation of immigration with criminality in rhetoric can contribute to an environment where violence can develop. So too can irresponsible rhetoric that blames the housing crisis or the lack of public services on immigrants.

Regrettably the three largest parties in this House, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin, have recently issued communications that have leant into anti-migrant sentiment. These are not comments from rogue Government Members, in the case of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, either. This week, the Tánaiste said that our migration numbers are too high. He implied that people facing deportation make up a significant proportion of Ireland's inward migration. Of course, this is wrong. However, it was not a slip of the tongue. His Fine Gael colleagues have since repeated it, and the Minister's party leader, the Taoiseach, has backed him.

Minister, you are in Government. Any flaws in the asylum system are your responsibility. Your party colleague holds the justice and migration brief. Any blame for the failure to provide fair and effective procedures lies not at the feet of people seeking asylum but with your Government and previous governments. Will you undertake a safety audit of accommodation? Will you now advance a public information campaign on the benefits to this country of inward migration and the facts about immigration?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The shocking and disgraceful recent attacks, including in Drogheda over the weekend and in City West before that, should serve as a stark reminder to everyone in this House how careful and responsible we must be when discussing and debating immigration policy. These disgraceful attacks are not reflective of the views of the overwhelming majority of our people whose first instinct is one of compassion for those people being subjected to intimidation and of revulsion towards those carrying out these attacks. People across our country are proud that Ireland is a tolerant multicultural and diverse country. They recognise how reliant our economy, our public services and our communities are on the contribution of those from migrant backgrounds. I see it in my constituency, which is one of the most diverse constituencies in the country. I thank the many people who have come here for the enormous contribution they make to our economy, our communities and our society. We need to be clear on that in all of our discussions when it comes to migration.

Today the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, is publishing the Future Forty report, which speaks to the huge contribution that many people from the migrant community make to our economic growth. Our continued success as an economy is dependent on attracting the talent and the people who make that contribution.

It is also important to be clear that everybody in this House should be able to have a broader debate on what system of migration we have. Everyone on this side of the House shares the Deputy's view that we should have a compassionate, caring approach to anyone who comes here and treat them with humanity and dignity. We should be clear that many of them come places where they would be vulnerable. In his remarks, the Tánaiste said migration is a good thing, but he was just making broader remarks on the system we have. We should be able to have a mature debate about the type of system we have. We are clear that it should be a rules-based system with enforcement. It is important that we have that in the context of managing a

complex issue globally. That is why there is constant evaluation of the various factors that are contributing to overall migration into our country. The Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, is being proactive across a number of measures he has introduced, while also sending a strong message on the contribution that many people who have come here make to our economy.

On the Deputy’s question, there is a security review, and that is part of the wider work that goes on with any centre that becomes applicable under IPAS. To be clear, this Government shares the Deputy’s perspective on how we treat people, but it is important that we can also have a debate on how we can have a balanced approach that is fair and also manages the consequences for those who are not given status. There need to be consequences for those who are not given status. If they have appealed and are not allowed to stay, they need to be managed in the context of a functioning migration system. That is the broader context in which this debate should be had.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Minister for his careful and responsible words in his response. He is absolutely right that people must of course be able to debate migration policy, but let us do so in a fact-based manner. Let us use careful and responsible language. I certainly do not think the Tánaiste’s conflation of all migrants with a tiny number of people facing deportation orders was responsible. The Minister has acknowledged the reality that the vast majority of people who have migrated to Ireland are here to work and that our schools and hospitals are staffed by people who have come here to provide an essential service – people who are propping up our creaking healthcare, education and nursing-home systems. That is what we all know to be the case, so why is there a focus in Government rhetoric on scapegoating those who come here seeking asylum and somehow conflating them with the vast majority of migrants, who come by different means entirely?

Just this week, the Cabinet has agreed a mean-spirited rent payment for people who have been fleeing Putin’s brutal war in Ukraine. It is not a revenue-raising measure; rather, Fine Gael sources have admitted, it is designed to disincentivise people fleeing war from coming here. Could we have a fact-based information campaign to provide an evidence basis for the debate on migration, please?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy is conflating lots of different things-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am not conflating them.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----unfairly and inappropriately.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: No.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Tánaiste was inappropriate.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is important that everyone in this House be able to have an honest, open debate about migration policy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Fact based.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Government needs to examine incentives, disincentives and push and pull factors in the context of migration policy in Europe and internationally. Every policy should be evaluated and recalibrated to manage the various factors that contribute to the overall level of migration to an economy, while also acknowledging the huge contribution people continue to make to our economy and communities. It is just unfair to take a particular sentence and try to conflate what has happened, in a shocking manner, in certain instances.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: He knew what he was doing.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The rest of them were.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, is correct in continuing to evaluate our migration policy and examine the wider factors contributing to significant increases. Those who are working and in centres should make a contribution. That is fair and proportionate, and that is the right policy approach. Anyone in this House would agree that if you have income and the means to make a contribution, you should make a contribution. Most people across the country would support that.

Deputy Holly Cairns: For decades, Sr. Stan was a campaigner and advocate for the most marginalised in our society. We could all learn from her. Our thoughts are with her family today.

I congratulate President-elect Catherine Connolly. She will be a President for all and will be missed in this House, but we know she will serve with the same integrity, diligence and compassion she served with here.

“The house is on fire ... Please answer”. This is what a terrified 12-year-old child texted to her mum on Friday after an arson attack on her home, an IPAS centre in Drogheda. In total, 28 people lived in that IPAS centre, the majority of them women and children. Four children, including a two-week-old baby, had to be rescued from the top floor of the building. Little children who came to this country seeking sanctuary are now terrified, traumatised and living in fear. This is where anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric has led us - a violent attack on vulnerable people that could easily have led to children being killed.

I commend the emergency services in Drogheda for their quick action. I also acknowledge that the majority of people in Drogheda and across the country are disgusted by what happened, because this attack is a new low, but is anyone surprised it has come to this? There have been 30 arson attacks on IPAS centres, or proposed centres, in recent years. We have witnessed rioting on our streets and there have been numerous public order incidents and protests outside IPAS centres.

What has the Government's response been to this increasingly volatile atmosphere? It has been to ratchet up its use of inflammatory language and stoke further fears. Mere days after rioting broke out in Citywest, Simon Harris suggested migration numbers, including the number of people here on work permits, were too high. Then, after the despicable arson attack on Friday night, the Government moved immediately to talk about charging those in direct provision for accommodation. You could not make it up. That is not to mention that a callous

proposal to reduce accommodation entitlements for people from Ukraine to just 30 days has also just been signed off. Where is the emergency stand-alone meeting on safety concerns for people in international protection? Where is the emergency meeting about increasing levels of violent hate in our communities? Where is the emergency meeting to discuss how to counter the dangerous lies being peddled by far-right agitators online?

This Government has failed miserably to deliver on its own commitments on housing and critical public services. Instead of taking responsibility for that, however, it is now pointing fingers at immigrants-----

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: That is not true.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----State agencies and the latest fall guy, EU red tape. This is straight out of the Farage playbook and it is deeply concerning the Government is taking this approach.

A Deputy: Stop. That is ridiculous.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The reality is the numbers seeking international protection are way down this year-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----and people remain trapped in the system for too long because of the Government's mismanagement of it. Is the Government reflecting on its communication---

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you are way over time.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----around this? Has the security audit of IPAS centres started?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I think Deputy Cairns heard me respond to Deputy Bacik in the context of the shocking and disgraceful attacks that have happened in Drogheda and Citywest. I am very clear to anyone listening about the positive contribution that many members of the migrant community make to our country, economy, society and communities. That is the position of this Government, and all members of this Government, in terms of wider integration and migration policy.

To the Deputy's question, the Cabinet committee considers wider matters. That is why, and this goes to the point I raised to Deputy Bacik, we should be able to assess overall migration policy continuously and evaluate it to look at European norms. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is constantly doing that in his engagement with colleagues across the European Union to look at the wider incentives and disincentives and the push and pull factors. That is a normal part of migration policy across Europe. We should be able to have a separate, honest evaluation of that continuously so that we are able to manage the overall numbers that are coming into our country. That is not dismissing the need for migrants and their ongoing contribution to our economy, but we need to be able to have an honest debate about that.

I am clear in my absolute condemnation of what has happened. The Garda did an excellent job. There is constant community engagement happening on the ground across many of these centres. If you take the response in Citywest and in Drogheda, the gardaí did an excellent job. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for justice and others were universal in their condemnation with what happened in these recent attacks. Deputy Cairns did not say that in her opening remarks. She ignored that in her opening remarks and sought to cloud this issue-

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Tánaiste said nothing.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----trying to conflate two separate-----

Deputy Ged Nash: The Tánaiste said nothing about Drogheda.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Ged Nash: He was on Instagram all weekend and said nothing about Drogheda. He did not condemn it.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Everybody in government condemns what happened in Drogheda.

Deputy Ged Nash: The man with no thought that goes untweeted said nothing. It is my hometown.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is very unfair.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is true though.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Everyone in this Government and in this Parliament should be able to have an overall assessment of migration policy. That is what I am saying. We need an honest debate about that continuously because there are various factors which contribute to a surge in applications and we need to be able to evaluate that.

I reject what the Deputy has said in trying to conflate these issues. It is unfair. The work the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is doing is as focused on community engagement through An Garda Síochána and the various supports that we have on the ground as it is the wider issues in terms of migration policy. The attacks have been disgraceful. I reiterate my view and acknowledge the ongoing contribution that many people continue to make in communities across our country. We value their contribution and their continued work and presence in our country. They need to feel safe and welcomed. We will be doing everything we can to protect that.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Government cannot stoke fear in one breath, then condemn attacks in another and come into the House and seek credit for doing that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Hear, hear.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Social Democrats have been pleading with the Government for weeks to moderate its language, to ensure what it is saying is accurate and that tensions are not further enflamed. Instead, the inflammatory language from the Government has increased. Shamefully, the Tánaiste chose to amplify half-truths to paint migrants in a negative light. He made those comments fully conscious of the volatile atmosphere that is out there. It is not just irresponsible; it is reprehensible. Now we see where rising hate naturally leads - a man pouring petrol on the stairs of an IPAS centre in the hopes of burning women and children alive. If this horrific event is not enough to prompt the Government to engage in some reflection, then I do not know what is. The Government now has a deliberate strategy of depicting international protection applicants as scammers gaming a lax system-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: That is not true.

A Deputy: That is so far from the truth it is actually ridiculous.

Deputy Holly Cairns: This is not leadership; this is leaning into a toxic far-right narrative.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cairns.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Withdraw that.

Deputy Holly Cairns: People have a right to come here and to make an application for international protection.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Withdraw that.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Government has a duty to assess those claims fairly.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Will the Government show leadership on this issue and deliver that clear and unambiguous message?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I reject that completely. If the Deputy listened to what I have said, I have rejected the politics of the far-right, of Farage-----

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jack Chambers: ----- and of anyone who gives an inflammatory response or weaponises this issue to divide people. Our focus is on community, on building harmony between people and on supporting and investing in communities while also ensuring that we have a migration system and policy which works. That is why we should have an ongoing evaluation of it. It is unfair to continue to conflate this, as the Deputy has. The experience of the women and children in that house and the threat that was brought on them is shocking and is universally condemned by this Government. That is why the work the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is doing in terms of the Garda's security reviews, which happen for IPAS centres, is really important. It is why community engagement is centrally important. I am disgusted, as everyone is, with what has happened.

Even over the summer, there were some the attacks on certain members of the Indian community as well. In my community in west Dublin, there was fear among many of the migrant members of our community. We need to reinforce the need to support them and promote safety in all aspects of our response. Community is at the centre of that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ba mhaith liom ar dtús mo chomhghairdeas ollmhór a ghabháil le Catherine Connolly ar an mbua iontach a bhí aici an tseachtain seo caite. Guím gach rath uirthi. Déanaim comhbhrón le Sr. Stan. Laoch ab ea í a d'oibrigh go díograiseach ar son iad siúd a bhí gan dídean sa tír seo. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis. Déanaim cáineadh orthu siúd a chur an teach IPAS i nDroichead Átha trí thine. Ba bheag nár bhfuair páistí agus tuismitheoirí bás sa teach sin ar an oíche.

This morning, commuter traffic on the M3 going to Dublin was backed up well into County Meath. The journey for tens of thousands of people took two hours. Meath is the biggest commuter county in the country. It is the only county in the country where the majority of workers leave the county to go to work every single day. Some 90,000 people in Meath commute to work on a daily basis and 60,000 of those are forced to use cars due to the lack of a rail line. Navan is the biggest town in the country without a rail line at the moment. In 1994, Fianna Fáil's Noel Dempsey promised to build a rail line between Navan and Dublin. The delivery date slipped and slipped. We were promised to have it in 2015 but it was never built.

I am the chair of the Meath on Track campaign and the people of Meath have campaigned strongly for this over the years and yet we still do not have that rail line. In 2021, it was promised to us again. We were told that the building of the rail line would start by 2030 and it would be built by 2036. This promise was met with derision in County Meath, to be honest. It is typical horizon politics - so far in the distance that it never gets done. In 2036, it will be 42 years since the rail line was first promised by Fianna Fáil.

In 1862, the original Navan to Dublin rail line was built in three years with picks and shovels. Despite all the technology we have now, the wait for the project is now heading towards 42 years. It is incredibly glacial in its delivery.

The economic cost of congestion in the greater Dublin area is incredible. Some €336 million was the cost of it in 2024, according to the Department of Transport, and it is estimated that by 2040, congestion in the greater Dublin area will cost €1.5 billion. Studies have been done on

congestion in European cities and Dublin is the worst in terms of time and cost. There have also been studies of the speed of traffic in Dublin at the moment. The average speed eight years ago was 12 km/h. The average speed of horse-drawn carriages in Dublin in the 19th century was 16 km/h. We currently in an incredible crisis in terms of infrastructure in the Dublin area.

Why is that this Government cannot deliver infrastructure on time? Why is it that we have the slowest planning, permits, judicial reviews and tendering in the whole of the European Union in terms of such projects? When will the Navan to Dublin rail line be built? What will the Government do to change the glacial pace of infrastructure in this country?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. What I would say about transport specifically is that there has been a big uplift in the transport allocation for the next five years. Some €22 billion of the over €100 billion being invested in the next five years will be in transport, specifically to build more roads and ensure our public transport objectives are delivered. There is going to be a serious transformation of transport investment over the next five years.

The Deputy is correct in saying that additional allocations in themselves will do very little to change how we deliver infrastructure across our economy. That is why over the coming weeks we will publish a series of actions, to be implemented in 2026, which will accelerate the delivery of infrastructure across our economy. It means rebalancing regulation in our economy and reassessing a lot of the rules, processes and structures that are not working and are delaying decision-making and adding cost, rather than value, to the cost of projects when they come to be delivered and procured. We will introduce reforms from a legislative perspective on critical infrastructure and on trying to advance that in a greater and quicker way.

We will also be examining the roles of our regulators and ensuring there is a duty to co-operate across many of our regulators, which at the moment are a part of the sequencing of delays that undermine the delivery of infrastructure across our economy. I will, in the coming weeks, be able to show the difference that will make to the delivery of infrastructure.

The Deputy referenced the Navan rail line. There was a reduction in capital expenditure when the economy contracted and that contributed to delays for many of the projects, which the Deputy referenced. That was a part of the previous national development plan. Part of what we are trying to do now is to match sectoral investment plans in transport and other areas with new short timelines so we can better deliver transport infrastructure. The Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, is working with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, on a sectoral investment plan for transport in our economy. That will seek to match this very serious allocation. Nearly €1 of every €4 we will spend on capital over the next five years will be spent on transport, which is one of the biggest investments in public transport and our road network for many years. Part of that is to try to match that with a credible pipeline of projects which we can deliver over a period of years while also trying to set out a new delivery mechanism into the early 2030s for projects that needs to go through planning and procurement. He will be able to set out further detail in terms of the transport sectoral investment plan. This new approach to infrastructural delivery is about rebalancing risk. The Deputy is often in here attacking public servants, politicians and others. People have a role in ensuring accountability where there is excessive spend on particular projects but it is also important we rebalance the risk appetite so that we address risk aversion in decision-making. That means we have to take extra-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----risks when it comes to delivery of infrastructure and other projects across our economy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. Deputy Tóibín to respond.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The problem is that if one takes the future tense out of the Minister's statement there is very little the Government can say. The Minister has been in government for so long at this stage and these particular problems in planning, judicial reviews and tendering have not appeared out of nothing. They have been as a result of the Government's implementation.

One of the big frustrations that exists among commuters in this country is that, on one level, they are getting the stick of extra costs. Last year, commuters paid €1.9 billion in motor tax and VRT and they contributed €4.1 billion in fuel taxes. Just last week the Government put up the cost of tolls again on an M50 that commuters have paid €2.2 billion for already. Mind you, those two bridges cost €53 million to build in the first place. Those commuters have paid for those bridges over and over again and yet the Government is using this stick on those commuters by putting up that price again instead of using the carrot of providing the necessary public transport they want to be able to use. That is where the major frustration is. On one level, the Government cannot introduce and cannot develop infrastructure because the systems are grinding to a halt with bureaucracy and red tape-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----while on another level the Government is using a stick to try to get people out of cars and that stick is impoverishing many people.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge that in some instances there is excessive bureaucracy and red tape and we need to cut it, remove it and reform it. That is central to my work beyond what is happening in the national development plan. The Deputy is correct that we do need to radically reduce the timelines it takes to deliver critical projects and housing across our economy. There are too many layers and too many barriers to the delivery of that, and I acknowledge that in many of the commuter counties. I work with my colleague, Deputy Dempsey, on this, when it comes to the Navan rail line, and work on other priorities in Meath, Kildare, Wicklow, Louth and other commuter belt regions where many people have a long commute to work. Part of the transformation of our transport system in the next five years will be to ensure the project pipeline gets delivered more quickly because we have put a record level of allocation beside transport when it comes to the prioritisation we have given it.

When it comes to tolls, the contribution tolls make is to the maintenance of our national road network. Our national road network needs to be maintained to a standard and there is a cost to doing that. That is part of the position when it comes to the toll rates TII sets every year.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Finance Bill 2025 - Financial Resolutions (without debate) (to be moved together and decided by one question; any division claimed to be taken immediately)

-Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Second Stage) (to conclude within 3 hours and 34 minutes, with any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be Second Stage of the Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

-Statements on International Protection Processing and Enforcement (not to exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes)

-Employment (Contractual Retirement Ages) Bill 2025 (Report and Final Stages) (to be taken no earlier than 7 p.m. and to conclude within 60 minutes)

-Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Committee and remaining Stages) (if not previously concluded, to conclude either at 12.10 a.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later)

-Motion for Further Revised Estimate for Public Services [Vote 33] (without debate) (back from committee) (any division claimed to be taken immediately)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Decriminalisation of People who use Drugs, selected by the Labour Party.

Thursday's business shall be:

-Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 (Second Stage) (if not previously concluded, to adjourn after 3 hours and 24 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Arts (Recognition of Comedy) (Amendment) Bill 2024, sponsored by Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

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

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

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

(c) private members' business may be taken later than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of Second Stage of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Education and Youth, and on the commencement time for topical issues;

2. the following arrangements shall apply to the proceedings on the Motions for Financial Resolutions for the Finance Bill 2025:

(a) the motions shall be moved and decided together by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

(b) the proceedings thereon shall be taken without debate; and

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

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall be brought to a conclusion after 3 hours and 34 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the arrangements for the first speaking round shall be in accordance with those contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) on the conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; Provided that any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday; and

(c) members may share time; and

Mins	20	20	20	12	4
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

4. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

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

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

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time, which may be taken later than 8.45 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Motion for Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2025 [Vote 33];

(b) pursuant to an Order of the Dáil of 21st October, 2025, Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall be taken immediately following the SOS, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Government business;

(c) in the event that the Statements on International Protection Processing and Enforcement conclude before 7 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 7 p.m.; and

(d) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025;

2. the Statements on International Protection Processing and Enforcement shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

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

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

(c) members may share time;

Mins	35	25	15	15	5
Mins	15	15	5	12	15
Mins	5	12	15	5	8

3. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Employment (Contractual Retirement Ages) Bill 2025 shall be taken either at 7 p.m. or on the conclusion of the Statements on International Protection Processing and Enforcement, whichever is the later, and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment;

4. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion either at 12.10 a.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later, by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment; and

5. the proceedings on the Motion for Further Revised Estimate 2025 [Vote 33] shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

1. (a) the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of proceedings on Second Stage of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025, or where those proceedings conclude within the allotted time, on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Arts (Recognition of Comedy) (Amendment) Bill 2024 and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

(b) the Dáil on its rising shall adjourn until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 12th November, 2025; and

2. in relation to the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025, the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) subject to subparagraph (ii), the proceedings shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 3 hours and 24 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(i) the arrangements for the first speaking round shall be in accordance with those contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(ii) where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(iii) members may share time; and

(b) the proceedings shall not be resumed on Thursday.

Mins	20	20	20	12	4
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Under Standing Order 35(3), I propose an amendment to the Order of Business. The current nitrates derogation expires in a matter of mere weeks and the Government's handling, or mishandling, of the issue leaving negotiations with the EU to run

down to the wire means farmers face a possible serious cliff edge in January. I ask that time be allocated in this week's schedule to debate this crucial issue for the future of Irish agriculture.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Since the Business Committee last met the company, Fastway Couriers, has gone into receivership resulting in the loss of 1,000 jobs in almost every constituency in the country. We need urgent statements because, as tragic as every job loss is, there are a number of competing factors here which point to huge gaps in our workers' rights legislation that need urgent debate. When will these workers, many of whom are on unusual franchisee contracts, get compensation?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Families up and down the country are struggling with energy affordability. Despite the fact this Government and the previous one failed to act on that and failed to invest in the grid and in renewable energy, what we saw yesterday was a report from another toothless task force telling us it will put forward recommendations next year. We need statements this week to discuss what action can be taken to provide targeted measures that will support people now and help them to survive this winter.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I wrote to the Business Committee seeking a debate on safety for asylum seekers after we saw the horrific attack and what seems to be attempted murder with the attempted burning alive of a baby and children in Drogheda. This was not an isolated incident but one of over 30 arson attacks on asylum centres in what we are seeing as a campaign of far-right terror in this State. We need to be debating it. There is a direct line between the dog-whistling of Government leaders and the scapegoating of asylum seekers based on misinformation and the creation of a hostile environment.

Deputy Michael Collins: Next week sees the inauguration of our new President and I wish Catherine Connolly the very best in her presidency. This will mean a by-election in Galway West. We in Independent Ireland strongly believe that this by-election should take place immediately. To facilitate this we have already put forward our candidate Councillor Noel Thomas who is working on the ground as we speak. Can we debate-----

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): We will expect his posters the very next day.

Deputy Michael Collins: Can we debate here this week as to how soon the writ will be issued so that the people of Galway West will get the representation they fully deserve?

Deputy Mary Butler: I commend the Deputy on not missing an opportunity. I have taken notes on all the issues that were raised. I believe that what Deputy Murphy has raised is covered under tomorrow's statements on international protection processing and enforcement. That debate will be on for three and a half hours and will be taken by the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. The Deputy will have the opportunity to raise his concerns about safety then.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Could we add "safety" to the title rather than it being about "enforcement"?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, this is not a back and forth.

Deputy Mary Butler: No. There is no need to. The Deputy can still raise it under that.

I have taken on board what has been asked in relation to energy, Fastway Couriers, and the nitrates derogation, on which we had a lengthy discussion this morning. All are important and will be considered at the Business Committee meeting.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Chief Whip. Are the proposed arrangements for the business agreed?

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are not agreed.

Question put and declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are moving on to Questions on Policy or Legislation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Nearly 1 million hospital appointments have been cancelled since 2022 under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and the crisis deepens by the year. This is according to new HSE figures released to Teachta David Cullinane. This is a damning indictment of the Government's failed health policies. Hospitals are understaffed, overcrowded and overstretched because the Government has built in recruitment restrictions that strangle the system. The Government promised 3,000 new beds in 2024. The funding has not materialised. The Government promised four new elective hospitals by 2027. They are stalled and will not reach planning until 2031. It is failure on every front. Behind every cancelled appointment is a person left waiting, worrying and suffering because the Government refuses to act. It is time to get real. Where is the plan to deliver the staff, the beds, and the investment needed to fix this broken system?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy is simply ignoring the record level of investment in our health service, which is €27.4 billion in funding in 2026. If she compares 2020 to July 2025, there are over 29,000 more staff, which is a 28% increase in staffing across our health system. There are over 10,000 more nurses and midwives, 5,000 health and social care professionals, 1,400 consultants and over 2,000 doctors and dentists, all of whom are making a really positive contribution with changed demographics, increased demand and pressure across our health system. Even with that occurring, we have had a 12% reduction in patients on waiting lists exceeding 12 months and a reduction in the average waiting time from 7.2 months to 6.5 months, and that is against a backdrop of a 9% increase in outpatients and a 5% increase in inpatient and day case attendances.

I regret whenever there are cancelled appointments for anyone across our hospital system but we are staffing and resourcing our public health in an unprecedented way-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister. I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----to respond back to the pressure and the changing demographics we are seeing.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: About 300,000 households are behind on their electricity bills and household electricity bills have jumped by more than €320 in a year. My colleague Deputy Ahern has been working hard to stop the greed that is driving this awful inflation and really making things so difficult for so many struggling households. Deputy Ahern has called on the Government to use the EU electricity and gas directives to introduce price regulation in these exceptional circumstances, namely, the complete failure of competition in the energy sector and the failure to protect vulnerable customers.

There are other mechanisms. Section 10 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 allows the Minister to issue policy directions to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. Indeed, the interim report of the national energy affordability task force recommended that the regulator conduct a probe on price gouging following the patent failure of providers to pass on cuts in wholesale costs to hard-pressed consumers. The Government could also threaten greed-driven firms with a levy on their profits if they do not cut prices.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The winter is upon us. People are already struggling. What will the Government do to help people from struggling even further with their energy bills?

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why we took measures in the budget to support families and households. As I said, the response around the VAT on gas and electricity was a measure that came with a cost. It was important to prioritise that in the context of the tax package. In addition, as I said, the social protection package we introduced will mitigate costs in the context of the changes we have made to the fuel allowance. Increasing the eligibility for households will help to support families most in need.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is examining the overall regulatory framework as it exists for energy providers. We need broader reform of regulation across our economy in energy and in other areas. There is a need for this to be seriously reformed in the interests of affordability but also in the interests of having balanced regulation and quicker decisions in terms of driving wider economic growth, which is something we are all working on.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Thousands of farmers met in Cork last night and they are really angry. They are correct in being angry because the Government has put its head in the sand and pretended that business as usual will be able to continue and that Ireland will be able to retain its nitrates derogation. That is looking more and more unlikely. The reality is we have had the nitrates derogation since 2006. We got it on the basis we would improve our water quality but we have not done it in 20 years. The EU is probably going to tell us the derogation is gone and we will not be able to retain it. Where is the Government's plan B for these farmers? It has led them to a cliff on the nitrates derogation and there will be nothing in place for them come January if that derogation is not retained.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for raising this point. We in government fundamentally believe in the importance of the nitrates derogation. Our 7,000 derogation farmers are operating to a higher level of environmental sustainability and with a higher level of conditionality to reach to meet that point. We know the economic value it has for our country, with 49% of our dairy herd in derogation and producing 65% of our milk. The majority of the €6.3 billion worth of exports from our dairy sector, which is so important to our rural economy, comes from that area.

That is why it is a top priority for me that I continue in my engagement with the Commission. Commissioner Roswall will visit Ireland later in the week. I addressed the meeting in Cork last night that 2,000 farmers attended looking for the retention of the nitrates derogation. I stand full square with them, as does the Government, in doing everything we can to retain the derogation beyond the end of this year.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Over 1,000 workers have been left in a desperate situation by Fastway Couriers going into receivership. These are direct workers and workers from franchisees. They have all been left being owed back pay or a back month of pay. They are owed wages. They should be owed redundancy. They are now struggling to pay bills and mortgages. However, they have been told they are effectively locked out for a month from accessing social welfare. They have been told they are still legally working for Fastway for 30 days from the point at which the receivership was announced but they will not get paid until the new year. The kicker is they cannot claim social welfare benefits in those 30 days and if they seek to claim social welfare benefits or they even start new employment, they would lose any redundancy entitlements.

They are left in a terrible limbo situation in the run up to Christmas. They want the Government to intervene. The first ask is whether the relevant Ministers will meet with those workers and then work with the Department of Social Protection to ensure they get what they need.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this issue. My thoughts are with all those workers affected by this receivership. I know how concerning it is for each of them. As the Deputy knows, a receiver is individually appointed by a lender to take control of a company. Its role is to secure the assets in that respect. The receiver is independent in its role and the Government cannot intervene in how the receiver approaches the position.

However, I understand the Department of Social Protection is engaging directly with the receiver and the affected employees in this case to provide the necessary information and support during this time. There are robust protections in place for employees of an insolvent employer and the receiver submitted a collective redundancy notification to the Department of enterprise on 31 October. It is currently undertaking the 30-day consultation with the employees' representatives. I will reflect the concerns the Deputy has raised. I know there are significant concerns across the House for all of the employees involved but there is a formal legal mechanism in how this operates from a legislative position.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Every now and again, I raise issues on behalf of constituents relating to dodgy, unscrupulous landlords who are not registered with the

Residential Tenancies Board. In some cases, they are also exploiting their tenants. In other cases, they are not planning compliant and operate in a very dangerous way. However, when I ask for an update from the Residential Tenancies Board, it says it cannot update parties who have made referrals, it would not be appropriate to do so given the fact the RTB may be pursuing a criminal prosecution and it might prejudice the case and if it is updating any person other than the non-compliant landlord, it could be dangerous and there are also data protection issues.

Can this be looked at? Is there a middle way where there could be a ticket-based system where it says: "under investigation", "processing", "completed" or "no issue found" because it goes into the ether and no one knows what is happening with that landlord? Sometimes it can go on for two years and it is as if they are just getting away with it. We need some sort of transparency as to whether criminal proceedings are being proceeded with.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I know, as constituency TDs, it can be difficult to get particular feedback from some State bodies and they reference GDPR or ongoing formal or legal proceedings. I will ask the Minister for housing, who obviously oversees the RTB, to reflect on what the Deputy has said and if there is a way of providing some level or layer of communication so people have a sense of where something is within a particular process. I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: People in Clonard and Enfield in my constituency of Meath West are very angry about their water supplies or lack thereof. Abbeyfields and Meadow View in Clonard are home to about 150 houses. They have not been served properly by a proper water service for over 30 and 40 years, respectively. Finally, in August, Uisce Éireann confirmed a new bore hole would be dug there and that it was imminent, along with an improvement in communications but neither has happened. Machinery is on-site but again, no one is quite sure what is happening.

Improvements have happened in Enfield over the years and we have finally secured a new reservoir there but once again, residents have endured 14 nights out of a recent 16 without a drop of water. Communications from Uisce Éireann are abysmal, inaccurate and often arrive after the fact. It is not good enough. There are businesses, delis, butchers and cafés that have to close when they have no water. Schools, nursing homes and people's lives are disrupted and negatively impacted. There is no tankering, there is no proper communication and there is no accountability from Uisce Éireann. It has to stop.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I regret that Irish Water has not properly communicated with her constituents, businesses and critical services in Enfield and beyond.

3 o'clock

When we are investing in Irish Water, there will be a focus on the importance of public service performance. As €12 billion is allocated to it over the next five years, it needs to ensure that customer service, communication and engagement are critical parts of its wider investment programme. When it is doing overall capital investment in the community, there will be disruption at times. It is important that it can be planned for and that there is much better

engagement. We will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to engage with Irish Water and properly respond to it to ensure there is better engagement going forward.

Deputy John Clendennen: On 12 January 2022, which will forever remain one of the darkest days in the history of County Offaly and indeed Ireland, a young woman, Ashling Murphy, had her life taken in the most brutal and senseless way in the cold light of day. Since this House last sat on 22 October, the courts have delivered their verdicts and sentences. However, there remains a deep sense of unease and dismay among many that the punishment did not reflect the gravity of the crime. Ireland is and must always remain an open and welcoming country, a place of compassion, fairness and opportunity. However, that openness does not come at the expense of safety. We need measures that send a clear signal that while Ireland welcomes those who contribute positively to our economy and our society, we simply will not tolerate those who abuse our hospitality or endanger our citizens. Will the Government commit to ensuring that foreign nationals, including EU citizens, who serve prison sentences for serious offences in Ireland are deported to their home countries immediately upon the completion of their sentences?

Deputy Jack Chambers: At the outset, I commend the family of Ashling Murphy and everyone in the community in County Offaly who have shown such incredible resilience, strength and dignity while dealing with the most horrendous circumstances that any family could ever experience. Ashling's murder shocked the nation. Everyone in this House and throughout our country offers them nothing but our love, support and deepest sympathies.

Regarding the Deputy's question, from a policy perspective the removal from the State of convicted criminals and those who are a danger to public safety is a priority for the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and for the Government. The removal of individuals is actively managed by the Department of justice in close consultation with An Garda Síochána and the Irish Prison Service. There has been a large increase in the number of removal orders under the freedom of movement directive, from 24 in 2024 to 99 so far this year. Under the 2015 free movement regulation, orders can be made for the removal and exclusion of European Union citizens, or their family members, in certain circumstances. There is a particular threshold, grounds and a bar upon which that is set. That is the basis. I cannot speak about particular people other than to say that is how the directive works.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: A local headline in Drogheda today reads, "28 people could have died", following the horrific arson attack on the George's Street IPAS accommodation centre. If it had not been for the swift intervention of An Garda Síochána and Drogheda fire services, families and children, including a three-week-old baby, would not have escaped with their lives. One family had no way out of the top-floor room in which they were trapped other than by going down the stairs that were ravaged with flames. Concerns have been raised about safety standards in this building and indeed about the private operators. We have here a rogue landlord prioritising profit over duty of care and human life, aided by the Government not meeting its obligations. There are no published reports of inspections of direct provision or EROC centres in County Louth, including this building, for 2025. The Government has paid millions of euro for asylum seeker accommodation to a company which is owned by a man who has been linked by the Criminal Assets Bureau to the Drogheda gang feud. Recent media

reports suggest that the owner of this company, Secure Accommodation Management, has been paid €10.2 million since it was set up in September 2022. Indeed, the then Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth highlighted its huge profits for 2023. It terrifies me that gangsters named by CAB are securing contracts and profiteering on public money. As a result of this, 28 people could have died on the Government's watch. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As I have said to a number of colleagues today, I am shocked and appalled by what happened in Drogheda. I heard many people from the Deputy's community express how appalled they were about that particular incident. We all condemn it.

To the Deputy's question, I am not aware of the particular circumstances in which the contract for this property was entered into. Perhaps the Deputy can provide the details to the Department of justice or to the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and he can assess that. Because of the changes in the wider migration pattern into our country across the last number of years, there has been a response to try and find accommodation for people under particular criteria who have come here. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Department of justice to respond to the Deputy's particular concerns.

Deputy Peter Roche: I wish to raise an issue with regards to the lack of funding coming from Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, for rehabilitation works on our national routes, particularly in east Galway and works such as overlays, drainage and pavement improvements. Funding over the last couple of years has been drastically reduced. Any time representations are made to the local area engineer, that is the cry TII has, that there is no funding available for such works. In this instance I want to reference a particularly challenging issue where floodwaters are constantly challenging a private home on the N63, just outside the village of Abbeyknockmoy, where emergency drainage works are required. That poor widow has to ring family when there is any forecast of heavy rain. It is not fair or right. A small investment would rectify that for her benefit. It is essential TII continues to fund the restoration works.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Roche. I am familiar with the funding needs of many roads and the road network across east Galway. One thing the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is doing as part of the sectoral investment plans for the road network and investment in public transport is to give better funding certainty to TII. As we know in recent years there was a difficulty in funding certain roads projects and maintenance, which the Deputy has referenced. The overall distribution of the €22 billion is being developed as part of the sectoral investment plan in transport. That is due to be agreed by Government in the coming weeks and will set out the broader trajectory of funding for transport infrastructure, and indeed better funding certainty for TII when it comes to responding to the needs of projects the Deputy has referenced in east Galway. I will ask the Minister to reflect on what the Deputy has said today in the context of the work he is doing.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: A few weeks ago I stood here and highlighted the fact that whilst An Coimisiún Pleanála has much expertise in the realm of planning, it has no in-house expertise when it comes to aviation. I flagged that here in the Dáil and an upshot of that in the days that followed was we were notified that Sagentia, a British company, has been taken on as an

independent consultant. Why is it that the Irish Aviation Authority, the taxpayer-funded State body for aviation safety on D'Olier Street, is being overlooked and undermined by An Coimisiún Pleanála? It is the authority for air safety in this country. I have asked An Coimisiún Pleanála this and await a response. I want to know what was the cost, due diligence and procurement process and whether there were any conflicts of interest. This needs to be laid bare because we have a State body. Why should we go outside the country and take on private contractors? Why would we overlook the HSE or any State body? Why would we overlook the Irish Aviation Authority when it raises red flags for aviation concern? Why would we go beyond our jurisdiction and pay a lot of good taxpayer money to bring in a private contractor?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Crowe. I am not familiar with the contribution he made a few weeks ago but what I would say is An Coimisiún Pleanála is independent in its functions and around its assessment and evaluation of planning considerations and decisions. I do not know the direct circumstances the Deputy has referenced, but there may be difficulty in taking someone out of the Irish Aviation Authority and bringing them into An Coimisiún Pleanála if it is doing an independent evaluation or assessment of a particular planning matter. The priority we have in the context of investing in public services is to support recruitment across our public service. That is reflected across our agencies, regulators and Departments in building expertise and that is reflected in the growth of public sector numbers in recent years. There may be a particular case where contracts have to be entered into if temporary expertise is required in a particular regulator or agency for a temporary period. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to assess what the Deputy has said, respecting the fact An Coimisiún Pleanála has to operate independently and separately to all of us to uphold the integrity of the planning system.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: In three successive elections Fianna Fáil engaged and paid for media coaching services provided by broadcaster Ivan Yates. He coached six Fianna Fáil Ministers, including the Taoiseach, yet you failed to disclose this relationship even though there was a clear conflict of interest. You knew Ivan Yates was playing for your team, contributing to Fianna Fáil election strategy and then presenting himself as an independent commentator in the national media, yet you said nothing.

Fianna Fáil already attempted to engineer a situation in this Dáil whereby Michael Lowry's crew could sit in government and opposition at the same time. Now, you think there is no problem with a consultant working for your party and then working for the media whose job it is to hold you to account. Of course, Ivan Yates should have disclosed his working relationship with Fianna Fáil. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, was the director of elections for Fianna Fáil during the presidential election. Did he not see a responsibility to publicly declare this relationship?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I absolutely refute and reject what you are after saying there. All political parties and many politicians who are not part of one receive media training. It has been a matter of public record that Ivan Yates was providing media training to various politicians within Fianna Fáil over a series of years. Fianna Fáil has every right to hire contractors or media trainers as it sees fit. It is a matter for Ivan Yates to disclose any potential or direct conflicts of interest in his interaction with or contribution to media organisations or

as a commentator. I am sure Sinn Féin hires media trainers. It spends a lot of time hiring expert lawyers down in the High Court when it comes to defamation actions.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are talking about a person who presents himself as independent.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Something you prioritise around your funding is to take defamation actions against many members of the media.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is a totally different matter. It is a matter of an analyst presenting as independent while playing for your team.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is how you prioritise your resources. We are able to hire media trainers and we have every right to do that. It is for Ivan Yates to respond to any issue in terms of his own conflicts of interest.

Deputy Michael Collins: Last night, businesses and residents were once again flooded in Bantry after a heavy night of rain. Since I came into the Dáil in 2016, I have raised this issue monthly - the latest was two weeks ago. The answer I got a couple of weeks ago from the Minister was that a flood relief scheme would be delivered to Bantry in 2031. The people of Bantry have been destroyed by floods last night and for decades. The *Southern Star* carried a story last week which recalled that in 1983, people had to sit up in businesses in Bantry and put their feet up in the air as the businesses were surrounded by floods. The time for talking is over. The time for Ministers of State with responsibility for the OPW coming to Bantry time in and time out to talk to residents and businesses is over. All Bantry wants is a flood relief scheme, not promises of compensation packages that cannot be delivered. Bantry has had enough. Throughout these decades of flooding, Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael has been in government. Will they fast-track the flood relief scheme, deliver it in 2026 and not kick the can down the road as they have done for the past 50 years? Councillor Danny Collins told me this morning that there is great anger in Bantry and that there needs to be a meaningful compensation package for businesses and residents. Will that happen this week?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I know from engaging with the Ministers of State, Deputies Christopher O'Sullivan and Moran, how seriously they take the issue of flooding in terms of capital allocations for the OPW. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to respond directly to the Deputy. He wants to accelerate many flooding schemes and, as part of his capital settlement for the OPW, has prioritised flood relief schemes across the country. Uplift for the OPW is being prioritised to respond to the needs across communities. I will ask the Minister of State to respond to the Deputy on the timeline and the urgency in terms of Bantry. I appreciate the Deputy raising the issue.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Four survivors of our hellish industrial school system remain on hunger strike outside Leinster House in an effort to obtain very modest financial and medical assistance for a cohort of about 4,500 people who have been profoundly harmed and neglected by the State. They have been left without written confirmation of what was agreed in a meeting

with the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, last week. I understand a meeting with an intermediary has been postponed until tomorrow. Meanwhile, they are into the 45th day of their hunger strike. Their physical health is in serious peril. One of the hunger strikers – Mary Dunlevy Greene, originally from Killeely, County Limerick - told me the main aim of the supports they are seeking is to be able to die with dignity as most survivors are already advanced in years and are suffering with health conditions related to chronic childhood adversity. You cannot get more stark than that. Will the Minister assure us that we will see those agreements confirmed in writing with the utmost sense of urgency?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Taoiseach met with the survivors. I understand there was a plan to have a mediator in place. Due to the personal circumstances of the mediator, that was not possible today. The mediator who was due to be in place has recommended an alternative. I understand the intention is that the meeting could go ahead as proposed and an email will issue to that effect. That is the latest update, as of the past couple of hours. I understand the sensitivity and urgency of having engagement on this.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Minister will know from his time on Fingal County Council that Donabate-Portrane is one area where the State is delivering houses at scale. Despite the population increase, there is only one direct bus service to Dublin city centre, the 33D at 7.20 a.m., and one back at 5.45 p.m. I have a sheaf of emails from the NTA and Dublin Bus that committed to one extra bus service in the morning and one in the evening, to start in October or by 3 November. Last week, the NTA pulled the rug. People are left behind on the platforms because trains are overcrowded. We only have one direct bus service from Donabate-Portrane. Dublin Bus is willing to do it. I remind the Minister that this is in the transport Minister's constituency. Can we please cut through the red tape and deliver an extra 33D service at peak time in the morning and the evening? Will the Minister do everything to ensure that is the case?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I go out to Portrane-Donabate and know the area very well. There has been a wonderful transformation in terms of housing, construction and work happening across the community. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to respond directly to the Deputy on the increased demand for public transport and, in particular, the bus service that has been mentioned. I understand the acute need and demand in that area.

Finance Bill 2025: Financial Resolutions

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move:

1. THAT section 531AM of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which contains the main charging provisions for Universal Social Charge (USC), be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution, to include a reference to Section 847AA which provides for a scheme of tax relief for donations to certain National Governing Bodies (NGB) where the donations are used to fund certain projects. The amendment provides that a donation to an NGB is not deducted when calculating an individual's USC liability. This follows similar treatment for donations under section 847A TCA (donations to certain sports bodies) and section 848A TCA (donations to

approved bodies), whereby such donations are exempt from Income Tax but are not exempt from USC.

2. THAT section 14 of the Finance Bill, which relates to section 14 of the Finance Act 2024 through which the taxation measures for the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System into the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) were inserted, is repealed, in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

3. THAT Part 30 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which relates to Occupational Pension Schemes, Retirement Annuities, Purchased Life Annuities and Certain Pensions be amended to provide for the tax treatment of the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System, including the taxation of payments from the scheme, in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

4. THAT section 16 of the Finance Bill, which relates to section 15 of the Finance Act 2024, through which a number of necessary auxiliary amendments consequential to the insertion of Chapter 2E into the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) were inserted, is repealed, in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

5. THAT the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) be amended by the insertion of a new Section 1009A to provide that foreign body corporates which are substantially similar to partnerships formed under the law of the State and their members shall be chargeable to tax in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

6. THAT section 731 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for tax exemptions for a unit trust which neither is, nor is deemed to be, an authorised unit trust scheme, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

7. THAT section 291A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides relief from corporation tax for capital expenditure incurred on specified intangible assets, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving rise to this Resolution.

8. THAT section 400 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which contains provisions for the corporation tax treatment of certain company reconstructions, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving rise to this Resolution.

9. THAT Section 481A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which contains provisions in relation to relief for investment in digital games, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

10. THAT section 891H of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which contains provisions in relation to country-by-country reporting, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

11. THAT section 71 of Finance Act 2010, which provides for relief from natural gas carbon tax on natural gas used for certain purposes, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

12. THAT section 82 of Finance Act 2010, which provides for relief from solid fuel carbon tax on solid fuels used for certain purposes, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

13. THAT section 6 of the Value-Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010 (No. 31 of 2010) which relates to persons not accountable persons unless they so elect be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

14. THAT Schedule 3 to the Value-Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010 (No. 31 of 2010), which relates to goods and services chargeable at the reduced rate of value-added tax, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

15. THAT Section 96 to the Value-Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010 (No. 31 of 2010), which relates to waiver of exemption under old rules, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

16. THAT Part 7 of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999), which provides for exemptions and reliefs from Stamp Duty to apply in certain circumstances, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

17. THAT section 126AB of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999) be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution to provide for a stamp duty to be levied on certain financial institutions.

18. THAT section 125A of the Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 (No. 31 of 1999), which provides for a stamp duty to be levied on health insurance contracts that are entered into or renewed between authorised insurers and their customers in each quarter, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

19. THAT section 41 of the Capital Acquisitions Tax Consolidation Act 2003 (No. 1 of 2003), which contains provisions relating to gifts and inheritances of life assurance policies, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

20. THAT the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) be amended by the amendment of section 811C(4)(a) to provide that a tax advantage arising from a tax avoidance transaction can be withdrawn in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

21. THAT the provisions contained in Part 4A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for the implementation of Council Directive (EU) 2022/2523 of 15 December 2022 on ensuring a global minimum level of taxation for multinational enterprise groups and large-scale domestic groups in the Union, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

22. THAT the provisions contained in section 638A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for the liabilities and obligations of, and the requirement of things to be done by, a successor company in relation to a merger or division pursuant to the Companies Act 2014, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

23. THAT section 959AA of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which relates to time limits on assessments made or amended by a Revenue officer on chargeable persons, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this resolution, to provide that a Revenue officer may make or amend an assessment on a chargeable person outside the normal four-year period to give effect to a Mutual Agreement Procedure reached under a limited scope treaty which is given the force of law by virtue of section 826(1B) of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997.

24. THAT Section 959AU of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which deals with the date of payment of tax for amended assessments, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this resolution, to clarify that where an assessment is amended more than once, the date for payment of tax arising from a second or subsequent amended assessment is determined in isolation from the due date for tax arising from the first amended assessment.

25. THAT the provisions contained in section 840A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997), which provides for a restriction on the deductibility of interest on loans for certain purposes, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

26. THAT section 100 of the Finance Act 1999, which provides for mineral oil tax reliefs for certain fuels, and qualifying uses, be amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Act giving effect to this Resolution.

Question put and agreed to.

Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to address the House on the Second Stage of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025. The Bill will provide the legal mechanism for the payment of €1.5 billion of equity investment in ESB, as committed to by the Government under the national development plan. I will set out the broader context for why Government equity investment is required, before outlining the subject matter of the Bill.

As Deputies will be aware, Ireland's electricity demand will grow significantly over the coming decade. It is estimated that electricity demand will double by 2035; this is in addition to the 25% growth that has taken place over the past ten years. The International Energy Agency has advised that expanding and modernising electricity grids is essential for a secure, affordable and sustainable electricity system. It has expressed concern that globally, investment in grids is failing to keep pace with spending on generation and electrification. In Ireland, every five years our electricity network companies, ESB Networks and EirGrid, present their five-year forecast investment plans to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, which then approves the revenues allowable for their operating and investment programmes. These revenues are charges to electricity customers known as network tariffs. This process is known as a price review.

The next price review, PR6, covers the period 2026-2030. The CRU published its draft determination for PR6 in July of this year. As part of the draft determination, an overall network expenditure programme of between €14.1 billion and €18.1 billion is being considered for the period 2026-2030. A final determination will be made by the CRU later this year.

The level of investment being considered under PR6 marks a significant step change. The current price review, PR5, which spans the period 2021 to 2025, will see an investment of at least €7.6 billion. PR6 will more than double that.

This unprecedented package of investment will enable the network companies to support Ireland through this period of change in terms of our use and demand for electricity. It will support key priorities in infrastructure, housing, competitiveness, investment, growth and climate action.

It is a critical period for Ireland in terms of improving security of supply, realising targets and ambition around decarbonisation, expansion of renewables and development of the offshore grid.

The benefits to extending and reinforcing the grid are many, including: improving the resilience of Ireland's electricity system and future-proofing it for generations to come; ensuring that every home and every business have a reliable and secure source of electricity, including the 300,000 new homes we have committed to build by 2030; safeguarding against damage from future weather events and storms; and accelerating the connection of new sources of renewable electricity which contributes to Ireland's transition to greater levels of renewable energy and achievement of our climate goals.

The investment also has huge importance for our economy and will be key to ensuring that the State can increase the critical infrastructure it needs to ensure continued economic growth and employment in our economy, in addition to continued foreign direct investment. The investment will ensure we can support the expected 50% growth in electricity by 2035 and deliver on Ireland's energy needs.

The scale of the increase, however, means that both companies need financial support to deliver the ambitious infrastructure investment programmes. In July of this year, as part of the national development plan, Government agreed the investment of up to €3.5 billion in additional equity to support the PR6 grid investment programmes over 2026-2030 and beyond. This represents the largest single investment ever made in Ireland's electricity network. Some €2 billion will be invested in EirGrid to support the financing of its offshore grid investment plans and €1.5 billion will be invested in ESB to support the financing of its onshore grid investment plan.

In respect of the equity investment mechanism for EirGrid, it is to be noted that this will be agreed and legislated for separately. Investment by EirGrid in offshore grid will begin next year. However, the majority of its investment will not occur until later this decade. The €2 billion Government investment will be allocated over the next five years to support EirGrid access the capital markets and fund its investment.

In terms of the investment in ESB, this Bill has been progressed as matter of priority. The equity investment in ESB is required by the end of this year to ensure payment from the Central Fund of Government approved NDP funding in the 2025 budget and to ensure ESB is

sufficiently financed to deliver the ambitious onshore grid investment programme, continuing and expanding its existing investment in our grid. As such, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I sought a pre-legislative scrutiny waiver from the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy. The waiver was granted following a technical briefing on the Bill being provided to the committee by officials from my Department.

The €1.5 billion equity investment in ESB is to support ESB's ability to finance the overall investment plan for 2026-2030 as part of PR6. This overall investment plan will be financed by debt issuance on the bond market, supported by Government's equity investment and ESB Network's regulated income, as approved by the CRU. It will see delivery of over 500 capital projects across transmission and distribution networks. This includes 81 km of new overhead lines, 319 km of new underground cables, nearly 70 new and upgraded substations across the country and 50,000 pole replacements.

ESB Networks will expand, modernise and reinforce our onshore electricity network infrastructure. Without Government equity investment, ESB would be unable to deliver such an extensive and rapid programme of work in the five years to 2030. The Government equity injection into ESB will support the strength of its balance sheet and ultimately assist in it maintaining excellent credit ratings.

While the investment does not directly lower current customer electricity bills, maintaining strong credit ratings ensures that ESB can borrow at the most competitive interest rates which ultimately lowers the impact of network charges on customer bills. The equity investment by Government sends strong market signals and demonstrates shareholder support at a time when credit rating agencies have noted general market concerns in relation to the high levels of capital expenditure required in electricity infrastructure across Europe. In fact, since announcing the Government equity investment, Standard and Poor's rating agency has announced an improvement in its credit opinion for ESB, upgrading ESB's issuer credit rating to A from A minus. It is important to note that the State will receive an increased stock holding in ESB in return for this investment. The State will continue to receive dividends in proportion to its shareholding.

I will now turn to the Bill's subject matter. I will begin by providing a brief overview of the most important measures the Bill addresses before providing a section by section summary of the Bill. The legislation before the House today has two main objectives. The first is to increase the statutory borrowing limit of ESB from €12 billion to €17 billion to finance the delivery of the PR6 investment programme. This increase is necessary to support the potential €15.2 billion expenditure by ESB Networks in the 2026-2030 PR6 period. The second objective is to provide for the issuance of capital stock by ESB in return for payment up to the value of €1.5 billion. The stock shall be issued to the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment.

Issuing capital stock which will be fully subscribed to by the State allows importantly for Government to attach the condition that the €1.5 billion investment be used specifically for grid infrastructure projects carried out by ESB Networks. It also ensures that the investment is reflected in the shareholding percentages of the company.

At present, the State's shareholding in ESB stands at 97.4%, whereas the employee share ownership plan, ESOP, holds 2.6%. Employee shareholding ownership came about in 2001 when stock was granted to employees of ESB as part of an overall cost and competitiveness review agreement with the ESB group of unions.

It is important to note that the Bill has been drafted to also enable ESB to issue stock to the ESOP in return for payment, should it choose to also invest in ESB to maintain its current shareholding percentage. The ESOP will have a period of up to 12 months following Government investment to make its investment. Should the ESOP choose not to participate in the equity investment, the State's shareholding will increase.

An independent valuation is currently being carried out by EY for ESB and the shareholders, which will provide a valuation range for ESB. The valuation determines the price per stock and, therefore, the number of shares the Government will receive from its €1.5 billion investment and its final percentage holding in the company. ESB management has advised my Department that ESB employees are supportive of both the equity investment by Government and the ambitious PR6 investment programme. On a separate but important note, legal consideration has determined that the equity investment does not give rise to any issue of state aid.

I will provide a section by section summary of the Bill, which has five sections. Section 1 provides for the relative definitions of the Bill. Section 2 amends section 4 of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 1954 to provide for the increase of the statutory borrowing limit of the ESB from €12 billion to €17 billion.

Section 3 amends section 2 of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 2001 by inserting new subsections. The new subsection (5) provides for the issuance of capital stock by the ESB in return for payment up to the value of €1.5 billion; that 90% of such stock shall be issued to the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation; and 10% of such stock shall be issued to the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment.

The new subsection (6) provides for the procedure for the Minister for Finance to make payment to the ESB up to the value of €1.5 billion for the capital stock from the Central Fund; and the new subsection (7) enables the ESB to make a concomitant capital stock issue to the trustees of the employee share ownership plan, should the trustees choose to participate, to maintain their current shareholding percentage.

Section 4 amends section 11 of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 2001 to insert a reference to the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in relation to expenses incurred in the administration of the Act. Section 5 contains standard provisions outlining the Short Title of the Bill and its collective citation.

I commend the Bill to the House and I look forward to the debate.

Deputy Pa Daly: I did not get a chance earlier to pay tribute to and congratulate Catherine Connolly. I also pay tribute to Sr. Stan who was a Listowel woman and a Kerry woman. In a week when we saw the outrageous attack on the house in Drogheda and convictions for racially motivated murders, I would love to know what she would have thought about the way the country is going. I pay tribute to her for all of her work with immigrants and the homeless over the years.

Due to decades of underinvestment, bad planning and mismanagement by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, Ireland's energy system is not fit for purpose. Alongside rip-off costs and a deeply regressive approach to financing, our electricity grid is another example in a long line of Government failures. Due to paralysis, it is plagued by critical infrastructure deficits - we all saw this in the storms of last winter - that not only result in hundreds of millions of euro in wasted renewable energy every year, driving up the cost of energy, but have already stopped people moving into their own homes. The need for urgent action and significant investment in our grid is clear. As the Minister of State said, we need to future-proof it for generations to come, but in doing so it must be fair and just to the generations to come.

While it is essential that we take a determined and ambitious approach, it is equally critical that the Government does not repeat past mistakes. The choices must shape Ireland's energy future in a way that delivers first for ordinary people and not for corporate interests. We all saw that when we had total control and State ownership of our energy markets, we had some of the lowest prices in Europe. Now, we have some of the highest. The Government must ensure there is no return to the snail's pace, stop-start approach of successive Governments. It must be subject to sufficient scrutiny and safeguards so that the public good is prioritised rather than treated as collateral damage. This is why the legislation is so important.

The Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025 legislates to allow for the €1.5 billion Exchequer investment in the ESB and furthermore to allow the ESB Group to increase its debt ceiling to €17 billion. It is important and necessary but how the money is spent really matters. The Bill mirrors the same strategic errors of previous Governments in potentially repeating our mistakes. For example, just like the summer economic statement, the revised national development plan and budget 2026, it is not only devoid of detail on the infrastructure the investment will deliver, but there is also no guidance on what projects should be prioritised. That is important and I will get to it. There is no mechanism for Oireachtas oversight, accountability or independent audit. As a result, this important investment of taxpayers' money will be vulnerable to waste and exploitation. It could fail to deliver the critical infrastructure that we need now and into the future. Ramming this Bill through without addressing these shortcomings will not undo the decades of failures. We should be careful not to repeat them.

Let us look at the position we have today. Ireland is massively over-dependent on expensive imported fossil fuels leading to some of the highest energy prices in the EU. I do not think anyone will disagree with that. Ordinary workers and families are being ripped off because the energy bills they are charged here are, on average, €300 to €500 more than other countries. Unsurprisingly, the number of households in energy debt is at a record level having doubled in four short years. There are now 300,000 households that cannot afford to heat their homes or turn the lights on. The crisis will only deepen further following the impact of another round of energy price hikes combined with the cruel decision to withdraw and rip away the energy credits this winter.

The constraints on our grid do not just impact energy affordability. In fact, grid constraints are placing urgently needed housing under threat. We saw that 80 families were prevented from moving into their homes last summer due to the lack of an electricity connection. They remain locked out. Recently, at an Oireachtas committee hearing, the ESB itself warned that limited capacity was placing new housing at risk. Grid constraints also place our vast potential for renewables and energy independence in jeopardy. Ireland saved €1.2 billion last year but

we lost nearly a further €500 million in wasted energy. Ireland's crippled grid acts as a barrier to a thriving economy and balanced regional development, not only with electricity connections but wastewater treatment systems as well. All of this means progress is at a standstill when the reality is we need to be going a lot faster.

Sinn Féin recognises the damage that has been caused by the failure to deliver on our grid and the results of that. Sinn Féin would mandate the planning, oversight and accountability that has been missing in the past, including a new responsibility for the ESB to provide a report on not just where the money has been spent, but where it will go in the future. This is the type of much-needed detail that has been missing, which is essential for credibility and certainty. To ensure this Government can no longer continue to treat energy affordability as an afterthought, our amendments will require the impact on consumer prices to be made clear. This will help to tackle the regressive nature of the current funding model because ordinary households should not continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden, while those who are causing energy surges, such as data centres, are left relatively off the hook. These reports should be laid before the Oireachtas initially within six months of the Act passing and then annually. We would also address the mismanagement of grid expansion to date. Successive Governments have rolled out the red carpet for data centres, while other essential infrastructure, such as housing, has been overlooked.

Sinn Féin is not the only one sounding the alarm bell on this. The energy regulator recently highlighted the fact that the ESB Networks substation at Castlebaggot, which was initially intended to support new housing, was handed over to data centres. Even the Government's own officials have issued stark warnings about a business-as-usual approach. In May, the Secretary General of the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment warned the Government that it must make a political choice between new homes and data centres. Similarly, officials in the Department of public expenditure also warned that Ireland's rapid growth in data centres is driving up household bills and gobbling up our energy capacity. All of the renewable energy increase that we will get will be taken by data centres. That is not right.

While increased investment is essential, it must deliver for ordinary workers and families. We hope our amendments will address those concerns ensuring that the ESB's investment is directed towards the right political choices of public good rather than the corporate balance system. This Bill is an opportunity to address the failings in our current system. We believe the amendments are required to ensure we do not fuel them.

I use this opportunity to call on the Government to address the deep unfairness in the cost, and to maintain and upgrade the grid. Data centres consume 22% of Ireland's energy demand, up from 5% in 2015. EirGrid projects will rise to one third by 2034. A single data centre can use as much electricity as Kilkenny city. However, under the current model a disproportionate burden falls on ordinary households. We have repeatedly urged the Government to restructure network charges and correct this inequity. However, not only have these calls fallen on deaf ears, but the draft decision on price review, PR6, which the Minister of State mentioned in his speech, will only further ingrain this unfairness. Under the CRU's draft price review, households and SMEs will see their network charges increase while large data users like data centres will see reductions of up to 18%. It is not just unfair; it is scandalous. The very

companies that have driven up demand have been asked to pay less and ordinary people to pay more. This is a political choice and we believe it is the wrong one.

I emphasise the very real crisis faced by ordinary workers and families when it comes to heating their homes this winter. Over 300,000 households are in debt and there has been another round of crippling energy price hikes but the supports to ordinary people have been ripped away. The Minister of State said that this Bill will not reduce energy bills and will have no influence on that, which is a pity. When the gap between Irish retail prices and wholesale prices is one of the biggest in the world, energy companies have serious questions to answer about price gouging. We have repeatedly provided the Government with measures that would hold the energy companies to account, but they have been ignored. We deserve much better than what the Government is willing to give. We certainly need more than an interim report that only diagnosed some of the problems but delivered no solutions.

The Government should provide €450 in energy credits on electricity bills now and not merely announce that it will publish an energy affordability plan in 2026 with action to follow God knows when. We want investment in the grid to be prioritised and delivered urgently. The stakes are high. This cannot be another blank cheque for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to repeat their failures. The Bill must look at and deliver for housing, for renewable energy, for affordability and for ordinary householders. It cannot be another missed opportunity. We will continue to fight for a fair energy system and one that works for people and not for profit.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Investment in our electricity grid is essential for Ireland's future. For many years, successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have failed to invest in adequate grid infrastructure, which has resulted in constrained housing development, major outages during storms and high electricity prices. Without a grid built for the 21st century, we will continue to see housing targets being missed. We will continue to see major outages during storms and rip-off electricity prices will not be addressed. While Sinn Féin supports the intent of the Bill, ramming it through without the necessary safeguards in place will not undo decades of under-resourcing and lack of delivery.

This Bill provides an opportunity to deliver clear oversight into how billions of euro are directed into our electricity grid and yet Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have decided not to engage with our amendments. We have proposed amendments that would ensure that this investment is geared towards the public good rather than serving corporate greed. We will continue to insist that this public investment prioritises transparency, accountability, fairness and affordability.

This investment comes at a time when almost 300,000 households are in arrears on their electricity bills. This week we saw the first analysis from the Government's energy affordability task force. The task force report illustrates the depth of Ireland's energy price crisis and outlined that more than 60% of electricity arrears are now long term. This highlights the lived reality of many households, who face significant difficulties in paying their bills and continue to see energy prices rise. Despite knowing this reality and knowing the positive impact electricity credits have had in previous years, the Government decided not to include energy credits in the recent budget. This is a clear slap in the face to households struggling with the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and the many people who simply cannot pay their bills.

Storms over the past year have shown the fragile nature of our electricity grid infrastructure. In the last year alone, over 300,000 customers lost power after Storm Darragh, 700,000 customers lost power after Storm Éowyn, and just last month nearly 50,000 customers lost power after Storm Amy. Many households lost power in all three of these storms for long periods of time. As we enter the winter storm season this year, there is real fear among many households about the potential for serious outages. With any increase in investment, there needs to be a serious focus on grid resilience.

At this crucial time when we must invest in our grid, Government must ensure that this investment prioritises the public good. This is an opportunity to address issues such as energy affordability, grid availability and grid resilience. To do this, however, there must be appropriate transparency and accountability that public money and public investments are used effectively. There is a clear lack of transparency and accountability in the current form of this Bill. I call on the Government to work with us to ensure that Ireland's grid infrastructure is fit for the future.

Deputy Réada Cronin: The current state of our country's grid and infrastructure more broadly has been a direct result of years of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael neglect. Decades of under-resourcing, bad planning and mismanagement by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have left us in the mess we are in now, with the crises in housing, education and health among a slew of others. Our grid infrastructure is the energy giver to our economy. It is the lifeblood of our country and it has not been recognised as such by this Government. I welcome that after many long years of neglect, it now recognises its importance and the role it plays in the everyday operation and future development of the State.

However, that does not mean that we should just ram this Bill through without proper safeguards in place, as without necessary scrutiny and amendments the Government is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. We need proper transparent planning and full accountability on the delivery of grid infrastructure to ensure we are achieving housing targets and meeting our renewable energy ambition. These are the critical projects that we need immediately to ensure our future. Instead, however, the Government has prioritised the building of data centres, which are devouring our grid capacity and directly impacting our ability to build homes. Data centres now consume over a quarter of our energy demand, according to the CSO. This is why Sinn Féin has demanded that any borrowing by Government to invest in projects must exclude grid infrastructure for connections to data centres.

We have also highlighted the impact that any new investment will have on electricity prices for families. We are currently paying the highest prices in Europe for electricity and very little is being done by this Government to address this. People have now endured decades of inaction and of rolling over for energy companies, which is at the heart of this crisis. Over the last few months, Energia, Flogas, Bord Gáis Energy and SSE Airtricity have all announced double-digit increases in the cost of electricity. We are all hearing it in our constituency offices, as I am sure the Minister of State is in his. Workers and families are being hammered with soaring prices at every turn. Now they are being forced to fork out hundreds of additional euro on their bills. On top of this, the Government has cut the electricity credits that were helping many families to get over the line at Christmas. Thousands of families are now facing into a bleak winter with no respite in sight.

We need to ensure that the ESB will submit annual reports detailing borrowing, project allocation and consumer price implications. If we do not, we will find ourselves in the same situation down the line without grid capacity to build the infrastructure and homes that our country desperately needs. I know we will be discussing this in the Dáil tomorrow night and I hope the Minister of State really looks at some of the amendments that Deputy Daly and I have put forward. I ask him to accept our amendments and to invest today in our future. Tógfaimid le chéile é.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Ireland's electricity grid is not fit for purpose. It is holding back housing delivery across the State. It is stalling renewable energy projects and limiting development in towns, villages and rural areas. It did not just happen by accident and it did not happen overnight. It is the result of years of underinvestment, poor planning and mismanagement by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. For too long, they have treated the national grid as something to be managed around rather than something to be built up for the future, and now we are paying the price. Builders cannot build homes. Families cannot move in. Businesses and communities cannot grow. The grid simply does not have the capacity. This failure to plan and invest properly has become a brake on the entire economy and especially on our ability as a society to tackle the housing crisis.

The Bill before us provides for €1.5 billion in investment in ESB Networks between 2026 and 2030. While that level of investment is very welcome and very necessary, we wait to see if it turns out to be more than pie in the sky and if the delivery on the ground will be felt, because we have heard it all before. Government press releases have never been in short supply but they have been like confetti in the past few months. What is missing in all of this is consistent delivery, transparency and fairness.

We do support investment in the grid. We see it as essential but we have concerns about the way the Government is going about this. Ramming a Bill through without proper safeguards, accountability and a clear focus on the public good will only repeat the mistakes of the past. Sinn Féin wants to see a grid that serves people, not corporate interests. We have submitted amendments to guarantee proper parliamentary oversight of ESB borrowing, to ring-fence investment for housing and community needs, to protect consumers from higher prices and to ensure independent auditing of how this public money is spent.

We also need to think about this moment in a broader and historical sense. In the 1950s, the State undertook the rural electrification project, which was a national effort that transformed every parish and townland in Ireland. It was driven by determination, ambition and a simple principle, namely, that no community should be left behind. That same drive is needed again today. If we applied the same vision and determination that our grandparents' or great-grandparents' generations once did, we could end the housing crisis that is hollowing out the social fabric of our towns and villages and driving young families from rural communities.

The investment must be about connecting homes before data centres, building fairness into the system and ensuring that no community is locked out because the grid cannot cope. It must be about energy independence, affordable electricity and balanced regional development and growth. The grid we build now will shape the kind of country we become. It must be built for homes and the communities they sustain, and for the future we hope to deliver for our children.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I congratulate our former colleague Catherine Connolly on her inspiring win after her presidential campaign. I wish her all the very best in her upcoming term as Uachtarán na hÉireann and our tenth President.

I welcome the opportunity to speak about this Bill. It is one of significant consequence, not only for our energy system but also for our economy, environment, society and country more broadly. It deals with one of the most crucial challenges we face now and in the near future, namely, how we generate, deliver and pay for the energy that powers our homes, schools, hospitals, businesses and industries. How do we keep the lights on, and how do we do so in a fair and sustainable manner that ensures affordability for Irish consumers? Ireland's energy landscape is being reshaped more dramatically now than at any point in our history, or at least since the ESB was established. We are living through a profound transition, trying to decarbonise our electricity system, at a time when the UN is saying we are on track to miss our target of limiting the rise in the global temperature by 1.5°C. We are trying to decarbonise while electrifying heating and transport and integrating massive new volumes of renewable generation, all while maintaining security of supply and trying to ensure sustainability and affordability for Irish households are paramount. This is no small task, and in that context this Bill has an important role. However, the Bill also has serious gaps in oversight, fairness, environmental protection and, crucially, managing the enormous energy demands from data centres that we need to address. I will return to those topics.

The Bill amends the 1954 Act to give ESB Networks greater borrowing and investment capacity, increasing the statutory borrowing limit from €12 billion to €17 billion. It also authorises €1.5 billion in direct Government equity investment over the next five years, between 2026 and 2030, which is of course very welcome. The Government's stated aim is to provide the legal and financial framework for upgrading and reinforcing Ireland's electricity network to support the roll-out of generation, new housing, electric vehicles and climate adaptation works, particularly to ensure resilience against storms and other severe weather events.

We have seen the huge damage that storms have caused in recent years. Quite frankly, we were not prepared for them. They have been hugely disruptive, particularly in the case of Storm Éowyn. As we all know, lives have tragically been lost in recent memory. All this is happening at a time when electricity demand is growing rapidly. By 2030, Ireland's total demand could rise by as much as 40%, driven by the electrification of heat and transport, population growth and, as I will emphasise later, the astonishing surge in data-centre consumption.

This is not a minor technical amendment; it is a strategic investment Bill that will determine where the State places its financial and infrastructural priorities for the rest of this decade. Therefore, it deserves a high level of scrutiny. I will begin with the positive elements. The Bill is an acknowledgement that our electricity grid is under severe strain. Much of our network was designed for a very different era, namely, one of predictable demand and centralised generation. Today, we have decentralised renewables, fluctuating generation and new kinds of load. Our grid was never built for this complexity. By increasing ESB's borrowing limit and providing direct equity from the State, this Bill allows essential investments in transmission and distribution. That must include the construction of new substations, the upgrading of lines and the replacement of tens of thousands of poles and cables. It is not necessarily the most glamorous of work but it is critical to keeping our energy system reliable.

I believe we will have separate legislation dealing with storm resilience. After Storm Éowyn, when over 750,000 customers lost power, it became clear that we could not continue to rely on a brittle network, dominated by overhead lines. I know we are not necessarily dealing with that issue today, but provisions for better vegetation management, undergrounding key lines and improving emergency-response capacity will be welcome and are necessary.

In principle, we also support the aim of giving ESB Networks the financial capacity to invest at scale. Grid constraints are now one of the biggest barriers to renewable energy projects. Developers of wind and solar farms across the country are waiting years for connections because of bottlenecks. Without new investment, Ireland will simply not meet its renewable electricity targets for 2030.

The Bill is timely and motivated by legitimate needs and recognises that grid infrastructure is essential to the green transition. However, a Bill that controls billions of euro in public funds should also control how that money is used, who benefits and what kind of system it builds for the future. On that front, the Bill is somewhat incomplete.

First, there is the question of cost. This Bill involves investment at an enormous scale. Billions in new borrowing and billions more for capital works are required, yet nowhere in the Bill or its accompanying documentation does the Government specify what this means for the ordinary household's electricity bill. The Department's press statements refer to competitive borrowing rates and long-term benefits but, in plain English, that means the ESB will take on more debt, and that debt will ultimately be serviced through network charges – charges paid by households, schools, businesses, hospitals and so on. Some analysis has suggested that the proposed upgrades could increase bills by approximately €80 per household per year. That may sound modest to some, but for families already having to choose between heating and eating, it is not so modest at all. What are households getting for the extra charge? They are not getting cheaper electricity, at least not in the short term. They are being asked to fund long-term infrastructure that will primarily enable new industrial and commercial growth. At a time of record energy poverty, where over a quarter of households have fallen into arrears in the past two years, that is deeply problematic. A modern electricity system must be just as well as sustainable.

We need to consider establishing more explicit consumer-protection mechanisms that may include, for example, mandating the CRU to publish an annual affordability impact statement outlining the cost effects of this investment and requiring measures to offset any regressive impacts.

More broadly on the issue of consumer costs, we need to seriously consider ways of reining in energy companies and rethinking the deregulation of the energy markets. I have spoken about this previously. There are ways of going about it, such as carve-outs and EU rules, that I have outlined in this House previously. The ESB is in a somewhat unique position given it is a State asset and a former monopoly provider. Under section 21 of the 1927 Electricity Supply Act, which established the ESB, the ESB's obligation was to charge at "such rates and on such scales that the revenue derived in any year by the Board from such sales and services together with its revenue (if any) in such year from other sources will be sufficient and only sufficient (as nearly as may be) to pay all salaries, working expenses, and other outgoings of the Board properly chargeable to income in that year". In other words, the original mandate of the ESB was non-commercial, and it remained so for over 70 years. That provision was repealed by

section 9 of the 2001 Act, which gave the ESB its commercial mandate. Can anyone really argue that there has been a step-change improvement for customers as a result of this commercialisation?

There are also the issues of accountability and oversight, or the lack thereof, in the Bill. The Bill substantially increases the ESB's borrowing powers but adds no new reporting requirements. That is not particularly good legislative practice. If a private company raised its debt ceiling by €5 billion, shareholders would demand rigorous scrutiny, yet here the shareholders, so to speak – the people of Ireland – are being asked to sign a cheque and just hope for the best. We need clear lines of accountability that could include annual reporting to the Oireachtas, for example, not necessarily just vague assurances from press releases. We need independent audit mechanisms that track project performance, delivery timelines and cost efficiency. There are over 500 capital projects planned under the investment programme. Which will be prioritised? On what basis? Who decides?

4 o'clock

How will we in the Dáil be informed if projects go over budget or fall behind schedule? We have seen in other instances, like the new national children's hospital, that we only learn of budget overruns and delays because they appear in the headlines. The Bill should, and could, include a new statutory duty on ESB Networks to provide quarterly performances reports to the Minister and the relevant Oireachtas committee outlining progress, expenditure and projected completion dates for all major works above a certain value. That is the level of transparency the public deserves when billions of euro in public money are at stake.

Any investment in our energy network and systems going forward must have decarbonisation and sustainability as its foremost considerations. It is worth pointing out that under the Climate Action and Law Carbon Development Act 2015 and the Climate Action and Law Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, the ESB, as a public body, is required to perform its functions in a manner consistent with our statutory climate objectives. However, in a position paper back in February, the CRU reported its opinion that the current provisions under the climate action Act do not provide a sufficient legal basis to allow it to explicitly mandate specific emissions reductions and offsetting measures, such as requiring that connection applicants put in place arrangements to ensure that emissions associated with the demand connection are fully abated from the time of that connection or on a set trajectory. That position might be unique to the CRU as a regulator in terms of the compliance obligations it can impose on third parties, or there may be similar problems with the enforceability of the climate change objectives as it applies to other State agencies and bodies. I hope this is something the Minister will check. In any case, given the salience of decarbonising our energy system in our fight against climate disaster, there should be the strongest obligations on the ESB to live up to its requirements under the climate Acts. I tabled an amendment to that effect but unfortunately, it has been ruled out of order. Nonetheless, I will reiterate that the ESB's paramount consideration must be the performance of its functions in a manner consistent with the climate Act.

As with all matters relating to our energy supply and national grid, perhaps the most urgent issue, and the elephant in the room, is data centres. This Bill completely ignores the single biggest driver of electricity demand growth in Ireland today. It is silent on the issue of data centres despite the fact that their impact is overwhelming the very grid this Bill seeks to

reinforce. That is pretty unbelievable. Last year, data centres accounted for 22% of Ireland's entire electricity supply. EirGrid projections suggest that, without intervention, this figure could rise to 30% by 2030. To put that into perspective, one sector, serving a few dozen multinational corporations, could soon consume nearly one third of our national electricity output. This is not demand that can easily be curtailed. Data centres operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The consumption is constant and inflexible. It does not dip when the wind stops blowing or shift when the grid is strained. The result is immense pressure on network infrastructure, particularly in the east of the country where these facilities are concentrated. Dublin, already one of the most data centre-dense cities in Europe, is approaching the limits of its transmission capacity. That congestion means a couple of things. First, renewable projects elsewhere struggle to connect because capacity is consumed by non-flexible industrial demand. Second, ordinary consumers face higher costs as new infrastructure is built primarily to serve that demand.

When data centres disconnect from the grid and use their own back-up generation, this back-up is almost always fossil fuel-powered. It is simply not a sustainable solution. Let us be honest: the bulk of this €1.5 billion investment will go towards meeting the needs of large energy users, not households. Yet, the costs are socialised across all consumers. That is not sustainable or fair. If we are serious about a just energy transition, we cannot ignore the imbalance created by this sector. We have to ensure that large-scale users contribute proportionality to the infrastructure costs they generate. The de facto moratorium on new data centre connections in the Dublin region, introduced in 2021, was a necessary stopgap and should be introduced nationally. We in the Labour Party have consistently called for a moratorium on all new data centres but clearly the Government intends on ploughing ahead and green lighting more and more of them.

That being the case, new or expanding data centres should be able to demonstrate access to renewable, self-generated power sufficient to meet their operational load. I have drafted a Bill, which I intend to introduce shortly, to give effect to such a provision. We should also be looking at requirements for all large energy users to participate in demand response programmes, installing on-site storage or flexibility technologies to ease strain on the grid. In addition, we need to explore the introduction of a large-user capacity levy, earmarked specifically to offset household and small business network costs. In our alternative budget, the Labour Party proposed a levy of €20 per MWh on data centres, which would raise over €140 million, and a reform of the PSO to ensure they contribute equitably. If they use disproportionately more energy, they should pay proportionally more. That is basic fairness.

Furthermore, we should be looking at the wider planning framework. I am yet to be convinced that the national energy demand strategy is robust enough in setting out clear criteria for where and how high-energy use facilities can connect. We are essentially building infrastructure blindly without any demand side governance. If we continue on the current path, yes, we might end up with a grid that is stronger but it will be one that is more unequal, carbon intensive and dependent on the very industries that make decarbonisation harder.

I wish to touch on the issue of delivery. The targets are laudable, such as 50,000 pole replacements, 319 km of new underground cables and 70 new or upgraded substations. Targets alone do not deliver progress, however, as we are all too aware. We know from recent experience that large infrastructure programmes often face cost overruns, planning delays and

procurement challenges. Global supply chains remain fragile and skilled electrical engineers are in short supply across Europe. If the ESB cannot deliver these works on time and within budget, the benefits to consumers and renewables developers will be delayed and the costs will inevitably rise. It would be prudent if annual delivery plans were required and perhaps an independent mid-term review in, say, 2028 to assess whether the investment programme is meeting its objectives and to allow for adjustments if it is not.

Beyond delivery, we need to ensure we are building the right kind of grid. The 21st century grid must be smarter, not merely bigger. It must be capable of real time balancing, integrating distributed renewable generation and enabling households and communities to produce and store their own electricity. If this Bill becomes only a programme of steel and concrete, with more poles, lines and substations without a parallel investment in smart technology, we will have built yesterday's grid for tomorrow's challenges.

There is one other matter I wish to raise. This is more of a procedural matter rather than one relating to the substance of the Bill. It is an insight into how I spent my Sunday night. It is about the lack of a consolidated version of this legislation. The Law Reform Commission, as the Ministers of State might know, does great work in consolidating a lot of our laws, but its resources are limited and it does not provide a consolidated version of the electricity supply Acts. Ideally, all of our legislation would be published in a consolidated format rather than leaving it up to individuals to piece together amendments that may have been enacted separately, sometimes over decades, to understand the current state of the law. The Government should publish consolidated laws for everyone's benefit, as is done in the UK. It is extremely difficult, even for someone like me who is legally trained, to decipher which parts of an amended Act are being changed for the purposes of reviewing and analysing this legislation. Every Department when proposing amendments to existing legislation should at least provide legislators with that Department's unofficial consolidated versions of Acts so that we can fully and fairly scrutinise them.

I will provide one small example. The explanatory memorandum states this Bill will amend section 4(4) of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 1954, which sets the ESB's borrowing limit. We are told that this limit is being changed from €12 billion to €17 billion. All of this fine, but the limit set under section 4 in 1954 was £25 million. This was amended by a 1982 amendment Act to a limit of £1.6 billion, but how did it get to the limit of €12 billion? Where do I see that so I know that it is changing? It turns out that the limit in the 1954 Act was amended again and increased to €12 billion under section 22 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act (Amendment) 2021. All I am saying is that, as legislators, we should be able to focus our efforts on looking exactly at the substance of changes to our laws, but we cannot be sure exactly what our existing laws are saying in the first place because they are made up of this mishmash of amendments that have been passed over 70 years. This needs to be made clearer for us as legislators. Aside from us, ordinary citizens should be entitled to see easily and in an accessible and transparent manner what our laws actually are and what their rights and entitlements are. This in so many respects is an access to justice matter. There is a need for reform in how we publish our laws. This is something I will raise with the Minister for justice and pursue separately.

This Bill has merit. It recognises real challenges and it provides a framework for investment that Ireland desperately needs, but legislation of this magnitude should be judged not only by what it enables, but what it neglects.

We need to ensure balance between public and private interest, between environmental protection and infrastructure speed, between affordability and ambition and between power for profit and power for people. This Bill will shape our grid for decades to come, so let us not build a grid that serves Silicon Valley better than the homes of counties Dublin, Clare or Donegal.

We must build a system that delivers clean, reliable and affordable electricity for every household, every business and every community in Ireland. That means stronger oversight, explicit and robust consumer protection and respect for the environment. That also means a clear, enforceable plan for managing industrial electricity demand, particularly from data centres. If we make these changes, this Bill can become a cornerstone of a just, resilient and sustainable energy future. If we do not, we risk locking ourselves into a model that is unfair, unsustainable and politically untenable.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I am thankful for the opportunity to provide an update to the Chamber on the progress being made with responding to the significant damage caused by last winter's storms, particularly in forestry. The volume of timber normally felled over a 2.5-year period was blown down overnight during Storm Éowyn. The latest damage assessment maps show that 27,000 ha of forests were windblown, with 11,400 ha impacted in private forestry. This equates to approximately over 40 million trees blown down by that storm. Counties Leitrim, Roscommon and Cavan were worst affected, where 48% of the windblow occurred. Considerable damage was also caused to electricity lines and other infrastructure by the storms. Immediately after the storm, I established a windblow task force, which has since finalised an action plan to guide our response, identify bottlenecks and rectify them. I thank the people from the different sectors and the officials from my own Department who really worked diligently with regard to putting all of this in place and getting things going. There was an awful volume of work to be done.

Considerable damage was also caused to electricity lines and other infrastructure by the storms. To further speed up the process, we have allowed the use of both thinning and clear-fell licences in removing storm-damaged trees. Our data now shows that 77% of windblown trees already have a felling licence issued by my Department. My Department also continues to progress the introduction of a reconstitution scheme for storm-affected forest owners. As I have said previously, I will ensure that forest owners that carry out clearance or replanting now will not be disadvantaged when the scheme will be introduced. That is very important for those forest owners to know.

I acknowledge the contribution Coillte has made to helping home and farm owners who are impacted by storms to have their power restored. Coillte's staff and contractors were immediately available. They worked tirelessly and in hazardous conditions to clear trees and open road access immediately after the event. Coillte has also laid the satellite mapping of the storm damage and I have worked with it in close co-operation and my Department to establish the impact across all counties that were affected. Since then, Coillte has moved on to

prioritising the salvaging of the storm damage material. This includes the corridors along ESB lines where possible. This includes a detailed assessment of areas of potential risk through drone images. Coillte is working closely with the ESB. I have been informed that the power lines that are a priority for adjacent to tree felling works for energy reasons. Based on this information, Coillte has developed a programme of works to incorporate these prioritised power line clearance works into its own harvesting programme. Work is well under way in that regard. Both Coillte and the private forestry industry have undertaken huge efforts to deal with the damage. Currently, more than 90% of the harvesting capacity in this country is working in windblown areas. Again, that is very important. A total of 90% of the machinery involved in harvesting is working on windblow sites. It is important to emphasise that the clearance of windblow areas is a complex, slow, difficult and dangerous process.

As the Minister of State with responsibility for farm safety and for safety in general in those type of hazardous conditions, I am placing a big significance on the importance of the work, the protection of our power lines, keeping energy going to people's homes and the protection of the people doing that hazardous work. That is also very important. That is a top priority for all of us. Both my Department and Coillte are continuing to engage with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and the ESB on the forestry corridor working groups. I thank the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien very much for his work. As part of this co-operation, my Department has contributed to the winter resilience plan 2025, which has been finalised by ESB Networks earlier this year. My Department has also inputted extensively to the framework for the draft legislation being discussed. It is my intention to ensure that the ESB will be fully empowered to better manage this issue in the future. To be clear, we have in place long-standing forest corridor requirements in legislation to protect the electricity network where it interacts with forestry land. In fact, the ESB and its representatives are empowered under current legislation to lop or cut any tree, scrub or hedges which obstructs or interferes with electric wires. Such works are a matter between the ESB and anyone acting on its behalf and the landowner in question and do not require a felling licence from my Department.

The proposed Bill, however, aims to enhance the resilience of the electricity grid and therefore provides additional, proactive measures that allow for the establishment and maintenance of designated forestry corridors within existing forestry and the maintenance of clear land around existing infrastructure, which, of course, is very important. When debating the Bill, I would like to ensure that the new legislation provides the protection needed for the public, but it also has to be proportionate for the forest owners in the State who will also be affected. I thank everybody for their work on this. I acknowledge the work of the Minister and of all the other people. The people who are a lot more important in this debate are not the people in this House in suits, with all due respect; it is the people who had to go out at night, working to clear the lines and trying to restore power in bad and dangerous conditions. They are the people who we all want to thank and we want to say how grateful we are for them. There is no worse place a person could be than inside a forest with trees criss-crossed every way and dangerous power lines knocked and understanding and knowing how important it is to get the power going to those homes and people. We had them throughout County Kerry. We had them throughout the country and in the counties I have referenced. People had no power or heat. It was horrendous for everybody.

I sincerely thank the workers and the people who strive so hard and put so much effort into trying to clear the lines. That job of work was done. It is now up to all of us from a political

point of view to make sure the strengthening legislation is there to help this work to be carried on in the future and to protect the property rights of the people who will be affected. I thank everybody. This is not an us-and-them situation; this is all of the people inside of this House. All we want is safety, power going to homes, heat going to homes, the continuity of supply and being fair to the people who own the land. That is all we are trying to achieve.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There is a major wind farm just above my hometown in Buncrana. Recently, I drove up the hill and observed that half of the turbines were actually turned off. When I made inquiries as to why that was the case, apparently the electricity infrastructure just is not there to take the power from them. It is absolutely extraordinary. These wind turbines are there a very long time. I just have to ask: what the hell is going on? Apparently, a significant percentage of the wind turbines that are dotted all across County Donegal do not actually feed into the grid. This is just crazy. Then there is a direct link between this failure to plan properly in terms of infrastructure and in terms of what people pay. People are being crippled here. The Government knows this. Homeowners and small businesses are being absolutely crippled with electricity costs. We know that wind energy plays a critical role in reducing those costs.

It is important the amendments to this legislation put forward by Sinn Féin are taken on board by the Government. We need full accountability here. We need a direct link between investment from the State into the ESB infrastructure and reduced costs for homeowners. People are being fleeced. We used to have the cheapest electricity in Europe. That was when we owned our own infrastructure and the company that charged the bills. We handed it over and wrecked the model we had. What is worse is that the wind turbines we have put all across the country are not feeding into the grid. We are not getting the full benefit of them to reduce costs. This investment has to be real, with real accountability and a real plan.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I stress that the waiving of pre-legislative scrutiny, PLS, is never a good idea. I do not know what the Government has against transparency and accountability. I welcome the fact we opposed the waiving of PLS. I also welcome the fact the Government is finally acknowledging the need to invest in our grid infrastructure. It is long past time. This Bill provides for investment in energy infrastructure but it does not provide details about how this will happen. Who will be responsible for managing and ensuring value for money? The Minister of State will, I am sure, forgive us if we look at the record of the Government, its wasteful habits and capacity to spend taxpayers' money without a single care, or indeed without any attempt to inject value for money.

I will talk about families in my constituency who have experienced huge delays, running to years, in moving into their homes in Páirc Na Blathanna because of the failure by the Government to invest in energy infrastructure. They were forced to couch surf. They were overholding. They put their lives on hold. They simply could not make that move into homes that were built and ready for them to move into. They will ask what is in this legislation for them. How will this improve their lives? The simple fact is that because the Government has waived PLS, we are not going to have a chance to discuss it.

I hope the Minister of State will take on board not just the intention but the substance of the amendments tabled by my party colleague, Deputy Pa Daly. We also note that the energy regulator has told us that the substation at Castlebaggot, which was initially due to support new

housing, has been handed over to data centres. We also note that the ESB has concerns about sustainability in north Dublin and the area I represent. That the Government has not allowed for proper discussion under PLS for this Bill means I have no answers for my constituents. They simply look at the Government's record with their heads in their hands.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I echo the comments about PLS. Unfortunately, during the previous term the Minister for energy got into a really bad habit of rushing Bills through the committee without proper scrutiny and it looks like the Minister of State is taking up that mantle and doing similarly. As a principle, all Bills should go through PLS unless there is an urgent or emergency reason not to. I do not think that is the case in this instance and it certainly was not the case previously. I ask the Government to stop using that mechanism. The Government members within the committee will always have the majority vote so I ask the Government to please allow Bills to go through the proper process. It will mean a much more robust debate and better legislation at the end of the day. It is not wasted time but very much valuable time. I ask the Government to do that.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. It is not just a technical debate about infrastructure. It is a discussion about the changing economic climate in Ireland, the changing environmental framework we are dealing with and how we prepare for those different changes as we go into the next decade. It is also a question of fairness and who we are building out our energy systems for. That needs to be a large part of the discussion here today.

It is nearly a year now since January 2025 when Storm Éowyn tore through Ireland, leaving 768,000 homes, farms and businesses without power. It was the worst storm that ESB Networks and the country have ever faced. Poles snapped, lines were down and entire communities were cut off from heat, light and communication for weeks on end. In the aftermath, emergency centres were set up, international crews were flown in and thousands of families were left in the cold. However, it was not a freak event. The unfortunate reality is that we-----

Deputy Alan Dillon: It was the worst in history.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We will potentially see more of those storms. That is the reality we face because of climate change. We will see more frequent and more severe storms. We cannot look at what happened during Storm Éowyn and consider it as a very difficult period in time. It is something that we need to learn an awful lot of lessons from and we need to see it as a wake-up call. The reality is that our grid is not resilient enough and our infrastructure is not ready. Indeed, our emergency services were stretched to their limits in their response. I welcome the Bill because I believe it can play a part in getting us onto a proper footing to deal with similar instances. I hope we do not have to deal with too many but we need to be ready and prepared to deal with them if they do happen.

I welcome the Bill and the €1.5 billion equity investment for ESB Networks. I also welcome the fact the increase to the ESB's borrowing limit will unlock over 500 capital projects, including 181 km of new overhead lines, 319 km of underground cables, 70 new and upgraded substations and 50,000 pole replacements. Reading out those figures, you realise that the scale of the job ahead of ESB Networks and the teams, the workers on the ground to whom the

Minister of State referred, is enormous. It is important that we invest in the ESB to help us achieve that modern and resilient electricity system. We saw an awful lot of gaps in the legislation and the different frameworks when we saw what Storm Éowyn did, particularly to forestry corridors. It is important that we manage the vegetation around the grid to stop these kinds of outages.

This is all positive. This is a positive step from the Government. However, there are certain aspects that we need to consider. One is that while we are putting in this investment, we must consider the costs and how people are going to pay for that grid infrastructure. Care needs to be taken to ensure we are not disproportionately impacting people who cannot afford any higher costs on their bills. It is important that we also ensure there is prioritisation of those resources, particularly for residents, people who are vulnerable and, indeed, small businesses. What we are seeing at the moment is, unfortunately, investment in a grid that will ultimately benefit large corporations through the supporting of the whole data centre industry. I will come to that shortly. We need to make sure that if the lights go out, we can assist the people who are most vulnerable and most at risk. We must ensure that if the lights go out, we can make those homes resilient and not focus our efforts on those corporations.

The Minister of State talked about PR6. As I have raised at the committee, PR6 will only invest in the grid to support the current level of data centre applications. It is not for any future data centres. According to the affordability task force, we will see an increase of 45% in electricity demand over the next decade. There is a real worry that even with this level of investment and the investment being given under PR6, if we continue to allow increases in the electricity used by data centres and this proliferation of data centres, the grid will still not be sufficient. It is only going to shore up the grid and secure the issues for the current level of data centres and not any future ones. That is a risk and I ask the Government to look at it. When I became a TD six years ago, one of the first motions I brought forward was on data centres and seeking a moratorium on them. It was not that the Social Democrats were against data centres *per se* - there was not a blanket objection in principle to data centres - but we wanted to see strategic management of data centres because it was clear, even back then, that this was not happening. We were seeing projections that were forecasting that by 2030, 30% of our electricity demand would be coming from the data centre industry. When we look at what actually happens in Europe, where the relevant figure is 2% to 3%, we see that Ireland is being disproportionately impacted by the demand from data centres on our electricity grid.

Over the past few years, we had instances where there were risks of brownouts and blackouts because the grid was not sufficient and was not able to deal with the demand, primarily from data centres. What did we have to do? The Government had to rush out and purchase generators that cost hundreds of millions of euro to ensure the data centres had access to a grid. It is really important that when decisions are being made about data centres, we know how many we can afford in this country from a climate perspective, from an energy security perspective and from an energy pricing perspective. The more pressure and the more demand that is put on a commodity such as electricity, the higher the price goes. Over the past few years, we have seen so many prices skyrocketing. Ordinary individuals are unable to keep on top of that. I believe a large part of that is down to the demand that is being placed on the trading and use of electricity. I ask the Minister of State to look into that and not ignore it.

We are not saying there should be absolutely no data centres; we are saying there is a need to put in good data centres that are efficient, can work in a complex electrical environment, can actually act as storage and can perform a function as part of that whole system. Do not just roll out planning permissions or approvals for them or roll out the grid because it is very costly to do that.

I also want to make the point that when the Government invests in the grid, it puts additional costs on consumers. There is an economic reality there. I was interested to see in the report by the affordability task force that it stated that, essentially, the network charges from the CRU's recent decision will put an increase of approximately €29 per year onto a typical customer bill. I want to raise this issue with the Minister of State because I am quite concerned about it. I raised it with the CRU over a month ago. It must be six weeks since I raised it with the CRU at a committee meeting, but it appears that nothing has been done. The Government needs to ensure that when it is making investments in the grid and when additional charges go onto consumer bills, there is transparency about these charges and the energy companies do not use the Government's investment in the grid to hike up prices, because that is exactly what we have seen.

In September 2025, Energia announced an increase in its energy prices. I think it was going to add an extra €200 or so onto people's bills. Energia stated that these price changes are "now unavoidable" due to "ongoing, substantial increases in electricity, system operator and network charges" and "that these costs are required to recover the costs of ensuring security of supply, addressing network constraints and investing in the electricity grid." That is incorrect. That is misinformation that is being put out to hundreds of thousands of Energia customers. I raised this with the CRU representatives at a meeting of the energy committee six weeks ago and asked them to look into it, but that press release is still on the Energia website. It has not been amended at all to reflect the reality that the €200 it is putting the bills up by every year is not down to grid improvements, security of supply issues or network charges. Energia is putting the price up because it is gouging. It will blame the Government, and investment in the grid, for doing this. I ask the Minister of State to raise this matter. I have serious concerns that the CRU has not addressed that issue after six weeks. It is the CRU's job is to protect customers and to ensure there is transparency in the information provided to it, but it is not doing its job properly.

Another area I want to raise in regard to the CRU is arrears. A report from the affordability task force yesterday mentioned that in June, 13% of electricity customers and 27% of gas customers were in arrears. It is crazy that the CRU has not published the most recent data and that we are still working from the June figures. When CRU representatives came to the committee meeting six weeks ago, I asked them what the latest figures for arrears were, but they could not tell me. They said they would publish them shortly and still have not done so. That information should have been available in the context of last month's budget. When the Minister of State is making policy decisions, he needs to know how many people are in arrears and how many the numbers are going up by each month. The Minister of State needs to have that information to hand because otherwise he will not be able to identify the scale of the problem. Again, the CRU is responsible for this. I have sent two or three emails to the CRU during the past six weeks asking for that information but it is not being provided. Obviously, the CRU is not listening to me. I ask the Minister of State to raise this issue with it because it is the body that is meant to be protecting customers.

There is a lot here. We will have an opportunity to discuss this important legislation over the coming days. There needs to be a short-term focus on how we can protect people this winter if there are more storms, how we can get ready and how households will be resilient not just to price increases but also to any disturbances because of storms coming in. It is really important but we will have further opportunities to debate that. I ask the Minister of State to talk specifically to the CRU about the points I have raised because I think they are important.

Deputy Joe Neville: I welcome Freddie Wasson from Leixlip, a transition year student who is working with me this week. He lost the county final last week and is very disappointed. I hope that working here in the Dáil will improve his mood before he heads back to school next week.

I welcome what we are discussing and I welcome this Bill. As a TD and someone who was elected as a councillor numerous times, I have always called for investment in infrastructure, especially, with my local hat on, in the Leixlip and Celbridge areas where we have had electricity outages. Since I was elected as a TD, we have seen outages in Kildare and nationally as a result of the storms of last winter.

Ultimately, anything that brings extra investment in our electrical system, such as the €1.5 billion we are talking about today and the ability to seek the additional loans required, has to be welcomed. I thank the Minister and his team for their foresight and belief in this. I thank the Minister for Finance for putting this forward on budget day ahead of time, considering the demands.

I am a member of the infrastructure committee, which will meet tomorrow with the housing bodies and the large developers in Kildare, Ballymore and Glenveagh. Their representatives will come to the committee meeting. I know one of the key issues they will be talking about will be Uisce Éireann and the challenges they have with water, but the electricity supply will be a key focus as well.

I have met many developers, no more than other Deputies, and I understand the sorts of issues they face. When houses have been built across north Kildare and elsewhere, we have not been quick enough to get the electricity supply in. That is one of the issues. I hope this legislation will go towards putting in the infrastructure in time to ensure we do not have those delays. My only fear is this: will €1.5 billion be enough to continue with that? I am sure there will be a multi-year approach whereby we will continue to have investment in our electricity system. Obviously, from a national perspective one of the key items we are looking at changing is how we do our electricity and how we work at electricity. Renewable integration is key. We are talking about offshore electricity, solar electricity and getting everybody on board in that regard. This is key but to do that we need to update our grid. With this extra money coming into the system, we will be able to invest to ensure we can avail of solar power units.

I do not wish to go off topic - perhaps it is in keeping with the topic - when I mention that Freddie and I were lucky enough to be in the new Lidl net-zero shop in Maynooth. We got a tour and we saw how a new development in a new shop with solar panels will be able to be cost-neutral from an energy perspective. I think we have to go that way. As our previous speaker outlined, we have continuing new demands on our system. This is where we have to talk about supporting our economic and digital growth. We all know that data centres will be required. The Social Democrats were talking against data centres and about moratoriums,

potentially, being put on them. At the same time, we cannot ignore the reality of the future demand that may be coming with the technological changes we have seen in recent years and continue to see, especially in the new realm of AI investment across the world. We can talk about moratoriums but we need to ensure Ireland is not left behind. This legislation will go towards that. We need to ensure we have an electricity system that is able to keep up with the best of other countries. Countries like Denmark and England have faced many of these challenges. It has been less of an issue in France, which has the nuclear energy option that many other countries do not have and we do not have. Ireland is in a different space but we need to ensure that with this investment we are able to open the opportunities where possible and where we are best placed to do so, and that includes data centres.

As I said at the outset, we need to be conscious of one-off events when we reflect on whether our system will continue to be fit for service in the future. We have climate change and increased storms. There are weather systems that come across, and are probably coming across in the next couple of months. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, knows this better than anyone given that his own area was probably one of the hardest hit by the storm earlier this year, and indeed by the outages that were in his area. I know the Minister of State will be looking for this sort of investment to ensure we are in a more robust and better place in order that we can get things back on track sooner, if possible, and in order that networks would not be out any longer than necessary. We can talk about the upfront €1.5 billion investment but by giving the ESB more flexibility to finance its own investments, we can ensure we have the best network possible over the coming years.

This Bill is about building a secure future and a secure electricity system. Once again, I welcome the Government's initiative on this.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the Bill before the House. While it includes technical measures to increase the actual borrowing limit for the ESB and to provide for additional share capital to be issued, in essence it is about making an additional investment in our electricity supply. This is incredibly important in an Ireland that is growing and will have additional demands in the future. Even in today's market, there are communities in my district that are experiencing difficulties because of issues with electricity supply capacity, with appliances being damaged in their homes and so on. I welcome the additional investment.

I also welcome the investment in the provision of interconnectors, particularly the North-South Interconnector. The investments here will be an important tool in order to deliver that. The interconnectors are really key because while they increase Ireland's electricity security, they also give us an opportunity to export renewable energy, an area where I believe we are going to be world leaders. We have already made great strides. The passing of the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021, which the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and I soldiered on at the committee, is having an impact but we need to do more and the Government needs to do more.

The provision of renewable energy is something that we could see being implemented very quickly now. One of the issues with the renewable energy system, particularly wind energy, relates to surplus wind energy that happens at night. When energy is not able to be used by the grid, it is effectively earthed into the ground. This is the reason I brought forward the Energy Poverty Reduction (Use of Surplus Renewable Energy) Bill 2025. The idea is that we come up with a national strategy for that surplus energy. Energy that is otherwise being wasted or

earthed into the ground every evening could be a digital or virtual district heating system right across the country. It could be heating the hot water tanks of many people across the country. It could be charging electric car batteries and so on. Having a national strategy for surplus wind energy is really key. I urge the Government to consider my Bill and to put every effort into bringing forward a strategy in this respect. I know the Ministers are supportive of it and I look forward to progress on this. The idea is that we can use surplus wind energy to tackle fuel poverty.

The work we have done includes the fuel supplement scheme, which has been massively expanded. If I am right, I think I heard a Minister say this morning that 26% of homes now are included under the fuel supplement scheme. That happened because we significantly expanded eligibility for people over the age of 70. These are people who worked hard all their lives, who bought their home and who own their home. They are now eligible for the fuel supplement. This also makes them eligible for the better energy warmer homes scheme, which allows them to get a full wraparound insulation system. This has a massive impact on their energy bills. There is a lot of connectivity between the different schemes we currently have. The measures in this Bill add to the overall investment.

With regard to the budget, there were targeted measures and there were general measures, as there have been in past budgets. The Opposition criticised us for not introducing more targeted measures in previous budgets but they seem to have forgotten that this time around when we made more targeted decisions. The 9% VAT rate was really key in keeping energy prices low. If that not had been done, people right across the country would have been paying significantly more for their ESB bills. That is really important but it does nothing to address the issue around energy prices. Energy prices in Ireland are too high. There are lots of reasons for that, some of them structural and some of them to do with our connectivity to the rest of Europe and so on. We have to make sure the energy companies know that their feet are being held to the fire on the issue of price.

I agree with other speakers about the CRU. It needs to do more to make sure consumers are getting the lowest possible price, given the mandate of the CRU. It is incredibly important. When people in our constituency offices say they are afraid to turn their heating on because they are not sure what the impact will be, or when people on a pay-as-you-go scheme cannot shop around to avail of different providers, we know how important the issue of energy prices is. While I welcome the Government's measures on the 9% VAT rate, which is really important, and on the fuel poverty schemes, I believe we need to do more on energy prices. I welcome the Bill.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I support the intent of this Bill but it cannot be pushed through without the necessary safeguards. People in counties Kilkenny and Carlow are paying a heavy price for the consecutive failures of the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and his colleagues to invest in our energy infrastructure. It is an issue my constituents continually contact me about. There is a question I would love to see answered. Is your top priority for energy residential housing or is it data centres? Which of these is at the top of the Minister's priorities? We all know it cannot be both. When I see the waves the Government has made to support the building of more and more data centres, putting immense pressure on our national grid, it makes me wonder. I find it staggering that a single data centre can use as much energy as the whole of Kilkenny city. There are now nearly 100 data centres across the State. The

Government's own experts have warned it about the risk this poses to building the homes we desperately need. We are now seeing that families across Ireland cannot move into new homes because they cannot get connected. I find it astounding that in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, data centres are set to see their energy bills drop by 18%, while families and workers across Ireland are facing the most expensive winter they have ever seen for energy bills.

I accept that many data centres are providing vital data storage, but a line must be drawn. Data centres storing unnecessary data about what type of advertisements to hit us with do not contribute positively to our society. It is the people of Ireland, not data centres, who contribute positively to our society. It is the people of Ireland, not data centres, who need to see their energy bills drop. The public cannot be expected to foot the bill for the data centres. It is simply not right and it is deeply unfair.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I welcome the Bill. The Minister of State will be familiar with the impact of Storm Éowyn and how it hit the west of Ireland in particular. Any investment in ESB Networks that helps to build resilience for the future is to be welcomed. I am fully supportive of it. Over the coming years, the ESB's investment plan will see the delivery of more than 500 capital projects - a huge number - including 181 km of new overhead lines, underground cabling, upgraded substations, new substations and 50,000 new poles. It is really important that this investment is made. We do not want to be dealing with another Storm Éowyn in the future without having the necessary resilience in the network.

As the PR6 strategy paper outlines, by 2030 millions of devices, including heat pumps, EVs, battery-storage renewables and smart meters will all be coming onto the electricity distribution grid network, in line with the climate action plan. There is an immense opportunity here but it requires investment. The ESB and EirGrid will need to work together to ensure the network can be built, can accommodate all these devices and can manage renewable power, with all its spikes, and all the different complex flows of electricity that arise across the system.

Communities are looking for certainty in the years ahead and we must provide that certainty in whatever way we can. Keeping the electricity grid and infrastructure up to date and fit for modern society is one way in which the Government can and will provide that certainty, and I support it in so doing. This Bill is a practical measure and an investment measure. It will afford progress for people across the length and breadth of the country and give strength to our economy. It will work with us to further our climate ambitions, in which the climate committee is very interested, and to prepare our country for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: This Bill will allow the ESB to access more funding and do more in terms of investment in improving infrastructure. As the majority shareholder in the ESB, there is a real onus on the Government to ensure people feel the benefit of that extra funding and investment. This is especially important for areas like mine across Roscommon and Galway that were hammered by Storm Éowyn earlier this year.

Proceeding with projects and more investment is key, of course, but security of supply is absolutely critical. In January, Storm Éowyn left some people without power for more than a fortnight and, in some cases, without heating as well. In my area, people went 17 or 18 days without power. It was a horrendous experience for families. All those people who lost power had to pay their ESB bill like it never happened. That is unacceptable and it must be addressed.

Forestry was a significant issue across Roscommon and Galway, with trees collapsed on lines and poles. Huge damage was done. Last month, once again, people were left without power for days, and some up to a week, following Storm Amy. The men and women working locally in the ESB and in tree service companies were back in some of the same forestry once again. It is absolutely unacceptable that forestry continues to be such an issue in terms of the ESB and power supply. Where there are issues with access, they must be dealt with quickly.

I hope the ESB will also use this investment to look at its vulnerable customers register, which needs work. We must look at what more can be done for people, especially where they are reliant on medical devices to live.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have just come from a meeting of the foreign affairs committee where we engaged with American Chamber of Commerce Ireland. We talked about geopolitical circumstances and the situation in Gaza. It is fair to say there was disagreement on the occupied territories Bill. I believe we, like many other states, are on the right side of that argument. We also spoke about the current uncertainty and all the other issues caused by the US Administration, the Trump tariffs and the question of where negotiations will go. However, the witnesses said the issues their members are dealing with at this time relate to the infrastructural deficits we still see. It is not a major shock that housing is a particular issue. We all understand the societal impact of that but, as well as the huge impact on families and individuals, we also know there is a huge impact on businesses and on our future growth.

As we discuss almost every week in this House, without seeing any major plan in terms of delivery, a particular issue is that we have an energy grid that is not fit for purpose and has not received the resourcing required to ensure delivery of improvements. We all know this is happening in the same context as the issues in relation to our water infrastructure, which is not where it needs to be. Unfortunately, not only are we failing in regard to long-term delivery but we are doing so during a cost-of-living crisis in which we are failing miserably to look after those who have to pay, especially those at the lowest end. I ask that we proceed with a view to delivering a fit-for-purpose grid while also ensuring we look after those people who live and work in Ireland and need the supports that have not been provided by the Government.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This Bill has been fast-tracked as an attempt to cover up decades of underinvestment in our energy grid. I absolutely agree that we need a modern, fit-for-purpose grid but it must be done with the required Government accountability. Sinn Féin has four constructive amendments we are asking the Minister to consider. They include proposals for greater transparency, fairness in pricing and the prioritisation of projects. Data centres cannot be given the same priority as hospitals. This is an issue on which we see bad Government policies leading to priorities not being delivered.

The Bill should have included actions to ensure consumers are not forced to pay increasing energy costs while energy companies see soaring profits. There are people struggling with the cost of heating. As we face into winter, hundreds of thousands of people are in arrears on their electricity bills. With prices having gone through the roof, more and more will join them. The Government must do more to tackle the energy companies. With the removal of the energy credits, the Government itself has increased people's energy costs this year. People were dependent on those energy credits. They were their hope of being able to pay bills and keep the heating and lighting on during winter.

There are families sitting right now in cold homes. There are parents who feel like failures because they are not able to look after themselves and, in particular, their children the way they should be. There are older people - I have spoken to them in areas I represent, including Madden's Buildings in Blackpool, Roche's Buildings and Barrett's Buildings - who are terrified by the cost of electricity and how they are going to get through this winter without the support of the payments that were made last year.

5 o'clock

Will the Government ensure that energy companies are not making horrible profits on the backs of ordinary people who are really struggling? Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have for too long cowardly not tackled these companies and their major profits.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We believe that price legislation should work for the ordinary person and our amendments look to deliver on that. This is about people's quality of life. This is about people not being afraid. Can the Minister of State imagine being afraid to turn on the electricity or the heating?

Deputy Michael Collins: This Bill allows the ESB to borrow up to €17 billion and issue €1.5 billion in capital stock, much of it going to two Departments. It is framed as a step towards modernising our grid and preparing for future demand. Yes, investment in infrastructure is always vital but, let us be clear, the people of Ireland are already paying the price - literally. Electricity bills have soared. The average household now pays over €1,800 a year for electricity. Some suppliers have increased prices by up to 13.5%, adding €18 a month for an already stretched family. We are told this is due to network charges and wholesale price volatility but that is cold comfort to families who are choosing between heating and eating.

Families were given two €125 energy credits, both issued early in the year, and nothing since. Budget 2026 has no new energy credits, no targeted reliefs and no plan to support more than 300,000 households now in arrears. Where is the fairness in this? Where is the urgency to protect the vulnerable? We are investing billions in the grid, yet schools are fundraising just to pay their ESB bills. Principals are forced to choose between heating classrooms and buying basic supplies. That is not sustainable. It is not fair and it is not the Ireland we should accept. If we can find €1.5 billion for capital stock, surely we can find the resources to restore energy credits and provide targeted supports for those most affected by energy poverty.

I support investment in our energy future, but I cannot support a system that asks ordinary people to foot the bill while removing the very supports that helped them survive in the past few winters. We also need to acknowledge the people who are doing everything they can to keep the lights on, such as the ESB crews who go out in all kinds of weather, often in dangerous conditions, to restore power to homes and businesses. Their dedication deserves our thanks and our respect but they too need a system that works, one that is properly resourced, well planned and future-proofed. The recent storms have shown just how vulnerable our infrastructure is. Trees falling along roads have knocked out ESB poles, causing widespread outages. This is not just bad luck; it is a sign of poor planning and underinvestment. Red tape and outdated systems continue to hold us back.

That is why I welcome the appointment of our Galway West councillor, Noel Thomas, as our spokesperson for planning reform. He has already raised important concerns with me, including the need to simplify claim forms for those affected by storm damage in Galway West and in other areas affected by the serious storms that hit. These forms must be easy to understand and quick to complete, especially for older people and those under pressure. Councillor Noel Thomas told me that Storm Éowyn caused unbelievable damage in his own constituency, as it probably did in the Minister of State's constituency. That is a very serious concern for the constituents of Galway West and it is an issue the Government needs to take up. It is fine to say we are investing in infrastructure, but the companies themselves are making a fortune out of ordinary, everyday people who work hard in this country and the Government does not seem to understand or sympathise with that, as can be proven by the last budget.

We must act now to strengthen our infrastructure, cut through bureaucracy and ensure people can access support when they need it most because this is not just about energy. It is about dignity, fairness and whether we are building a country that works for everyone or just those at the top. I still ask the Government to reconsider the decision it made in the budget not to give energy credits to customers. These people come into my clinic every weekend. They are suffering in every way they can be hit by the Government with extra taxes. This was one little bit of relief they got just before the previous election, with the promises and all of that. That was great, but now the election is over and it is time for people to suffer. That is not good enough.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Once again, we are asked to hand the Government and the ESB a blank cheque of €5 billion in borrowing authority and €1.5 billion more in taxpayer capital, with no plan, no accountability and no guarantees of benefit to the Irish people. Let us be honest in this House: the Government record on energy policy is a record of failure. Ireland now has the second highest household energy prices in the entire European Union. Eurostat confirms we now pay around 48 cent per kilowatt-hour, compared with 31 cent across Europe, 27 cent in France and 30 cent in the Kingdom of Spain. Ireland is an energy-rich island paying poverty prices, but the only constant has been Government complacency.

Ordinary people are being crushed. This winter, working families - not just the poorest of working families but working families who are doing everything right, paying their bills and getting up early in the morning, going to work and putting in their shifts and time - are choosing between heating their houses and what they are purchasing in Lidl, Aldi, Dunnes or SuperValu. They are picking between whether they can afford this or that for the child or how merry Christmas will be because they have to heat the house as well.

Last week, I met with a pensioner and sat in his home, a cottage in Rathcooney in County Cork, wrapped in a blanket with one heater going and a hot water bottle. That gentleman finds it so difficult to find the money to pay the electricity bills coming into his house because it is an old property. He does not have the moneys to do the property up, despite what is available from the Government in terms of grants. I have spoken to small business owners from Ballincollig to Little Island who are telling me they are closing early or closing one day a week just to save on energy and lighting costs. That is not progress. It is an absolute scandal. What has been the Government's response? It has been to let the ESB report profits of €868 million. While the State dividend rolls in, the households of Ireland have to tighten their belts, are told to put on an extra jumper or, as the Minister of State's predecessor suggested, share the heating

with their neighbour and go from house to house. That is not an energy policy. It is daylight robbery, dressed up as climate virtue.

I support the investment in the grid but, let us be clear, the failure to build proper infrastructure lies squarely at the feet of this Government. Every builder, developer and employer in Ireland can tell you the same thing. The biggest barrier to growth is not the planning red tape; it is the supply of power and water. Projects have been delayed because there is no grid capacity, factories are stalled because there is no connection to take them and housing estates are refused planning because the system simply cannot cope, in respect of both energy and water. That is not the fault of the planner, the engineer or the local authority. It is the failure of national leadership. It is a failure of plans and a failure to invest in the future and think ahead.

Ireland has some of the highest taxes in Europe and the largest budget surplus in the history of the State, yet the State cannot guarantee enough electricity or water to build homes or businesses. That is the definition of incompetence on the Government's side. If this Bill is to mean anything, it must mark the end of complacency and the raising of the ESB borrowing limit to €17 billion must come with strict conditions. There must be full transparency around the borrowings, an independent audit and legally binding timelines for the grid expansion. Timelines for grid expansion are vital. Every euro must go on real infrastructure, stronger cabling, faster connections, rural upgrades and modern sustainability.

No more can we have the day of the consultant and report after report. No more can we have bureaucracy and another round of self-congratulating Ministers who have failed to deliver. Ireland deserves an energy system that works and fully supports families, industries and home building. The people who are paying the bills deserve answers, not excuses. I say clearly to those on the Government benches that before they lecture us on public sustainability, make sure people can afford to turn on the lights. The Government is not addressing that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The two biggest problems this Government has are the delivery of infrastructure and rip-off Ireland. The two elements are inextricably linked. The inability to deliver on infrastructure is hammering families throughout the country. It is adding to massive misery and difficulties for so many families in so many areas in terms of housing, electricity, water and transport. One of the reasons that is happening is that in this State at the moment, Government inaction around planning, permits, tendering, etc., has allowed that aspect to delay projects. Right now we have some of the slowest planning permissions delivered, the slowest permitting, the slowest licensing and the slowest tendering in the whole of the EU. Judicial reviews go on for years. As a result, key infrastructure gets snarled up in a process. None of that is by accident. It has not evolved by itself but as a result of legislation that the Government has been involved in for the past 15 years.

The second issue relates to the fact that electricity is holding up so many other aspects of infrastructure delivery. Right now, hundreds of homes in this State are not being built or are not connected and not lived in as a result of that lack of electricity. The lack of electricity infrastructure is slowing down the building of homes. That is an incredible indictment on the Government. In terms of price, spiralling costs are currently affecting families. There are 412,000 households in this country in fuel poverty. It is incredible that nearly half a million households in this country in fuel poverty. The prices of electricity are extremely high. Energy

prices in Ireland are three times the wholesale prices. That is one of the biggest gaps in the world. The Government often tells us there are lots of reasons we have higher electricity prices than anywhere else in the world. However, the fact is that those reasons all lie under the wholesale price. Electricity prices here are three times higher than the wholesale price. The gap between the retail price of electricity and the cost of producing it is one of the highest in the world at the moment.

Electricity companies are failing to pass on the profits they are involved in. Why would they not? The ESB is a semi-State company. It is delivering Government policy. It is salting the people. It is involved in super-normal profits in terms of its revenue. The ESB made €706 million profit last year in a cost-of-living crisis. That is an incredible situation.

Even the pricing of electricity happens within this State as a function of the dearest element of the production of electricity. The Government is artificially increasing the price of electricity to make sure it is being priced at the dearest element, which is often gas. The Government's legislation is allowing for that.

In regard to retrofitting, about which I have heard people talk, only 22,000 homes reached the gold standard of B2 retrofitting last year. That is well short of the half a million households that are in the target for 2030. In terms of any retrofitting, only 54,000 homes were retrofitted at any level last year. There are 1.6 million homes in need of retrofitting. That means it will take 50 years to get to a retrofitting situation where families have a comfortable home with low energy costs.

The issue of data centres messes with my mind. We are told that we have to do so much to reduce the level of electricity usage and that we have to do our best to make sure we are a low-carbon economy. At the same time, the Government is flying high in terms of the increasing number of data centres coming into this sector. Data centres use 22% of all metered electricity in this State. That is way out of kilter in terms of the European Union which is about 3% or 4%. That figure is likely to reach 30% by 2030. There is one rule for the small family dealing with electricity but a different rule for the large multinationals. AI is going to drive that through the roof.

In terms of Storm Éowyn, two weeks after that storm 13,000 homes were still without electricity. Most of those homes were in the west or the midlands, showing again that this Dublin Government is forgetting about the west of Ireland in terms of infrastructure. One of the reasons it was hit so hard was that so much of our infrastructure is overground. Yet, this Government wants to proceed with the EirGrid north-south interconnector which is overground. We have been waiting for this infrastructure for 15 years. A bull-headed instinct by the Government to overground it is delaying it. Only 15% of homes, families and farms are going to allow EirGrid onto their property to build it. Some 85% of farmers are not going to allow it. It is going to remain in limbo for years as a result of this Government's instincts to force it overground.

We need a situation where we have investments but we have to free up the process, the red tape and bureaucracy that has been added on to the system by years of Fine Gael Governments that are slowing down the delivery of much-needed infrastructure. Unless we get to that we are just pouring that money into a bottomless pit. I see no real evidence that this Government

means business when it comes to getting rid of the bureaucracy and red tape that are slowing down infrastructural development in this country.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: This legislation is welcome, if modest. As others have mentioned, it is a response to disruption caused by Storm Éowyn. It will allow for the creation and maintenance of forestry corridors and vegetation management, subject hopefully to environmental obligations under the Habitats and Birds Directives. I have no problem with the legal mechanism to make an additional €1.5 billion equity investment in the ESB to part finance the PR6 energy grid investment programme. However, I am more interested in the larger scale investment required. Obviously, we note the proposal to raise the statutory borrowing limit from €12 billion to €17 billion to help to finance proposed future capital projects, including the new lines, the underground cables, the upgraded substations and the 50,000-plus electricity poles. It is a massive investment that is needed but we need to see the detail of what is coming to modernise and future-proof the grid.

We are talking about a potential €10 billion to €13 billion investment plan up to 2030. However, a couple of things need to go alongside this. I note a private wires policy statement was published in July that outlined scenarios whereby private developers can build and own electricity lines to connect generators to customers. I do not have an issue with that in principle but I do have an issue if it is purely to allow companies to create their own private sections that will impact on the grid. My definition of private wires would be more about an area like a housing estate that has a wind turbine beside it or an array of solar panels where people can be offgrid in a situation like a storm so they are able to switch over to their own group generator. I would like to get more information on that type of thing.

I agree that data centres need to be able to produce their own energy and feed into the grid rather than taking out of what we already have.

To be positive, I notice the microgeneration support scheme and the clean export guarantee tariff already in place for exporting excess renewable electricity to the grid. On a massive national scale in terms of having the potential to be exporters, we have to first of all make sure that we are efficient in our usage. In that context, I agree with colleagues in terms of subsidising the bills people are facing right now. It does make sense to continue it. I welcomed the continuation of the 9% VAT on electricity but I do not see anything going towards getting people to reduce their energy consumption. Back in the 1970s, we used to hear about closing doors and switching off all plugs because there is seepage from leaving on Wi-Fi at night-time or from leaving USB chargers plugged in. There is not enough information out there to help people to reduce their bills. I have noticed that constituents, especially older ones, do not change over their tariff after a year has elapsed. They are stuck in an overpriced standard tariff when they could be saving money. I agree that the Government should be helping people during these tight times. However, we should also provide people with more education about how to reduce bills themselves.

I have mentioned in previous contributions that the visionary aspect should be that we should be a net energy exporter, assuming we have capacity for ourselves. To get to that, we need to have more consistency and more clarity on the energy storage policy framework, for example, which has an immediate procurement target of 500 MW for the transmission system and 500 MW for demand flexibility for the distribution. However, there are criticisms about this. There

is no long-term concrete mechanism or any example of urgency. I would like to see clarification in terms of long-duration energy storage. That would be beneficial, as would conversion to green hydrogen. We also have a lack of cohesion between the stakeholders in terms of the planning, EirGrid and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. I do not see the joined-up thinking to meet our climate action targets or our energy production targets. If we want to get to net exporter status, we need to fast-track our investment in the grid. While this €1.5 billion is welcome, we need a tangible €13.5 billion-plus investment to happen in the next three to four years.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome this Bill. It is a hugely important piece of infrastructural progress. I welcome the fact it has come to us as quickly as it has, making good on a commitment in the programme for Government. I recognise that the Bills Office and the Minister of State's Department turned it around in quite a short period of time. I also recognise the pre-legislative scrutiny done by my party colleague Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí and his committee. I welcome the fact the Bill has progressed quickly and is here. It does some important things.

I have listened to the debate and heard the criticism from many colleagues, but let us get down to brass tacks. This Bill is about providing the electricity infrastructure that we need to build houses to start to erode the deficit in housing provision. If we do not do this, we will not be able to do it. It is that simple. This is an absolutely necessary measure to allow the ESB to put in place the electricity infrastructure that is going to allow houses to come on stream faster and across the whole country. If there was no other reason to welcome this Bill, that would be a good reason to welcome it. I hope the ESB and EirGrid will be able to do that as fast as possible.

I listened to the debate and heard the criticism of, for example, electricity prices. I join with those Deputies. I do not understand why the Commission for Regulation of Utilities has allowed electricity prices to go up as far as they have. I understand there was a peak in generation costs at the time of the outbreak of the Ukraine war. That is no longer there. In fact, with 40% of our electricity generation coming from renewables, I do not understand why we have not dealt with that problem.

We talk about it in the context of the budget and whether or not we should have targeted measures or ongoing supports. Leaving that debate entirely to one side, there is a simple solution to this, and it is to tackle the energy companies about the cost of electricity. It is unjustifiable. Maybe I do not understand and there may be a perfectly good reason, but I have not heard it yet. In the absence of such a reason, we should be going back to the CRU and asking it to explain why it has allowed electricity prices to become as inflated as they have, particularly in the context of our European neighbours. I do not really understand why we have allowed ourselves to become an outlier in that regard. The cost of electricity is something that I hope can be addressed when the infrastructural deficit is addressed by this investment.

Mention has also been made of microgeneration, something that Ireland has been absolutely behind the curve on. Households all over this country are willing to use solar panels or other ways of microgeneration including geothermal, but they are not facilitated by the network to do that in real terms. While it may be technically possible to put electricity back into the grid, there is no real incentive to do it. The unit price that a householder gets for putting it back is

negligible even compared with the wholesale price of electricity. That is not going to encourage people to use the facilities at their disposal to feed the electricity generated within their homes, farms, businesses or wherever it might be back into the network to contribute to the overall amount of electricity available.

The other issue I have heard people refer to, including Deputy Gogarty, is long-duration energy storage. That is something that could definitely be a target of infrastructure spending. When we put the target together for the number of electric vehicles on the road, one of the big pluses for me was that we would have cars charging overnight, drawing electricity from the grid and essentially being a national battery for electricity that could then be used during the day when there is a greater demand on the grid. These mobile batteries would be there, having absorbed the excess energy available overnight. I do not know what plans the ESB has for large-scale long-duration electricity storage, but where we have good renewables, particularly in wind, we should be taking that energy and making sure it is there when there is a need for it on an ongoing basis. I would welcome any news the Minister of State might have on the plans within this infrastructure development to increase long-duration electricity storage.

The other issue raised was data centres. I join with my colleagues in their concern about the extent that data centres are gobbling up electricity. I do not agree that we should have a moratorium, but I do not understand why every data centre in this country is not covered in solar panels to begin with. To the greatest extent possible, they should be doing what they can to ensure they are using renewable electricity. I recognise that when they take electricity from the grid, it might be renewable electricity, but they are using electricity that could be used by somebody else, who is then relying on electricity that is not renewable. The greatest concern I have about data centres is that when they do not get enough electricity from the grid, they are relying on on-site diesel generators to feed their electricity needs. That has to be worst possible way to generate electricity, particularly on the small scale of a data centre. We need to take steps as a Government to ensure that data centres are ideally not doing that at all, but certainly to the very minimum extent possible.

Finally, I will make a point on the construction of this Bill. The principal Act referred to in the Bill is the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 1954. As I understand it, that Act has been amended 20 times since then. When you pick up the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025 and look at it, it is illegible. Section 2 will say that section 4 of the principal Act is amended by amending the reference to €12 billion to a reference to €17 billion. When you are reading the Bill, that means nothing. It means nothing in isolation. Section 4 has been amended over and over again. In order to understand what this Bill actually says, you have to go back and dig up 20 different pieces of legislation to actually understand section 4 of this new amendment Bill. Why do we not take the original section 4, repeal it or restate it in the new Bill so that somebody reading the legislation can know what it does? Of course, you can read briefing documents, but legislation should be accessible to people. They should not have to trawl through years and years of legislation to find out what it means.

Deputy John McGuinness: There will be many families and community groups in my constituency that will listen to this debate and wonder how quickly this Bill has come before us here in the Dáil and note how well supported it has been across all parties and groups. They will then look at the regulations for windfarms. There was a debate here in 2013 and the then Minister was asked for regulations, to level the playing field and to ensure that the voices of

communities and individuals were heard. To this day, we do not have the regulations that are necessary to protect local communities and to set out the criteria for the development of these large-scale windfarms. There are problems with these issues in Kilkenny, Carlow and into Laois. Families were here with us in the audiovisual room setting out their positions. They told us some distressing stories and yet there is no regulation.

I asked the then Taoiseach if he would consider a moratorium on the applications that were there so that the regulations could be introduced and applied to any development taking place. I also asked that the huge windfarms, the new technologies and new sized blades and towers could at least be discussed in this House. That did not happen.

Deputy Stanley has a Bill on this issue. I ask the Minister of State to take it and use it on Second Stage to bring about a debate on this issue so that we can come to some conclusions on what needs to be done and plan for the future. We also need to reach out and help the individuals and communities that we represent. It is not just Carlow, Kilkenny and Laois; it is right across the country.

If you drive along the road from Kilkenny to Durrow, you will find that the local communities have windmills behind them, and there are plans for windmills in front of them too. No consideration is being given to their difficulties. In fact, I would say the system is stacked against them because the big companies involved have no problem paying for submissions. However, communities have to pay for the submissions that have been forced upon them. It is dividing local communities and causing mayhem between neighbours. I ask the Minister of State to look at the different options that are there. Why not look at the nuclear option? Small nuclear plants are being built all over France and Germany. They are not at all the way they used to be. They are an option. We import electricity generated by nuclear plants while we hold the moral high ground and say, "Oh my God, I wouldn't have those in this country." We should stand up, take our responsibility seriously and bring about the change in policy that is necessary to deal with these issues.

I draw the Minister of State's attention to the big energy companies and I will give an example. The energy companies are not treating their customers with respect. They are not showing any degree of compassion. People cannot get in touch with them unless they use the freephone line and queue forever. They could be cut off in the middle of their conversation. If they send an email of complaint, God knows what will happen to it. I followed up one of them today in my constituency office. The phone was cut off. I could not get through on the email and when I finally submitted a third-party authorisation, it was sent back to me because the man signed his name as "Ger" followed by his second name, when his name is "Gerard". They asked me to get the man to sign the full name, "Gerard". These are vulnerable customers who are appealing to big energy companies making huge profits to sort out a meter or help them to pay a bill, or they are asking why a single man in a house would generate electricity up to €3,000 of a bill. There is something wrong. They will not reach out to the customer, as any other company should and would, to help them resolve the issue and get paid.

Accountability and reporting oversight are critical to this Bill and the money involved and I do not see enough in it to convince me there are conditions that must be met by the companies and that we are serious about value for money and oversight of taxpayers' money.

I turn to the domestic and commercial cost to SMEs. Farmers who pay their bills, in particular dairy farmers, have come to me and said that, in the middle of milking, down goes the electricity. They have a power failure. When they report it to the energy company, they get absolutely zero traction to sort it out. Small businesses are closing because of the cost of electricity and nobody seems to be reaching out to stop companies charging them far too much for electricity.

The number of domestic and commercial customers waiting to be connected is truly shocking. They are getting no respect or response from the big companies. I had an experience on the Hebron industrial estate with a commercial operator. It is impossible to get the answer so that a supply can be arranged and housing provided for those on waiting lists. There is so much to be done. I ask the Minister to please take note of what is being said by me and other speakers, and to act on it.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Ba mhaith liom comghairdeas mór a dhéanamh le Catherine Connolly, an Uachtarán-elect. What I say in this contribution is not directed at the Minister of State; it is directed at the entire system I have been facing ever since being elected to this House. I welcome the Bill and the opportunity it provides. The billions of euro in investment in ESB Networks are badly needed. I am a member of the climate and energy committee and we are constantly discussing how Ireland's electricity system will be developed over the next four years we are in government. This is essential infrastructure. It underpins huge issues we face across Departments, from the housing crisis to economic growth gridlocks and the renewable energy transition. I love how we call it a transition; it is not a transition but the complete scrapping of our current energy system and the building of a new one. We are changing, like the entire world is. This scale of investment, with the hundreds of projects and the substations, has been needed for years. I welcome the funding and the fact the ESB is getting reduced rates. It is helping to secure Ireland's energy future.

We will face huge fines running into billions of euro regarding our energy. That is not 100% confirmed by the EU but if it is the case we need to do everything now. I have spoken about this in the House multiple times. That is why we cannot ignore the wider truths. It is a fact that our energy system is not keeping pace.

I recently visited multiple solar farms across Ireland during the break. The owners and engineers told me they are turning off solar farms because the grid cannot take it due to curtailment. I understand the Bill is trying to tackle that but it needs to be fast-tracked because it does not make sense that we are turning off Irish solar farms to then import, as the previous Deputy mentioned, electricity from the UK that is from nuclear plants and other projects that they have, and buying off them when we have our own solar farms. It does not make sense to the public or to me. It is just bureaucracy and outdated policy. We saw this before with the North-South interconnector. It was identified in 2008 and is still not built. That critical infrastructure is delayed not by technology but by indecision.

When I entered this House, one of the reasons the Ceann Comhairle ruled I was not a Member of the Opposition was that I claimed private wire policy was a win for me and my team. That policy is something I have been working on since January and I met with the OPLA today to review the Bill I am working on. The Bill is for small-scale local issues, to help eco-villages and small industry; it is not going to help big industry.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: These small local issues will be the things that help. At the moment, it is not only that there is a housing crisis. Where somebody is waiting for a connection to build houses, if someone else can easily build a solar farm and have a direct line link to those houses, it will speed up everything. Germany, the UK and Denmark are doing it. I understand the Government is bringing forward a policy and I welcome the fact the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, announced that, but it needs to be fast-tracked. When I knock on doors in my constituency, I find people are struggling with energy bills. Private wires will reduce bills because of the demand on the grid being used by big energy. If they can take that off, this will reduce the demand and the cost per unit.

We constantly discuss in the climate and energy committee the curtailment we will face with the ORE being built across Ireland at the moment. It is great to see. There was a €90 million investment in Cork Port. It was great but many experts say we need to put more than €90 million in for when these large vessels come in to develop offshore renewable energy projects. To make it as effective as possible, more needs to be going in. I asked two weeks ago for the maritime law to be changed so the Department could put this on. It would be very good if this could be looked at and fast-tracked. If we could build infrastructure at our ports in the west using offshore renewable energy off the coast of my constituency, we could tackle the curtailment, take in the surplus energy, build electrolysis centres with private wires and have long-duration energy. The end goal is being as efficient as possible. No other country has the potential we have on our coasts to build our grid. With this great Bill, which I welcome, it needs to be done correctly. We need experts there. It cannot be brought down by inertia and indecision.

Private wires can play a major role in reducing emissions, cutting connection delays and supporting economic activity. Eco-villages across the country help us decarbonise the data sector while allowing it to grow responsibly. I am well aware 53,000 jobs are directly or indirectly linked to the data centre industry in this country. I will not say the industry needs to be removed. I understand the FDI that comes from it but we need to mitigate the damage it is causing. That is something we can do right now.

Solar farms across the country are waiting 18 to 24 months, on record, for a connection. It is ridiculous that they are built, sitting there and not supplying homes.

I urge the Minister of State and his Department to look into fast-tracking private wires as a simple win for the Government and for our climate, our housing and our entire grid system.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I very much welcome this Bill, given the urgent need to take active steps towards financing and upgrading our creaking energy grid. If that requires amending an outdated series of rules around ESB borrowing, we should get on and do exactly that. Clearly there is a need here, if the existing laws and limits go back to the 1950s or the 2000s.

The Bill deals with the current ESB fund of €13.4 billion for the PR6 investment programme and the construction of the North-South interconnector, which is a critical piece of infrastructure, but my concern is more on the micro level than on the macro level. It is all well and good investing in the grid and energy infrastructure, but what good will that do if we

continue having homes in entire communities, and indeed businesses, living with blackouts. If we do not do the simple things right, like cutting back trees that knock down power lines, we are missing the point entirely. A reinforced grid is one thing but maintaining continuity of supply often comes down to the small, local and practical details. Given that the State will grant an additional €1.5 billion in shares or capital stock in ESB, we also need firm assurances that this level of taxpayer investment will be protected.

I have major concerns around the persistence of moving towards such levels of so-called renewable energy for our grid. I am not at all convinced that the economic, environmental or infrastructural arguments relating to wind energy, for example, are as credible as people think, and I am extremely concerned about the lack of protections for many communities throughout the State. In my constituency of Offaly, I have constituents complaining about infrasound from a wind farm. They are not being listened to. We have no guidelines and we have absolutely no protections for those communities. I have called time and again for a moratorium on wind farms until the guidelines are published but, more importantly, until the guidelines give balance to this whole debate and argument and protect communities and their rights and so far that is not happening. It is shocking to see wind farms being imposed on communities that are completely opposed. I have also had an issue with farms in Offaly where it is affecting animals. Not alone is it affecting the residents, but it is affecting the animals in the fields. I have had reports of livestock having to be moved when a wind farm went into north Offaly. That is not fair. We need a balance between communities and corporate entities.

I will end on electricity prices. As I have stated here previously, giving energy credits, which were welcomed by many struggling households around the State, was letting the energy companies off the hook. Why are the energy companies allowed to continue to profiteer? I call on Government to tackle that issue head on. It has to be tackled. We are all elected here to represent communities throughout the State, not to represent the energy companies. That needs to be tackled and there needs to be fairness.

I ask again for the energy companies to be brought in before the Oireachtas committee on energy and climate. That needs to happen quickly. I have had constituents, including pensioners and ordinary hard-working families who are stretched trying to pay bills and, indeed, businesses, into my offices and I know for a fact that many small businesses have closed because they just were not able to meet the high energy costs.

It is wrong that Government is continuing to sit back and allow the energy companies to profiteer when people and small businesses are struggling. Are we not here to represent the ordinary people and the small SMEs around the State who create huge employment? Is that not our purpose here? My understanding was that was why we were all elected here. It was not to represent corporate entities; it was to represent communities and our constituents. I am calling for Government to tackle this issue of extortionate electricity prices once and for all.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the chance to talk about this serious and, for some people, emotive matter here this evening.

I welcome the investment by Government in the ESB. It surely needs to improve when we see communities left without electricity for days and weeks in places such as Cordal, Brosna, Gneeveguilla, Glencar and Knocknagoshel earlier in the year because of a storm. I have to mention one aspect of that operation. I want to thank all the workers that put their lives in

danger trying to restore the lines, day and night, to get the power going. I have to commend them very highly. ESB management, who were overseeing this and ensuring the workers were out there, refused to make drones available to them to find the outages in dense forestry and terrain that was hardly traversable. If they had the facility of having a drone to go out, check the line and see where it was broken down, it would have saved hours, days and weeks of time for those poor men working hard on the ground trying to rectify the situation. I want the Minister of State to ask why that did not happen in Kerry and why drones were not made available to the crews on the ground. That is one of the questions.

The other problem I have is that we hear this massive sum being invested in the ESB, but what are we doing for our consumers that have to pay so much? I see here a list. Energia imposed a 12.1% increase from 9 October last. Bord Gáis raised its electricity unit rates by 13.5% and its standing charges by 12%. SSE Airtricity prices rose 9.5% and those of Flogas 7%. Why is there such a difference in the first place? Flogas's increase is just half what they others are. There is no law or order, or control, at all here. Pinergy had an increase of 9.83%. Do we have a regulator? Where is he? Did he ever open his mouth? Is he asleep all the time? What is happening the regulator or is he there at all? That is what I am asking. This is the only sector where companies seem to get what increases they want and the poor consumers have to suffer these massive charges.

Many people are cajoled and forced into this situation that they have to use so much electricity. They were told to do this. The building energy rating, BER, rating was forced upon thousands of people that have built new houses by the banks and other lending institutions. They have to have the lowest BER rating and to do that means they cannot have a chimney with an open fireplace or whatever form of heating they desire. This is why they have been forced into electricity only. The Government then will find that when the power goes out, there is no one to help them. Two council houses that I pass every morning when I leave Kilgarvan have been unoccupied for over a year. There was people living in them up until then. The reason is they were selected for complete retrofitting at a cost of over €100,000. There was nothing wrong with the houses only to paint them up and do a few jobs to them, not to take off the roofs and take out the chimneys which is what is happening. They are gone at 18 occupied houses over in Rathmore now, trying to force people into taking out their little stoves and fireplaces. I had an elderly lady bawling crying on the phone to ask Kerry County Council not to take out her little stove. That is what is happening. There are vacant houses around the place that are not being got ready for reuse or to leave other tenants into them, and they have no place to live at the present time.

Many farmers and others are generating electricity themselves. They were encouraged to produce enough that they could sell it and now we find the grid is only going the one way, bringing electricity to them. The infrastructure is not there to sell the electricity to the ESB. The ESB, in some cases, will only take one third of what they can produce. There is something wrong here and I ask the Minister of State to look at that. It is very serious.

Hundreds of people have been on to me that their power is being turned off and that they cannot pay the bills. This is what they find when they have these heat pumps that are running all the year round. They were able to carry on themselves and get a few bags of turf or a bag of coal. We appreciate the fuel allowance, but it is not as going as far as people need it to go with these exorbitant electricity bills.

I was amazed, when it was made known at the agricultural committee meeting last week, that some of these people who are building commercial anaerobic digesters can get a grant of up to €5 million from the State. Imagine that. What this is about is meeting our 2030 targets for generation of energy. This is being paid for by taxpayers. It is everything and anything just to meet our targets, regardless of what it will cost. Can you imagine what a €5 million grant would do for people who are trying to pay the electricity costs they have? In the first place, I think I was the only one who voted against the timing for the 2030 emissions target deadline. I was the only one in Dáil Éireann. Every other man, woman, party, Independent and individual voted for 2030. I did not. I know a lot of people will get hurt and squeezed in between.

I mentioned retrofitting new and occupied houses against the wishes of tenants. I go back to the way people are being forced and encouraged to use electricity. When we realise that the power can go out at any time, we hope that the ESB and Ministers are ensuring that we will not have outages like we had before, when trees were left too close to wires. What has happened until now, whether it happens all the time or not, is when the ESB is told about trees rubbing off wires, it is only allowed to cut them back a metre from the lines. That is not good enough. That is not adequate because tall trees fall the length of themselves onto the wires. I ask for that to be reviewed to ensure no tree is left standing. They should not be left standing along any road either because we see people in cars being killed. These trees are overshadowing wires and roads. That should not be happening.

I again go back to the exorbitant costs and the regulation, which is not there. It is immaterial. While we support the investment, I do not support what is happening to customers. We do not have a regulator. He is not doing his job. It is the Ministers' duty; this is their time in position. They are the Ministers of today. They should ensure the energy regulator gets out and does his job, and gives clarification and transparency to what is happening. Are the energy companies entitled to these increases or are they not? I feel they are not.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I also warmly congratulate our President-elect, Catherine Connolly. I wish her the very best in her appointment. Leaving Mayo-Galway rivalries aside, I know she will do a tremendous job. I wish her the very best.

I thank all the Deputies for their engagement in respect of this very important Bill. I appreciate the general support right across the Chamber in that regard. The fact that many Members have contributed to the debate demonstrates the importance and relevance of energy issues. I welcome the broad range of contributions on such wide-ranging issues. I will, most importantly, keep my comments focused on the content and purpose of the Bill.

It is perhaps worthwhile to begin by restating the purpose of the Bill. It is very much focused on creating capital stock in the ESB in return for payment. This will be the mechanism by which the Government will provide the €1.5 billion investment in the ESB to support critical development of our electricity and grid over the next five years, as committed to in the updated national development plan. This investment will be crucial, as many Deputies said, in modernising, building that resilience and reinforcing our electricity network infrastructure. It will also support the Government's key priorities in infrastructure, housing, competitiveness, investment growth and climate action.

Within that, there will be a robust accountability and oversight mechanism for the expenditure by ESB Networks. Indeed, that will increase significantly in price review 6. The company will be obliged to report to the CRU, on a programme by programme basis, on cost, performance, delivery and the timeline for delivery. The Minister will also require ESB Networks, as part of this investment, to report quarterly on network expenditure, network financing, delivery and debt, which is very important. There will be a clear and transparent reporting mechanism for the Minister. That has been an important theme that needs to be emphasised as part of this. It is also important to recall that the State itself will receive, on a receive-return basis, a return on its €1.5 billion investment and, as the major shareholder, on ESB profits via payment of dividends. The Government's investment will be complemented by additional privately sourced debt, funded by the ESB, to finance the delivery of the overall price review 6 investment programme. The Bill will ensure that it also provides for the increase in the ESB statutory borrowing limit from €12 billion to €17 billion.

This large-scale investment in the grid as part of PR 6 will deliver energy security into the future for Irish families and communities right across the country. It will significantly improve network resilience and future-proof it for generations to come. It will enable the connection of hundreds of thousands of new homes - as I said, we have an ambitious target of over 300,000 homes over the term of this Government - improve connectivity and accelerate the connection of new sources of renewable electricity. It is another important piece of legislation that demonstrates the Government's commitment in meeting our critical infrastructure needs as a State and balancing the needs around housing, economic growth and employment in our economy in delivering the key infrastructure we require.

I will respond to some of the key themes and questions raised by many Deputies. One related to high energy prices. Many Deputies raised their concerns around the impact of these high prices on households and businesses. We fully understand these concerns. Many Deputies will be aware that a number of factors give rise to higher energy costs right across Ireland. One of the principal factors is our current reliance on fossil fuels, in particular, imported gas. We are very much reliant on imported gas, which is particularly vulnerable to price volatility in the international wholesale gas market. We are very much focused on building a more renewable base. Electrification provides a route not just to decarbonising our energy system but also reducing our dependency on imported gas. We, along with many of our neighbours, very much feel the impact of our vulnerability to reliance on gas as our main energy source. We are making great strides in substituting our fossil fuels with indigenously generated wind and solar energy. This journey to a clean energy source is very much part of this programme. Electrification can only be achieved through investment in our electricity grid. That is what we are focused on through this Bill.

6 o'clock

In addition, the €1.5 billion investment in ESB, which the Bill we are discussing will facilitate, will help keep consumer costs associated with the PR6 infrastructure programme to a minimum by ensuring the ESB maintains a high credit rating but also can borrow at low interest rates.

In terms of supporting householders and businesses on the more immediate basis, I again highlight some of the key measures Government is progressing to help current energy costs, including the extension of the reduced VAT rate of 9% on gas and electricity. We also increased

the weekly fuel allowance by €5 from January 2026. That will provide an additional €140 to over 400 households during the annual fuel allowance season. We are extending the €400 tax exemption from profits from micro-generation of electricity to 2028. We are also providing a range of grants to include solar PV on homes, businesses and farms to make it easier for people to improve their energy efficiencies and produce their own energy. We have also received confirmation from the main energy suppliers that the hardship funds for those struggling to meet their energy costs will also be made available to households over the winter.

Deputies asked how much investment has been allocated in facilitating new data centres. I assure them that price review 6 takes many Government targets into account including the connection of up to 50,000 new homes a year, up to 1 million electric vehicles and currently contracted data centre demand. The programme for Government commits to developing a comprehensive plan to accelerate energy generation connectivity and the planning process. That plan will be guided on the approach around data centres, which provide huge importance within our enterprise system, but we need to provide certainty to the industry when making short- to medium-term investment.

Regarding future grid investment and ESB profits, a number of Deputies asked about grid investment. To date Ireland has invested in the grid at a similar pace to our EU peers, maintaining and upgrading EirGrid as required. Ireland needs to go through a period of change in the use and demand of electricity. Adapting our grid for this increased demand for energy is critical in order to progress our decarbonisation progress.

I am confident that the legislation before the House today is an important step in future-proofing our grid for generations to come. I acknowledge the significant work of the Attorney General, his officials, and officials from both the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation who have worked with my departmental officials here today in drafting this important legislation. I also thank the members of the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy for meeting officials for a technical briefing in advance of granting a waiver on the pre-legislative scrutiny. I also thank Deputies from all sides of the House here today for their interest and contributions. I look forward to the early consideration of the next Stage of the Bill taking place tomorrow.

Question put and agreed to.

Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

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

I will be sharing time with colleagues.

It is clear that the cost of sending children school is rising and pushing more and more parents into significant financial hardship. Budget 2026 has failed to deliver the investment and vision which our education system so desperately needs. The Irish League of Credit Unions has reported that the cost of sending children back to school this year has increased since last year. It says that the costs often reach up to €1,560 for secondary school students and €1,450 for primary school students, increases of €154 and €364, respectively. These costs are putting extreme pressure on families who are already struggling with the spiralling cost-of-living crisis.

Some 27% of secondary and 14% of primary school parents say they have had to use savings while 15% and 8% respectively had to take out a loan or borrow from family or friends to cover the cost of so-called voluntary contributions.

Schools have been left short in terms of an increase in the capitation grant called for by teachers' unions. I am sure the Minister of State is aware that the cost of insurance, heating and energy and the day-to-day running costs of schools across the State have increased significantly. The insufficient increase in capitation funding will leave schools struggling to keep up with their bills. There is no doubt that parents will be relied on to try to make up the difference, to try to subsidise what is supposed to be a free education system. The Catholic Primary School Management Association has warned that parents will face a hike in voluntary contributions to plug funding shortfalls. It estimates that €54 million would be needed from so-called voluntary contributions to subsidise so-called free education.

Parents also face new expenses for digital devices. The Minister of State will be aware that one in four secondary schools have moved to using digital devices rather than traditional textbooks. One digital device costs an average of €430 per child. Some parents who cannot afford to pay for the device up-front then pay what the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has dubbed a poverty premium as instalment payments can add up to a higher price. This is pushing those struggling most with their finances into greater debt. Like Terry Pratchett's boots, it is expensive to be poor. To add to this, this year the Government has decided to reintroduce the State exam fee, leaving parents with yet another expense.

In this context of ever-increasing cost to families, we bring forward the Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill for Second Stage debate this evening. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission says that restrictive school uniform policies are stifling competition and driving up costs. In short, it says the Minister's 2017 circular is not working. Our Bill would address this. It would mandate all schools to adopt a cost-conscious uniform policy ensuring clear labelling of optional versus mandatory items to prevent unnecessary spending; multiple retail options for uniforms allowing parents to shop around for best value; minimal use of expensive branded items such as embroidered tracksuits to avoid excluding students from activities; stability in uniform policies so items can be reused or passed down to siblings; support for second-hand uniforms through swaps or sales; and compassionate enforcement of uniform rules where financial hardship is suspected.

Barnardos, the Irish League of Credit Unions, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and others say costs for parents are increasing and that specific new measures are needed to help them. This legislation will be a good step on that road and the Minister should support it.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: We all see it every year: the proud photos of our little ones in their school uniforms standing tall and smiling on the first day back. Those bright faces fill our social media feeds but what the photos do not show are the stress, the struggle and the sacrifice of the parents or guardians behind the camera, the sleepless nights worrying about how to afford it all. For far too many families, 54% of them, going to school is not a joyful occasion; it is a financial burden. Some are forced to cut back on essentials, even food, just to make sure their child has a uniform or a pair of shoes that fit. This is shameful in a so-called modern state.

Uniform costs alone are spiralling. Hundreds of schools have a uniform policy that requires crested uniforms often with only one supplier meaning parents have no choice but to pay whatever price is set. We all know how fast children grow. Jumpers shrink, jackets get lost and the bills keep piling up. On top of that are the so-called voluntary contributions, estimated at over €54 million this year, forced on parents because this Government has failed to properly fund our schools. One parent of a child in a secondary school has paid €272 so far this year for mocks fees, study blocks, lockers and career outings, and that is only by the start of November. This is before uniforms or digital devices are taken into account.

Inequalities keep growing. The Government's plan for leaving certificate reform risks creating a system where well-funded schools pull further ahead while other schools, starved of investment, fall behind. Even the so-called hot-meals scheme is a postcode lottery. Parents in Clare are calling it a scheme of frustration with poor-quality food. Some schools in Clare are unable to afford even the electricity to heat the meals, and others are unable to access the scheme at all due to procurement and supply issues. Therefore, once again families are left to fork out for packed lunches on the back of empty promises.

Teachers' unions and parents have been clear: schools need proper funding and increased capitation grants. However, this Government has not listened. Budget 2026 once again fails our parents, our teachers and our schools. When will we see the day when back-to-school photos show not just the smiles of children but also the relief of parents who no longer have to struggle or sacrifice to give their kids a fair start? Let us make that day come sooner rather than later. Let us end the yearly cycle of stress and financial strain. I urge the Minister to support this Bill, stand with children, parents and schools, and support families.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Gabhaim buíochas le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Darren O'Rourke, as an reachtaíocht thábhachtach seo a chur chun cinn.

Families right across south Kildare are at the pin of their collar. Week after week, my office receives emails from people who have to choose between heating and food. Scores of working families across the county are at risk of homelessness from rising housing costs because of new Government legislation. Costs keep rising, yet the Government decided to make families even worse off in this year's budget. On top of rip-off electricity, insurance, food shopping and medical costs, school-related costs represent just one more area where families are being fleeced. Eighty percent of schools ask for voluntary contributions. Many schools are forced to pass the cost of facilities on to parents due to inadequate capitation. Families increasingly have to pay out for digital devices. According to the Irish League of Credit Unions, back-to-school spending is €364 more expensive this year than last year for primary school and €169 for secondary school.

Uniforms remain a huge cost for families. We know that certain schools still have uniform policies that require several crested and embroidered pieces, not only on the jumpers, pants and polo shirts but sometimes even on sports clothes and rain jackets. Frequently, a sole local provider has a monopoly over these, and this drives up the price. Schools also need to be directed not to change their uniform policies unnecessarily – a measure that would help to keep costs down over time.

We also need to consider second-hand schemes and have centralised guidance and support for such initiatives, as provided for in this Bill. Ireland is the second-largest producer of textile

waste in Europe after Belgium. We consume 53 kg of textiles *per capita* per annum, according to www.changeclotthes.org, which is more than double the EU average. We have a serious problem with consumption patterns and waste management systems in this country, and there is no doubt that school uniforms represent a chunk of that problem. Anyone with children will know they often need a new uniform every year, sometimes twice in a year, which leads you to wonder what happens to the outgrown uniforms of children who do not have siblings to hand them down to or who simply cannot pass them down due to crests. Chances are they are not recycled. I see real opportunity under this Bill for the Government and schools to take leadership on this issue and allow schools to institute a sustainable model and a mini-circular economy and mindset at community level.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: People across the State have faced successive years of profound financial hardship. In recent years, families have faced significant increases in the cost of the weekly shop, excessive increases in the costs of necessary utilities such as electricity and gas, increases in rent, and – every August – the high cost of returning children to school, with school uniforms being one of the biggest costs. The cost of a uniform is not just once off; it is yearly for most families. Children, particularly teenagers, grow out of their uniforms each summer, requiring further investment by parents.

The Irish League of Credit Unions has noted that compared to 2024, costs have increased by €364 for primary students and €169 for secondary students. Generally, students wear the uniform four days a week and a school-labelled tracksuit once a week, so parents must buy a tracksuit, at least two school jumpers, two school shirts and two pairs of pants or skirts.

A constituent I spoke to who has one child in secondary school in Limerick outlined the amount he had to spend on school uniforms this August. The school opted this year to redesign the school tracksuit, adding more cost for parents. The father I spoke to advised that he had purchased two school uniforms at €31 each and one school tie at €8. He opted to purchase school shirts and grey trousers but not from the recommended provider. He paid €50 for a school tracksuit top and an additional €36 for the school-labelled tracksuit pants. He advised he spent nearly €200 on school attire this year. He remarked that he was fortunate to have only one child in the school at the moment, but that child is a growing teenaged boy, so next year, if this Bill is not introduced, the family will face the same costs again. With the cost of everything in the State spiralling out of control, this is just not sustainable for working families anymore. Parents face high uniform costs and not long after their children return to school, they face the so-called voluntary contribution that schools seek. I do not blame the schools for this; they are cash-strapped themselves.

I was also contacted this morning by a parent of a child who attends primary school in Sixmilebridge, County Clare. The school, she advised, is holding a fundraiser not for anything new and shiny but just to afford day-to-day costs. Parents are worried. Fifty percent of them say they are worried about back-to-school costs, with many relying on loans or savings to purchase essentials. Our Bill provides that only iron-on or sewn-on crests should be required for school attire and that the monopoly in the supply of school uniforms should be ended, allowing parents to purchase required clothing from an expanded number of clothes shops.

The Government has failed to address the funding crisis across schools. It did not increase the capitation grant by €75, as recommended by unions and other stakeholders, but by just €50.

The burden falls on cash-strapped parents to make up the difference. I ask all Members to support our Bill and provide some alleviation to those families struggling to meet ever-rising school costs.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I move amendment No. 1:

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

Dáil Éireann:

notes that the Government:

- recognises that the cost of preparing children for school each September can be a cause of financial difficulty and worry for many Irish families;
- is committed to ensuring that schools will adopt measures to reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs in line with Programme for Government Commitments; and
- has commenced work to review Circular 32/2017 which sets out the measures to be adopted by schools to reduce the costs of school uniforms and other costs as noted in Education Plan 2025, and this includes:
 - the establishment of a working group, which includes representatives from the National Parents Council and from the education partners;
 - planned engagement with parents as well as with children and young people to obtain their views; and
 - work to promote uniform swap shops in all primary schools, thereby making uniforms more affordable and supporting sustainability, as committed to in the Programme for Government;

recognises that while decisions on school uniforms are a matter for individual schools and Boards of Management, Circular 32/2017 already sets out the principles of cost-effective practice to be adopted by schools to reduce the cost of returning to school, including:

- schools are advised that they should select school uniform items which are generic and can be purchased from a range of retailers;
- only 'iron on' or 'sew on' crests should be used;
- schools should provide parents with a list of all required items and indicate the likely costs of these required items at best value stores;
- where an exclusive supply arrangement applies, it should be tendered for regularly; and
- schools should also consult with parents as to their views on how to reduce costs;

further recognises that the Government has introduced a number of measures to alleviate the costs associated for schools including:

- €170 million allocated to provide free schoolbooks for some 940,000 children and young people enrolled in schools in the Free Education Scheme, from the start of the 25/26 school year;
- €39 million secured in Budget 2026 towards increased capitation funding for primary, post-primary and special schools to provide additional financial support towards their running costs;
- over €69 million of additional funding allocated to school transport services as part of Budget 2026, and this is to provide for the additional demand for pupils with special educational needs on school transport services and increased bus contractor running costs; and
- additional funding of €58 million allocated under cost-of-living measures to the School Transport Scheme, to allow for continued reduced transport fees in 2025;

further notes that the Government is progressing the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill, which will strengthen engagement between schools, parents and students, including on issues such as school costs and uniform policies; and

accordingly declines to give the Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025 a second reading.

I thank Sinn Féin, including Deputy O'Rourke, for introducing this Bill. The Deputy's motivation is clear and sincere and shows genuine concern for families facing the very real costs that come with the new school year. I share that concern. I am aware that for many parents, the start of the new school year can be financially stressful, with new uniform and transport costs arriving all at once. This is why the Government has made affordability a central focus of our education policy. However, I cannot accept this particular Bill today. This decision is not about rejecting its intent; it is about recognising that we are already taking significant, evidence-based steps to achieve the same goals in a more comprehensive and sustainable way.

As colleagues will know, school uniform policy has traditionally been a matter for each board of management, reflecting local needs and traditions. However, since the publication of Circular 0032/2017, the Department of education has made clear that schools should take steps to ensure uniforms are affordable and accessible to all families. The circular sets out clear and practical guidelines for schools: uniform items should be generic and available from a range of retailers, not tied to just one supplier; iron-on or sewn-on crests should be used instead of embroidered ones; parents should receive a full list of required items and their likely costs at the best-value stores; exclusive supply arrangements must be subject to regular tendering; and schools should consult parents on how best to reduce costs. These measures aim to make a real difference but we recognise that more can be done. That is why a working group, including representatives from the National Parents Council and education partners, is reviewing Circular 0032/2017 to strengthen and update it. The group will engage directly with parents, children and young people to ensure the voices of those most affected are heard.

We are also commencing work to promote uniform swap shops across primary schools, helping families to save money while contributing to our wider sustainability goals. This is in line with our commitment in the programme for Government. The central piece of our education policy is that the school always needs to engage openly with parents and students to listen as well as to inform them. That is the principle at the heart of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill, which is progressing through the Oireachtas and expected to go to Committee Stage before the end of this year. When enacted, this legislation will require every school to consult parents and students on key policy issues and activities. It also sets clear expectations with regard to communications, transparency and respect between schools, parents and students. It will ensure that families are genuine partners in decisions about their children's education, including how schools manage costs. This is a collaborative approach rooted in trust and responsibility which will achieve far more than issuing a set of prescriptive guidelines.

In respect of broader Government measures to reduce costs, uniforms are one part of the cost burden families face. This is why the Government's strategy is comprehensively tackling the full range of expenses that come with schooling. This year marks an historical milestone in Irish education policy. From September 2025, all students in the free education scheme, consisting of almost 1 million students and young people, will receive free books and core classroom resources. This represents an investment of over €170 million and a full delivery of the programme for Government commitment to provide free school books for every child. Schools will manage the provision directly, ensuring resources are used effectively and sustainably. This is one of the most significant steps taken to remove cost barriers in the Irish education system.

In the context of capitation funding, we have also taken major steps to support schools with their running costs. In budget 2026, the Department of education secured €39 million to increase capitation funding, giving schools greater flexibility to cover running costs and reducing reliance on parental contributions. This includes an increase of €50 per pupil in primary school and €20 per pupil in post-primary school. There are additional supports for DEIS and special schools as well. Over the past three budgets, capitation funding has increased by nearly 50% at primary level and 28% at post-primary level. This is a significant uplift in capitation funding.

We also maintain our commitment to affordable and accessible school transport. The school transport scheme, which Bus Éireann operates on behalf of the Department of education, has expanded significantly over the past six years. The number of children and young people using the service has grown from under 120,000 pupils in 2018 to over 178,000 pupils in 2025, which equates to an increase of close to 50%. Of those 178,000 pupils, over 100,000 mainstream pupils who are eligible for transport are facilitated, as well as more than 49,000 pupils who are receiving concessionary tickets. In addition, in excess of 23,000 pupils are travelling on dedicated school transport services for children with additional needs and more than 5,500 pupils from Ukraine are also facilitated on these services.

Investment in the school transport scheme has more than doubled from €200 million in 2018 to €512 million in 2024. This investment is extremely welcome as the scheme and associated costs continue to grow. Deputies will be aware that there have been many discussions on school transport here, at the committee on education and in the Upper House. We are committed to

ensuring a further expansion of services in the years to come. In budget 2026, there is an extra €69 million to meet demand, especially for students with additional needs, and to offset rising operational costs.

The Department of Social Protection issues a back to school clothing and footwear allowance. Payments totalling €47.5 million to over 126,000 families in respect of over 221,000 children were issued in July 2025. These payments were issued automatically to eligible families who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments. Families who do not receive the payment automatically can apply directly to the Department of Social Protection. The allowance supports eligible families with the cost of school uniforms and footwear ahead of the upcoming school year. It provides €160 per child aged between four to 11 and €285 per child aged 12 years and over in second level education. Eligibility for the back to school clothing and footwear allowance was extended in 2025 to include foster care families. The total budget allocated to the scheme for 2025 amounted to €54.4 million.

This is a Government that acts on the evidence, in partnership with the education community, students, parents and education partners. I thank Deputy O'Rourke and Sinn Féin for raising and keeping this issue to the fore. Their concerns reflect the concerns of families right across the country and I share those concerns deeply. We are working with schools, parents and students, not around them. I believe the path we are on, through sustainable investment, ongoing collaboration and legislative reform, is the right one. While I cannot accept the Bill, I want to be clear that my Department is working hard to deliver on the Bill's core intent in a way that is coherent, system wide and enduring. Our aim is simply that no family in Ireland should ever struggle to meet the costs of sending their child to school.

The review of Circular 0032/2017, the enactment of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill and our measures to provide free schoolbooks, increased capitation for schools and ongoing investment in school transport all form part of a coherent, evidence-based strategy to make education genuinely affordable for all. For that reason, I am asking the House to decline to give this Bill a Second Reading, but I do so while affirming my Department's total commitment to tackling back to school costs and supporting families in every community in Ireland.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I wish to start by saying that I am a strong supporter of schools having uniforms. It takes a lot of pressure off families and it keeps the fashion shows and the competition out of schools. It is a leveller. Every time parents are asked about school uniforms, survey results always say they support a uniform. We are in a cost-of-living crisis and everything is getting more expensive, however. Every September, parents are worrying about the cost of getting their kids back to school. They are using their savings and, in some cases, they are borrowing to ensure costs are covered.

In some schools, we have a situation where there is no competition when it comes to a parent buying a school uniform. We all know the story. Parents get a letter from the school telling them that the uniforms have to come from a specific shop and that no other brand or version is acceptable. That is the case for secondary school uniforms in particular. Parents with a daughter – I am speaking for myself in this instance – have to buy a skirt, blouses, jumpers, PE tracksuit and school coats, which are all branded. This costs big money. The Minister of State

will understand that these costs add up for parents who have two or three children in that school. That is before we even talk about schools where students need iPads or tablets.

The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, looked at this earlier in the year and found that three quarters of schools had branded items that could only be bought from a recommended retailer. The Minister of State and I know that leads to higher costs. A simple way to reduce costs for parents is through giving them more choice when it comes to buying school uniforms. We need to switch to generic jumpers and make iron-on or sew-on crests the norm. Back in 2017, the then Minister issued a circular addressing some of these issues, looking for iron-on crests and generic items, etc. I am absolutely surprised to say that the Minister of State is not supporting the Bill that actually details what was said in 2017. Here we are seven years on and nothing has changed and there is still a massive cost on parents buying school uniforms. This Bill we are debating is very clear. Schools need to have it written down. It needs to be a proper policy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The report of the Barnardos 2025 back to school survey indicated that the average price of uniforms was €126 for a primary school uniform and €119 for a secondary school uniform. Many parents have just paid out for these uniforms, but they are facing additional costs as well in January. Children grow and play and a lot of the time, these uniforms have to be replaced. That is an additional cost.

I know parents who have had to go to the credit union to get loans to send their kids back to school. They had to borrow money off family or friends to get their kids back to school. I know parents who have had to go to money lenders to get money to get their kids back to school because things are so tight now with this current cost-of-living crisis that every penny or euro counts for the vast majority of people. Think of the parents who are living in overcrowded emergency accommodation. How are they going to wash uniforms? I raise the pressure that is being put on them to get their kids out the door every morning in the proper attire. There are some shops with a monopoly. Parents are paying out vast sums of money when they should have more choice. There should be more flexibility. It should be easy for people to buy uniforms for their children, not putting a barrier of costs in the way. What we are looking to do is to support parents, families and children.

The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission recognises that there is a monopoly and it is costing parents money. Barnardos found that 54% of parents were worried about the cost of their children going back to school. At the same time, schools are worried about their heating bills. Parents are paying out for everything, for example, school transport and iPads that are not being covered by the Government. That was an easy way to take pressure off parents. We are coming forward with solutions for people. The Government should be backing us. We should be working together here. Why does it always put barriers in place when we are trying to support ordinary people?

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Hear, hear.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Every year, families across the State face a financial cliff when the school term begins. Parents are being forced into debt. They are dipping into savings and turning to credit unions just to send their children to school. As we have just heard, they

are going to money lenders, unscrupulous ones at that, and getting themselves into huge unsustainable debts. One of the biggest drivers of these costs is school uniforms. In Waterford, parents are telling me the same story each August and September. They are stretched to breaking point. In many schools, families have no real choice when it comes to uniforms. Branded or crested clothing is required, extended even to PE wear and jackets. That includes primary school, driving costs up year after year. This Bill is about tackling that head on. The Bill will place an obligation on the Minister for education to make regulations ensuring every school has an affordable uniform policy, one that recognises the financial pressures facing families. It is about fairness, choice and common sense.

The Irish League of Credit Unions has found that the total back-to-school spend this year rose by €360 for primary, and €170 for secondary students. More than half of parents have gone into debt to meet these costs. It is not just uniforms; it is books, digital devices, transport and the voluntary contributions that are anything but voluntary. I have spoken to parents in my constituency clinics this year who are paying hundreds of euro for a single digital device because their child's school has moved away from textbooks. Families with two or three children simply cannot keep up. Others are paying for fuel or taxis because they are excluded from the school transport scheme - a scheme that is supposed to ensure equal access to education but instead leaves rural families in particular footing the bill for long commutes.

For families of children with disabilities or additional educational needs, these costs are multiplied. Between therapy appointments, sensory equipment and specialist materials, they are already carrying a heavier load. School costs should never add to that burden. All of this is happening against the backdrop of a deepening cost-of-living crisis. Groceries, rent, energy, fuel - everything is going up, while wages and supports fail to keep pace. Families are being pushed to the limit and the Government's response has been piecemeal and reactive. It is the same story in every part of the State. People are working hard and doing their best but are struggling to stay afloat.

Schools are feeling that same pressure. They are being asked to do more with less, to fundraise for basic materials, to rely on voluntary contributions to keep the lights on, to keep toilet paper in the toilets because the so-called increases in capitation funding announced in budget 2026 will not take effect until January. Teachers and principals have been very clear. They have been clear with us, and I have no doubt they have been clear with the Government. They need proper funding now, not next year. Tonight's Bill is a modest but meaningful step. It will not solve every problem, but it will make a real difference to families and parents who are struggling. It would ensure schools adopt uniform policies that are affordable and accessible, policies that treat parents with fairness and respect. Families in Waterford and across the State do not need a Government press release about free education. What they need are decisions that actually lower costs, take the pressure off the kitchen table and make schooling genuinely affordable for all families. The Minister of State indicated the Government will not be supporting this Bill, but supporting it would be a really good place to start.

Deputy Ann Graves: We are all aware that families are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. Between spiralling rents, mortgages, energy, food and fuel, the list of ever-increasing bills is growing longer and longer. Each bill puts further pressure and stress on working families. When it comes to their children's education, parents are being forced into more debt

in order to cover back-to-school costs. Barnardos carried out a back-to-school report, noting that 54% of parents are worried about costs, as families dip into savings where they have some, get loans and apply household budget cutbacks to pay for uniforms. The Irish League of Credit Unions report highlights that there is a 5% increase on last year in families that are sacrificing food in order to cover costs. That is an absolute disgrace.

I have seen the effects of these bills on families. In my own constituency, a family with both parents working, but with mortgage, food and fuel costs, is still struggling to pay their bills. The added cost of a uniform is even more pressure. When asked about the cost of uniforms, the Minister for education said it was up to schools to offer crests parents could buy and then buy the uniform separately. This is not practical or workable. PE gear adds to the bills. The polo shirt costs €15 when crested, yet a parent can buy a three-pack with no crest for about €8 - the same colour as what the school demands but it just has no crest on it. A mother told me:

... we did have to buy 2 crested t-shirts at a total cost of €30 and in winter my son will wear the cheaper one when there's no fear he has to take his tracksuit top off. The school jacket which is not even heavy is another €39 as its crested. It's just a rip off. I hope your party eventually takes power and you might listen to the ordinary person who works, pays taxes and are then fleeced.

These are the words of ordinary working families. A lone parent is being crippled by back to school costs. She wants to know why the Government does not introduce regulations that will ensure uniforms are standardised and made affordable. Sinn Féin has introduced legislation to place an obligation on the Minister for Education and Youth to introduce regulations governing the implementation of an affordable school uniform policy in school. This is what people want; a Government that is on their side, that cares for working families and will give a helping hand when people need it.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank Sinn Féin for putting this Bill forward. The Labour Party is very happy to support it. For many years, the Labour Party has championed the serious effect that back-to-school costs are placing on families across the country and the serious need to implement concrete support measures. Every family is affected by this, not just the chosen few. However, we stand and debate another topic that has a significant effect on our most vulnerable people in our society. This year's budget is another missed opportunity to show real ambition for Ireland's teachers, children and school communities. It is not enough to make token gestures while ignoring the major issues at the heart of our education system. This is one of those major issues. We should not be in a situation where parents are forced to take out loans, apply for supplementary welfare allowance or for their children to go without. The reality is this is what is happening. These families do not want their sympathy or empathy; they want fair and transparent access to everything that others in our society have.

This Bill leads towards the very basic things that children in this country should have access to - school uniforms. I recognise the role and the pride that schools take in their school uniforms. They are part and parcel of the history and of the fabric of each and every school community. Every parent wants to see their child, no matter how young or old, in their school uniform. I think of my own grandmother's house. There are pictures of all of her children and grandchildren on her wall. Apart from only a few, nearly every picture shows each child in their school uniform. This is no coincidence. The school uniform is an essential element of

school life and has been for many generations in this country. However, with this, we must be progressive in our views on school uniforms. In 2017, the Department of education issued guidelines to schools to reduce uniform costs by encouraging the use of generic uniforms with sew-on crests. Implementation, however, has been inconsistent, with many schools insisting on expensive and branded uniforms. When schools mandate crested or branded items of uniform from exclusive suppliers, costs increase further, thereby undermining the principle of equitable access to education. That is the fundamental issue. We talk about education being the great leveller. How can that be if mothers or fathers cannot afford to go out and purchase a branded jumper or shirt for their children? Where is the equity in that? Where does the great leveller come in there? It does not.

We must see a culture change back to second-hand uniforms. That will only be made possible by interventions from the Government. Many people will tell you that it was once the norm. Pieces of uniform, be they school ties or jumpers, were passed down a generation. Unfortunately, it does not happen any more. We must see that culture change.

The back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance is a payment to help families with the cost of school uniforms and shoes. However, the payment is not universal but is means-tested. I speak for all families when speaking on this topic. No family should be put before a means test to access a payment to help with the very basic, in this instance school uniforms and shoes. In the Labour Party mission is the provision of an inclusive and genuinely free-of-charge system of State-run education. To be totally frank, we can say we created free primary and second level education in this country all we want, but when you step back and analyse it, have we actually? We still have voluntary contributions that are not that voluntary. We have exorbitant school uniform costs. Schools now ask children to have €500 laptops and tablet devices. Many schools are begging parents to partake in fundraisers every year, placing another burden on parents. However, this is not the school's fault because it is often the case that these fundraisers go towards funding for essential day-to-day running costs, new school equipment or even jerseys for their sports teams.

I welcome recent increases in primary school capitation grants and the roll-out of the school meals programme. However, as I said, if you take one step away and analyse this free primary and second level education system, nobody here can say it is free. Education is our greatest tool for creating a more equal and prosperous Ireland and costs should not be a barrier to any child reaching his or her potential. We must ensure that every child has a fair start and we must cut costs for parents by making education genuinely free. That includes the costs I mentioned previously, including the universal back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance and a ban on voluntary contributions. We must also continue working towards increasing our capitation grants not just at primary level but also at post-primary level.

Parents are doing everything they can to give their children the best start in life but they are being failed by a system that continues, as I said, to demand voluntary contributions, to charge for uniforms and exam papers and, increasingly, as has been mentioned, to require expensive digital devices, such as tablets and iPads. This is not free education. Making the clothing and footwear allowance universal would come at a cost of €250 million to the State. It would include €260 for four- to 11-year-olds and €385 for those aged between 12 and 22 years.

Issues such as these are the fundamental issues that create a stigma within our schools. We must ensure we reduce any cause, or get rid of any cause or possible cause, of bullying within

any of our school environments. However, we must be real with ourselves. We have all been in schools. The children without are often the ones targeted. School uniforms should not be another target placed on a child's back.

As was mentioned previously, data from the Irish League of Credit Unions revealed in August that parents are now spending over €1,450 per primary pupil and €1,560 for those in secondary school. One in three families are being forced into debt to cope with the financial burden. It is absolutely unacceptable that 35% of parents say they have had to deny their child at least one essential item. This is not just about cost. It is about fairness and dignity for children. No child should be left behind because their family cannot afford the basics.

Along with this, there are other clear actions that the Government could introduce. We could permanently abolish exam fees and we could make school transport free for everyone with a €27 million investment. We could ban voluntary contributions and increase capitation grants by a further 20%. We could also ensure that home economics students get the same ingredients support that exists for woodwork and metalwork. Education should be a right, not a burden. The Labour Party's proposals are constantly practical, costed and achievable.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul's regional co-ordinator in Cork, Mr. Cormac O'Sullivan, said that back-to-school costs season is very busy for them. He said:

We've seen an increase in calls in the last [number of weeks], and it's only going to get busier now as we get through August. SVP has been advocating for the last 15 years for free schoolbooks, so it's great that this year both secondary and primary schools are both receiving free books. However, we're seeing an increase in people looking for help to buy technology, laptops and tablets. The books are free but now many schools are expecting students to have devices, which is quite a big expense for parents. It's not mandatory to have them, but there's an expectance there, and kids don't want to be the only one in a class without one. We've also seen an increase in people looking for help to buy uniforms. The back-to-school allowance is there, but it's not enough to cover everything. Those are the two main expenses, but SVP is conscious that the school year doesn't stop in September. There are costs associated throughout the year, and we'll get a lot of calls for assistance on those too.

Those additional costs include voluntary contributions and school trips. Mr. O'Sullivan went on to say:

For the [transition year] students, there's big pressure on parents to be able to fund overseas trips. We're asking schools to put in place a suitable alternative for people who just can't afford that.

Barnardos in August published the results of its back-to-school survey, which showed that 50% of primary and 60% of secondary school parents were worried about meeting costs this year. Some 27% of secondary and 14% of primary school parents across Ireland said they have used savings to meet back-to-school costs, while 15% of secondary and 8% of primary school parents said that they have taken a loan out or borrowed from family or friends.

The Zurich cost of education 2025 survey, based on information from 1,900 respondents, put the estimated cost of sending a child to primary school at €1,442, an increase of €30 on last year's report, and a lifetime cost of €12,920. That is our free education system.

In August, I read about back-to-school costs for one parent, Ms Claire O'Rourke, who lives in Glasnevin in Dublin. I read about her in *The Irish Times*. She came up with a figure of about €800 per month for four children. That figure applies every month during the school year. In her article, she included that one of her daughters' schools favoured iPads over schoolbooks. They had to be bought from a particular supplier at a cost of €604. When speaking about school uniforms, she referenced the new PE kit the school has introduced. It cost €117.50 for one child. She went on to speak about exam fees, extracurricular activities, voluntary contributions, school transport and school lunches. These are all what we would consider basic and part and parcel of free education.

Every year, parents contact public representatives about the costs associated with going back to school. One parent told me in August that they would not pay gas or electricity bills in August but would borrow, take out a loan and use instalments to get as much as they can for back-to-school items. They said they would go into debt until March the following year before it was all paid back and the situation would repeat again in August. They said they are worried about whether they can keep it up, year after year.

These are real-life examples. They are particular examples from associations such as Barnardos and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which are constantly advocating for and meeting families who are coming to them for help. No family should be going into debt, skipping meals or turning off the heating or lighting to cover basic needs such as school uniforms. No child should have to go through the plight of not knowing whether they will have every piece of school uniform every year. I am extremely disappointed. I would normally work with the Department on this, but I am extremely disappointed that the Department has not taken this Bill on board. It is legislation we could all have worked on together. It is disappointing. For the end of my speech, I have written, "I urge you to support this motion." However, there is no point in saying that now because the disappointment is there now. It is felt in the pocket of the people who have to pay for their children to go back to school every year.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I welcome the Sinn Féin Bill and thank that party's Members for their work on it. The use of school uniforms is often debated by parents, patrons and researchers. Some people love uniforms and others do not. The Social Democrats support this Bill, however, if the Ceann Comhairle will indulge me, I will speak about having school uniforms in the first place. I will not take up too much time on this but Ireland is one of only three countries in Europe that has uniforms in our State schools. The other countries are the UK and Azerbaijan. Other countries may have school uniforms and it varies depending on whether they are private schools or there are particular reasons but most do not in their state schools.

I researched this issue during my doctoral work and when I worked as a youth worker and in a school completion programme. Uniforms are a huge cause of discomfort for people. The main reasons are that for children and young people with sensory issues, uniforms are often very uncomfortable and are very itchy. They are not practical for girls, in that uniforms might have very long or very short skirts and are not very practical in cold weather and for cycling. However, that is not a reason that if we do have a school uniform that it is not then affordable. I will come to that part and I am not dissing this Sinn Féin Bill at all. I am just saying that

uniforms are important for people and if we have them, that is fine but there might be an alternative.

Uniforms cause a huge amount of difficulty for some students because they forget items. The Bill does deal with the fact that we have to have uniforms but there needs to be a practical understanding from schools on how to implement their policies. I often worked with young people with regard to attendance. I worked in the school completion programme where attendance was a big thing. What we would find was that a young person would eventually get to school after being suspended due to behaviour, or after a long absence, only to be told they were wearing the wrong colour shoes, the wrong tie or they forgot this or that. That is ridiculous because the child is sent home to get the proper uniform. Schools need to be practical about this. Yes, uniforms are extremely expensive. Some people might forget them but others may not have them. Where I am coming from, and this is where it speaks to Sinn Féin's Bill, some children and young people do not have the uniforms because they are just so expensive. On that basis, a family cannot afford to replace the tie. The easiest part of the school uniform to get lost is the tie. They do not know where it is. It falls down the back of the radiator or wherever but it is gone. It is expensive to replace it. I do not know why school uniforms need to have a tie in the first place but that is probably a side part of this.

School jumpers, as has been said by many, are very expensive. Students grow out of them, they lose them, they get holes in them, somebody else take them or whatever. Schools have to have a practical way of dealing with this. Having generic uniforms, if they have to have them, is so important.

Recently I had students Clogher Road Community College in. They were doing leaving certificate applied, LCA, work experience with me. I asked them to do a project on what their ideal school would be. They had a long list and one of the things they had on the list was no school uniform. They do not have a uniform in the school they go to but they were both in schools previously where they did have a uniform. They feel much better in themselves not having to wear a school uniform.

My last point on this, before I go back to the substantive part, is I know people argue that if we do not have a school uniform, it can lead to competition as to what clothes students wear. School culture is very important in this. I have been involved in multi-denominational schools for a long time and what I found was that there is no uniform in those schools but there is not that competition and the reason for that is that the students kind of have their own uniforms, which is leggings and a hoodie or jeans or tracksuit bottoms and a hoodie. They fall into what it is and there is not that big competition.

However, this Bill is about the cost of living and supporting families in a situation where it is so expensive to put their children through our free education system. As previous speakers said, this is where the problem is - it is not free. I have mentioned Circular 32/17 several times in the Dáil because I thought I might have imaged that circular came out because nothing ever seems to have happened about it. I was delighted when it came out for the kids we supported in our project. All school completion programmes and all schools working in disadvantaged areas have a bank of uniforms in case somebody forgets something. In our project, Ballymun ansoe school completion programme, we had a washing machine and dryer so we could wash uniforms. We had a stock of uniforms so we could replace them for families who could not afford to replace them themselves. We had the facility to wash and dry uniforms, if that was

necessary. Sometimes if a student only has one uniform and if that uniform gets dirty on a Monday in the yard or during sport, it will be dirty for the remainder of the week because he or she does not have a second one. When a uniform is really expensive, it is hard to replace it. If they were generic, it would not be as hard to replace them. Previous speakers said that if the polo shirt is a generic that can be bought anywhere, that is great but if it is an expensive one, a family might have one or might have none.

If we have circulars and there are things set out by the Department that schools are supposed to do and they are not doing them, what is the consequence? What is the point in somebody in the Department of education writing a circular, saying this is what we want the school to do but then it does not happen? What role does the Minister of State have in making sure that happens because this Bill would not have had to have been brought forward if what was set out in the circular was being done? The circular said uniforms should be generic, practical and the costs for families should be reduced as much as possible but yet all we hear this evening is that this is not the case. We have a situation where school uniforms are expensive and families are struggling and coming to the end of August and beginning of September, they are thinking about what they will do if there is not that culture within the school to have swaps when students grow out of things. I think a lot of schools are doing that and getting used to the idea but there are schools that are not because people are contacting us asking us if this can be brought in and asking if anything can be done.

Students have to have uniforms, tablets and books. I am constantly puzzled that they have to have tablets and books. There are exam costs, voluntary contributions, which really are not voluntary in some cases, and other costs associated with going to school such as lunches. I know there are free lunches but not everybody eats the free lunches. If education was truly free, there would not be costs for any of these things.

We have one in five children living in poverty. The reality is that we have the Society of St. Vincent de Paul delivering food and we have food banks. We have families who go to different places to pick up food every single week. Uniforms are the last thing they can deal with or else uniforms are the thing they focus on because they know it is the thing that will draw attention to the student, in that they are different and are not the same as everybody else because they do not have the school uniform or the uniform is dirty. What it means is they buy the school uniform but then they do not have any other clothes because it is either-or. It sounds like we are talking about the 1980s or previous times but we are not. This is 2025 and this is happening for families.

What I and the Social Democrats are saying is that if we want to have free education in this country, which we keep saying we want to have, it will not be free as long as we have these costs that cannot be kept down to a minimum. It is so easy to do that but it needs to be policed. Not only do uniforms need to be affordable but they need to be comfortable and practical. Girls wearing shorts or shirts that are down to their ankles or up to their knees or wherever is not practical. How are they supposed to cycle? They will not cycle in a skirt that goes up to here or is down to their ankles. It is dangerous and they will not feel comfortable in it. How will a transgender child wear a uniform that is assigned to one gender or the other? There has to be flexibility in that.

In regard to having items that are compulsory and items that are not, some schools I have been involved in have had a tracksuit but the tracksuit did not have the iron on crest but rather the crest you have to buy and that is the problem because they are the expensive things.

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this Bill forward. I echo my colleague from the Labour Party in saying I am disappointed the Government cannot see that this Bill has to be brought forward because what was already set out in that circular is not happening. When the Government implements things, it needs to follow up on them. It is really important. We are trying to make the lives of young people easier and make it easier for them to learn.

In regard to children with additional needs, uniforms need to be practical for those students as well because it is really important they are comfortable and do not have sensory overload from uniforms that are itchy or uncomfortable. I am disappointed the Government will not support this Bill. The Social Democrats will support it.

7 o'clock

It is important that any family sending their children to school should not be going to a loan shark, a credit union, a bank or other family members to be able to just have this basic thing, which is being able to send their children to school knowing they are not going to go hungry themselves or that their children will not go hungry, or that the children would be shamed because they do not have the uniform because they cannot afford it. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this Bill forward.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important Bill. I fully support the Bill, which would mandate all schools to adopt a cost-conscious uniform policy. As a parent, I have seen the cost of school uniforms increase massively over the years. It used to be the case that not so long ago we would have been able to buy one or two branded items such as a school jumper or a school tie. Other items such as polo shirts, trousers or shoes could be bought at any shop if they were the right colour. This allowed multiple retail options and allowed parents to shop around for the best value, or even to shop second-hand sometimes. That option is increasingly being taken away as more and more schools introduce expensive branded shirts, track suits, bags, coats and PE gear. Uniforms are supposed to signify unity and equality but now they just mean another additional cost for families when there is a cost-of-living crisis going on. It costs between €40 to €50 for one secondary school jumper now. I have three children that were at high school in the past 18 months and I know for a fact that one jumper per child does not happen. A family is paying for multiple jumpers because they go through them and they do not last a year. It costs hundreds of euro just to put a uniform on them that has to be changed and adapted as winter comes and again as spring comes as children grow. If a family has multiple children, they are paying far more. School uniforms cost an absolute fortune for middle-income earners but for low-income earners it is an entire week's wages that comes out of that family's costs just to put a uniform on their child's back.

A circular published just eight years ago by the then Minister for Education included measures to be adopted by schools to reduce the cost of uniforms and other costs. The circular, which the school authorities were expected to adopt, included the following principles for cost-effective practices: all elements of school uniform should be part purchased from various stores; the iron-on or sew-on crest should be used; whenever possible generic rather than branded items should be specified; parents should be provided with a list of all required items

along with the costs of these required items; and the schools should consult with parents on their views and suggestions on the reductions of the costs of these uniforms. The template questionnaire that would address the cost-effective practices should be sent out to parents once every three years. As a parent I have not seen that. The boards of management should review this annually. As a member of a board of management, I have never seen this. It was stated that the schools should implement this circular from September 2017 onwards. Anyone who has school-age children will know that these proposals were not introduced in most schools. In fact, schools seem to be going in the other direction. In recent years more and more schools have turned to expensive branded options under the guise of promoting equality and inclusivity. The reality is that it just causes additional stress to parents and it has resulted in the exclusion of students who in some cases have not been allowed to take part in activities without school-branded clothing. It is a ridiculous situation that students are actually being excluded as a result of a school uniform policy. It completely goes against the intentions of the uniform in the first place. Students are also subject to harsh disciplinary action when not adhering to school uniform policy. The fact is that schools themselves do not seem to be adhering to Circular 0032/2017 regarding school uniforms. One of the key proposals of the school uniform was to create a more focused educational environment and reduce distractions. It completely defeats the purpose when students are penalised for something as small as a white stripe on a pair of shoes or for their tie being tied up the wrong way. This puts focus on the appearance of students and not on their educational environment.

Because school uniform policies have changed so much over the years, in many cases items can no longer be reused or passed down to siblings. This means that parents are forced to buy brand new uniforms all over again with the expense to the family. How are parents expected to cope in a cost-of-living crisis? Back-to-school costs are astronomical. The Irish League of Credit Unions found that one in three parents now say that they get into debt covering their children's school costs when they go back to school in August and September. Over one third of parents say they are forced to deny their child at least one item when going back to school. Instead of two €50 jumpers, it is now one €50 jumper and the student has to make sure that this jumper is as good as new every single day or washed. It now costs on average €1,450 for primary school parents and €1,560 for secondary school parents to send their children to school. Families simply just cannot afford this. They are squeezed from every angle.

On top of this, for families in Donegal and across the country the defective concrete crisis is adding an unbearable cost to this desperate situation when these kids are living in crumbling homes. Their parents are trying to heat these homes and pay their mortgage. They are being squeezed to death and they cannot pay for these uniforms. Many homeowners face impossible decisions while trying to pay their mortgage. What will they do: pay the mortgage in September or put a uniform on their child's back? They are choosing to put the uniform on the child's back and then the banks have the cheek to come and chase them for their house.

Given that the 2017 circular was completely ineffective in addressing this cost of uniform,s it is clear that this Bill is needed to promptly address this issue to support struggling families. I urge the Government to support Sinn Féin's Bill and to address the increase in back-to-school costs for hundreds of thousands of families across Ireland.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I support the Bill not because it is a radical idea, but because it is basically decent. No parent should go into debt to send a child to school or to educate their

children. This Bill only exists because the Government has failed in the most fundamental of duties to make education genuinely free and fair. We have heard many times that Ministers roll out free books, free books and free books, but parents are still being hit with hidden charges. Many schools today had contacted families earlier this year telling them, or forcing them, to purchase electronic tablets costing up to €600 per child. Let us imagine being the parent hit with that charge in August and September while having the additional cost of €1,400 to €1,600 on a uniform.

On top of that we have the so-called voluntary contributions, which are anything but voluntary these days. I have met school principals the length and breadth of this country who are begging parents simply to keep the lights on in their schools and to pay the insurance costs. The facts are stark. An analysis of 707 schools shows that heating costs are up 83% since 2019, water and refuse bills are up 51%, accounting and auditing costs are up 58% in schools and the cost of management systems is a staggering 199% increase. The average primary school faces a deficit of €17,000 in day-to-day running costs while the Minister of State and Ministers parade around claiming that Irish education is free. That is a falsehood. It is not free. It is a lie that is told by comfortable people to the struggling families of this nation.

We have schools that cannot pay their energy bills but the same Department seems to have an endless and bottomless pit of money available for ideology and teaching nine-year olds about transgenderism and social theories instead of maths, science and literature. That is not education; that is indoctrination. This is what the Department is doing. Parents did not vote for their children to be used as social experiments. Families in Cork, Mallow, Glanmire, Little Island, and Ballincollig want everything that we had as children growing up. They want the basics done right. They want heat in the classrooms, affordable uniforms and education that is real learning that will put their children in a place where they are available for the jobs of tomorrow. They want their taxes spent on teachers. They do not want it spent on consultants and PR campaigns about inclusivity. What they really want is nothing more than getting the basics right so their children are able to leave school, go on to third level education and secure a future in this country. The Government is drunk on the nectar of self-congratulation while ordinary parents in this country are running on empty. The truth is the Department of education has lost touch with classrooms. It governs by press release, with parents left in the lurch and left to feel the pain over and over again. Most parents facing the summer holidays are thinking about how they will pay the bills when schools return in August and September and what other hidden charges there might be. I support the Bill not as a gesture but as a rebuke to the Government. It takes the Opposition to remind it that the Minister for Education and Youth and her Department should serve families, not lecture them.

Deputy Michael Collins: This is smart, fair and deeply necessary legislation that puts families first. For too long, the cost of school uniforms has placed an unfair burden on parents. According to Barnardos, back-to-school costs now average €725 for primary school pupils and €1,100 for secondary school. That is not just a statistic; it is a crisis. Families are dipping into savings, taking out loans and making impossible choices just to send their children to school. The Bill is a practical response to that reality. It requires schools to keep uniforms simple and affordable, allow parents to shop around and not be tied to one expensive supplier, offer second-hand options and show compassion when families are struggling. We must stop punishing

families for sending their children to school. The cost of uniforms should never be a barrier to education. The Bill puts fairness first and helps to make school more equal for every child.

We also must discuss voluntary contributions, which are, in fact, anything but voluntary for many families. Despite increased capitation funding, schools are still relying on these contributions to cover basic costs such as classroom materials, IT upgrades and extracurricular activities. Some parents are being asked for anything from €140 up to €550 per child, with 80% saying those requests do not feel optional. Schools, too, are under pressure, with the funding they receive often not stretching far enough. However, we cannot allow that gap to be filled by guilt-tripping of parents. No child should be excluded, embarrassed or disadvantaged because his or family cannot afford a voluntary payment. Capitation rates must be increased further, a code of practice should be introduced for voluntary funds and we must ensure transparency and fairness in how schools communicate with families.

Affordability in education does not stop at uniforms. I have long advocated for better support for apprenticeships and trades. We need to stop talking about trades and start investing in them. Our young people deserve real pathways to skilled work, not just promises. We in Independent Ireland believe in expanding modular training programmes, increasing SOLAS and ETB capacity regionally and offering incentives for completion, including local placement guarantees. This is especially urgent when we consider the cost-of-living crisis and the heartbreaking number of children and parents experiencing homelessness. Education should be a ladder out of poverty, not another rung that is out of reach.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the Bill and thank my colleagues in Sinn Féin for bringing it forward. We will support the Bill because it is about simplicity. The more simple we keep uniforms and the whole back-to-school experience, the cheaper it will become for families. In Mayo, as throughout the country, families are struggling. September brings significant financial fear due to all the costs associated with going back to school, including the cost of uniforms, shoes, warm coats, schoolbooks and, increasingly, IT equipment. I spoke to a family recently who spent almost €1,500 on a tablet for their child entering first year. That is an incredible amount for this family to have to find. It is a very challenging situation for parents. School transport is another big factor. Likewise, the not so voluntary school contribution is causing great difficulty for families. It is causing difficulty for principals as well as they are forced, in effect, into becoming debt collectors. It is totally unacceptable.

The back to school clothing and footwear allowance is welcome and positive. However, it appears the Minister is rejecting this Bill on the basis of citing that provision. This is totally unacceptable. The allowance often gets diverted into food, heating and all those other costs. The Bill reduces the cost of going back to school. Who could be against such a measure? In some cases, parents are told they must, for example, buy a branded jumper, shirt and skirt. The branded nature of such clothing, which may include embroidery, means it may be double the cost of non-branded items. A jumper that might cost €20 instead costs €60 or €70, which is totally unreasonable and unfair.

The Bill is a positive measure. Clear labelling, for instance, is a positive measure. Often, students will come home and tell their parents they need a particular jumper. It is a good thing to ensure parents know what is mandatory and what is optional. Minimal use of branded items is another positive measure. Crested jumpers are typically more expensive than non-crested

ones. Reducing the exclusive nature of uniforms will allow a greater number of providers and suppliers into the marketplace. I spoke to many families last September who were, in effect, forced to purchase uniforms from one or two suppliers. Competition is a good thing. The Bill will promote competition in the market and reduce costs for struggling families.

The promotion of the second-hand clothing option is a wonderful measure. Ireland is second highest in Europe for textile waste, with, on average, 53 kg of textile waste per person. That is double the European norm. Would it not be a great thing if schools were front and centre in promoting the use of second-hand clothing, hand-me-downs and reusable items? When I lived in America a number of years ago, I found the concept of the thrift shop to be a great thing. Many of my American friends would talk about the great deals they got in a thrift store. Assisting schools to promote reusing uniforms is a positive measure. Of course, it can only really happen if we enable a greater use of generic uniforms. That is the key. Regional towns with a number of schools would see a movement of uniforms across those schools. That would be a positive development.

We will support the Bill. I am disappointed the Minister seems to be opposing what is a very simple and practical measure to reduce the cost of sending children back to school.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome this debate on an issue with which we are all very familiar, either as parents or as public representatives. Back-to-school costs are a major source of anxiety for parents every year, particularly when uniforms demanded by some schools are at the higher end of the cost scale. It was noted on First Stage that the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and Barnardos have indicated that back-to-school costs average €725 for primary school and €1,000 for secondary school pupils. It is concerning that just 14% of respondents to the Barnardos survey said their school had an affordable school uniform option, while 92% said their school required crested or branded uniform items.

My concern in respect of the Bill is that unless we are very careful, we may end up producing the very situation we are trying to avoid in terms of costs. For example, what would happen when in determining the threshold costs for a school uniform, we arrived at a cost that was more expensive than the traditional cost for any given school? While a standardised series of costs may end up reducing expenses for some parents, it may actually increase expenses for other parents.

We need to be very careful about how we approach this issue. That being said, I will support the Bill because as the issues arise, I know we will have the opportunity to amend on Committee Stage, if necessary.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): The Minister again thanks Deputies O'Rourke, Clarke and Ó Laoghaire for bringing forward this Bill and for giving the House an opportunity to debate an issue that affects many families in the country. The Deputies' concern for affordability in education is both genuine and shared across this Chamber. We may differ on the mechanisms, but not on the principle. Every child deserves to go to school without cost being a barrier and no parent should feel financial pressure simply because they want to give their child the best start.

I recognise, as the Deputies do, that the start of each school year can bring financial strain. School-related costs tend to arrive at once and for many families, that creates real pressure. That is precisely why the Government has made affordability a cornerstone of our education policy and why we have already taken major, practical steps to address the very issues raised in this Bill. Our approach has been to implement comprehensively instead of in a piecemeal way, to support families in a sustainable way and to embed affordability across the education system. Through the review and strengthening of Circular 0032/2017, which relates to back to school costs and includes school uniform costs, we are ensuring schools adopt effective measures to make school uniforms affordable, from using generic, widely available items to promoting swap shops and removing exclusive supplier arrangements. This is a key action in the education plan 2025. Crucially, we are doing this in partnership with parents and students. The working group, established by the Department of Education and Youth to review the circular, includes representatives from the National Parents Council and other education partners. It will engage directly with families and young people to hear their views on how best to reduce the back to school costs.

The Government believes that the best policies are built with communities, not simply imposed on them. We believe that our approach acknowledges the responsibilities of all people in our children's lives, parents and school staff alike, to support the quality of their teaching and learning in schools. It also acknowledges our responsibility as a Government to support our school communities in working together in the best interests of children and young people. That is why the Minister, Deputy McEntee, intends to progress the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019, which will, for the first time, make it a statutory duty for every school to consult with parents and students on all key policies and activities, not just on school uniforms. The charter Bill aims to embed transparency and respect among all members of school communities. It will make clear that parents and students are not passive recipients of decisions but genuine partners in shaping them. The Bill will also replace section 28 of the Education Act 1998 with a new section 28. Working with other provisions of the Bill, this amendment will ensure that all schools will be required to have, and implement, standardised complaints procedures for parental complaints and complaints from pupils and students.

The charter guidelines, which will be developed in consultation with education stakeholders, will set out the details of the grievance procedures. These will focus on dealing with complaints efficiently, effectively and, insofar as possible, informally. The overall approach of the charter Bill is to move away from reacting to problems in schools after they arise to an early intervention approach that aims to improve the day-to-day experience students and their parents can expect from schools. In doing so, it is envisaged that the number of complaints in schools should reduce. We are not stopping there.

Uniforms are just one element of the overall cost of schooling. That is why our response has been, and will continue to be, comprehensive. From September of this year, every child and young person in the free education scheme - almost 1,000,000 students - will receive free school books and core classroom material. This is an investment of €170 million per year. It represents the full delivery of a major programme for Government commitment. Families will no longer be asked to buy books or pay book rental fees. Schools will handle provision directly, ensuring every euro is spent efficiently and effectively. This is one of the most significant cost reduction measures ever introduced in Irish education.

We are also giving schools the means to manage their own costs more sustainably. In budget 2026, the Department of Education and Youth secured €39 million in additional capitation funding for schools. This includes an increase of €50 per pupil at primary level, an increase of €20 per student at post-primary level and enhanced supports for DEIS and special schools. These are substantial increases. Capitation funding has increased almost 50% at primary level and 28% at post-primary level over the past three budgets. This ensures schools can cover essential running costs. We have also ensured the cost of getting to school remains manageable. An extra €69 million in budget 2026 has been allocated to meet rising demand and transport costs. We have seen a particular increase in demand for school transport for pupils with special educational needs and we are delighted to be able to offer this service for free to these students.

In addition, €58 million in cost of living supports for 2025 allowed us to continue the reduced transport fees introduced in recent years for children and young people accessing the mainstream transport service. As a result, families are benefiting from the following fees in this school year: €50 per primary pupil; €75 per post-primary pupil; and a family cap of €125. These measures have made a tangible difference in easing the back-to-school costs and ensuring access to education is not limited by geography or income. The hot school meals scheme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance. It provides free, nutritious meals to children during the school day. It helps families reduce the cost of school-related expenses while also supporting children's health and learning. The hot school meals scheme was extended to all primary schools during 2025. This means that in total, 3,200 schools and 550,000 children are now eligible for the hot school meals scheme.

The Government's position is clear and grounded in evidence. We are not opposing this Bill because we disagree with its goals; we are doing so because these goals are being achieved in a more integrated and effective way. We are addressing back to school costs at every level through updated guidance for schools and school uniforms, direct engagement with parents and students, free school books, enhanced capitation and affordable transport. We are doing so as part of a coherent policy framework that promotes equality, sustainability and fairness across our entire education system.

In closing, I again thank the Deputies for their commitment to this issue and for the constructive debate we have had. Their concern reflects the concerns of families right across Ireland and those are concerns I share deeply. However, I believe the path we are on through sustained investment, meaningful consultation and evidence-based reform is the right one. It is delivering results and it will continue to do so. The review of Circular 0032/2017, the enactment of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 and our broad package of cost reduction measures together form a coherent, joined-up strategy to make education genuinely affordable for all. For that reason, while I respectfully ask the House to decline to give this Bill a Second Stage reading, I do so with a firm commitment that this Government will continue to act decisively, compassionately and in partnership with parents, students and schools so that no family in Ireland will have to struggle to meet the cost of sending their children to school.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Minister has taken a disappointing approach. Back in 2011, I recall discussing the affordability of school uniforms in this House with Ruairi Quinn, the then Minister for Education and Skills. Unfortunately, at that time, we failed to convince him and probably more importantly, the officials at that time this was the way forward. If we cast our

minds back to that period, we were in the middle of an economic crash. Families were finding it extremely difficult to try to pay for school uniforms. Despite the positive reforms that the Minister of State has outlined relating to school books etc., when I talk to them, families, and particularly poor families, are finding it almost impossible to try to pay for these school uniforms. We all know the stories of the debt collectors and money lenders. This particular time of the year is probably the worst time for families. With Christmas coming up, this is the time when they go to the money lenders. It also happens in July and August when their children are going back to school. The debate I had with Ruairí Quinn at that time was on the cost of education. The Minister of State has outlined certain reforms that have been initiated. I do not think he is trying to tell us that it is not expensive for families to put their children through the education system. I do not think he is trying to say that here tonight. However, what we are trying to do tonight with this reform is bring a bit of reality into the room. I accept that the cost of school uniforms does not affect everyone. One of the arguments made in 2011 was that there was no demand at the time from some elements. However, some elements can actually afford to do it but others cannot. That is the point we are making. One of the speakers here tonight was talking about some of the initiatives in certain communities in relation to what is happening. The approach taken by the Minister is disappointing. It seems we have not learned from the past number of years. It is really disappointing.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: In most primary and post-primary schools, school uniforms are mandatory. School uniform policy is generally decided by each individual school's board of management. Increasingly, the cost of uniforms has become a significant concern for many families. This proposed legislation addresses these concerns and outlines a number of ways for schools to offer more cost-effective options for parents.

While we are being critical of their cost, we accept that school uniforms can have beneficial effects. They can promote a sense of pride, self-confidence and a feeling of belonging. They can contribute positively to a student's overall well-being. There is a belief among many teachers that school uniforms can help to prevent bullying as well. School uniforms also offer a practical and convenient solution to parents because they make the decision on what to wear going to school an easy one. It eliminates socioeconomic distinctions among students and removes the possibility of students being discriminated against based on their clothing. However, the cost of a child's uniform can quickly add up, especially if they are required to have a blazer, a tracksuit and other PE gear. Most likely the school uniform will have the school crest on the blazer or jumper. The cost of school uniforms can vary between schools but the average cost for a school uniform in Ireland is around €119 for primary schools and €211 for secondary schools. Additionally, parents can also spend on average around €100 on PE items. This can prove costly if a family is struggling financially. It will definitely be a financial burden on parents who have to buy school uniforms for a number of children.

Some reports have indicated that the total spend on school uniform items can be around €300. Although the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance offers some assistance to hard-pressed families, it falls short of the actual costs the family will incur. The CCPC has made a number of recommendations to help to reduce the costs for parents. The most obvious of these recommendations, which are reflected in this Bill, involves the use of generic uniforms with iron-on or sew-on crests. The implementation of these recommendations has not been consistent. Many schools expect parents to buy branded uniforms which can only be bought

at certain shops. Such non-competitive arrangements restrict choice for parents and can lead to higher prices. This Bill aims to take the stress out of buying school uniforms by giving parents a choice as to where to buy uniforms and deliver good value, especially during this cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: This Bill has been proposed by my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, and by Sinn Féin at a time when the cost of living is on everyone's lips. It is a very aptly called the Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025. During the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the cost of school uniforms has become a huge financial burden on families. The average cost of a full school kit, including gym gear, can be up to €420 per pupil. If there are three siblings, the cost becomes €1,260.

According to the ESRI, as a result of the recent budget the overall earnings of average workers will go down by 2%. Food and grocery prices have risen by 27% between 2021 and 2025. Property tax has gone up by 23% since 2021. Fuel, home heating and electricity bills are the highest in Europe. There is a double cost attached to these uniforms because, as sure as night follows day, voluntary contributions will also have to increase. In fact, the Irish League of Credit Unions has found that almost 80% of schools rely totally on this surcharge. We know that schools throughout the country have a uniform policy that mandates parents to purchase specific design-crested uniforms, including gym wear and jackets. More often than not, the provider of these uniforms is a single entity with a sole contract cutting out any form of competition or any chance of reduction on the items, which means that uniforms will increase in cost each year.

Sinn Féin's affordable uniforms Bill would go a long way to help families and guardians to reduce the cost of school uniforms, and particularly to help large families to cope with this expense in their children's education. The Government amendment is an affront to parents and families throughout our country. The Government said eight years ago, in 2017, that it was going to review a circular and establish a working group, including representatives from the National Parents Council and educational partners. Not one thing has been done in the past eight years to alleviate the exponentially increasing cost of school uniforms. The answer is already under the Minister's nose. He should simply agree to pass Deputy O'Rourke's Bill, and stop wasting time with reviews and bogus amendments.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. Deputy Mythen put his finger on it when he said that the Government amendment is an elaborate way to kill the Bill, essentially. It refers to consultation, collaboration, engagement and further review, but the substance of the issue is this: what difference is the Government's approach going to make to parents sending kids to school next September? Zero. None. It will be of no benefit to them at all. If the Government enacted the Sinn Féin legislation, it would make a real difference to the lives of people and certainly the financial position of families across the State. The Government wants to review a circular that people working in the sector have said has not made a blind bit of difference. Rather than being reviewed, it should go straight into the bin. That is the reality of it. The Government wants to throw everything into the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill. When will that Bill actually come into effect? We are talking about an extended period after that before policies are developed. The cost-of-living crisis is now. We are living through it. We want urgent action from the Government to respond to it. What

we are getting instead is consultation and engagement. I do not know about the language the two Ministers of State used when they said they do not want to tell schools what to do. That is exactly what we need to do, in a collaborative way for sure. An affordable school uniform policy needs to be developed, after thinking about this in a detailed way, and needs to be put in place in black and white. That is a reasonable ask and I think it would be met with a reasonable response from schools. It would make a huge difference to families across the State next September. The approach the Ministers of State have come here with - I do not know whether it comes from themselves, from the Department or from other Ministers - is the same type of mentality that has not made a blind bit of difference up to now. It did not make a difference in 2011, as Deputy Crowe said, or in 2017 when the circular was being drafted. The CCPC, Barnardos, the Irish League of Credit Unions and all of the poverty stakeholders say that not enough is being done. The Government's response tonight is wholly inadequate.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Early Childhood Care and Education

1. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the steps she will take to increase the number of early intervention classes to meet current and projected demand across the State; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [60168/25]

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality has responsibility for provision of services to children of preschool age. The access and inclusion model, or AIM as we know it, provided by that Department enables the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities or additional needs in the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme. Its goal is to create a more inclusive environment in preschools so that all children availing of preschool regardless of ability can benefit from quality early learning and care. This is in keeping with general policy position of supporting children with additional needs to access supports and services with their peers and siblings in their local community.

There has been a significant increase in resources and supports provided to children with additional needs accessing the AIM programme over recent years. It is important to note that a diagnosis is not required to access AIM supports and that while some children require additional supports at preschool level, many will transition into mainstream classes thereafter. To further supplement the provision of services for these children, my Department also provides a number of early intervention classes in mainstream and special school settings for children aged between three to five years with a diagnosis of autism. There is also a small number dedicated to children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

These classes are intended to provide early support to children with the most complex of needs before they start school and can aid their transition to junior infants. The vast majority

of young children with additional needs are therefore supported to attend their local early childhood care and education, ECCE, setting and do not need to attend a primary school or special school to access early years support. A professional recommendation for a placement in such a class is also a requirement. Where the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, identifies a need for an early intervention class, the class is sanctioned and supports are provided by my Department to ensure the school can accommodate the class.

We have 3,000 new special places being created in our education system for the current school year. The NCSE is currently examining the level of need by special class and special school type and where these places are best located, including for early intervention classes. For this year alone, there have been three new classes opened and this is responding to the need that has been identified.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I think the Minister will agree that those who avail of early intervention classes along with their families reflect on them very positively. Has there been an assessment of unmet need? Is it the case that this is demand-led through the NCSE? If there has been an assessment of unmet need, what are the plans to meet that need into the future?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Where a need is identified through engagement with the NCSE, this is where early intervention classes are opening. To give context - the Deputy will forgive me but I believe my figures from the Minister for children are right - approximately 96% plus of young children between the ages of three and five are accessing the ECCE scheme. Those children, without having to do any means test or assessment, are able to avail of the AIM scheme as well. That leaves fewer than 4% of young children who perhaps are not accessing ECCE and who perhaps for different reasons are not getting or are not able to avail of the level of support they need. That is where the early intervention classes work really well. I have been in some of the classes local to me and I can see how beneficial they are.

At the moment, we have 159 early intervention classes with three newly sanctioned for this year. Again, they are to supplement where the ECCE and AIM schemes are perhaps not providing enough support or are not adequate for those young children for whatever reasons. It is really important particularly at that age where for young children, it is play-based learning. It is not that we want children in school from the age of three; it is that we are trying to support as many young children as possible in the early education years. However, where it is not working, that is where I am absolutely confident and clear that the early intervention classes are supporting those children and are very necessary.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It might be worth having joined-up consideration of it to see if there is opportunity to get additional benefit from more early intervention classes. Has any consideration been given to the potential barrier there of a need for diagnosis at that stage? These are young children. Related to that is the transition between early years and primary school and primary school into secondary school. We now have the new 1 October deadline for the parent notification system. The criteria for relevant documentation at that stage has been a barrier for some people and there is some concern they will be locked out of the system. Can the Minister give us an update on the new scheme, particularly as it relates to those transitioning from-----

Deputy Helen McEntee: To answer the Deputy's previous question, and rolling into the next one, the Department looks at, reviews and assesses the level of need and that includes the early intervention classes. The new timeline and the new structure we have put in place will look not just at the demand for a special class place or special school place but also at the potential demand for the early intervention classes. The 1 October deadline has passed and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I are working with the NCSE every week and are meeting on a regular basis to look at the overall demand that is there. We are not going to lock anybody out and it is really important to say that. We have a deadline there for a very clear reason, which is to make sure we and, in particular, the NCSE are able to plan ahead but of course we want to work with parents. While we are still working with and managing the data, we are getting a much clearer picture of what the demand is. Last year there was not a requirement for children to have presented to the NCSE by a certain date, which was in February, to get access to a class but it is now a requirement. Children who would earlier on in the year have been unknown to the NCSE are now known, and so we are getting a much clearer picture of what the demand and need is. That will include the overall demand and need for the early intervention classes.

Educational Disadvantage

2. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the roll out and funding of DEIS plus, as of November 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [59395/25]

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. Tackling educational disadvantage and, in particular, supporting students to fulfil or achieve their full potential in life is a key priority for me. The DEIS programme is a key policy of Government to tackle concentrated educational disadvantage at school level and it is important to acknowledge the success it has been over recent years. More than €180 million is provided annually to additional supports for almost 1,200 schools in the DEIS programme. Budget 2026 allocates an additional €16 million this year on top of that which will translate into €48 million in additional money for the next full year to support the implementation of a new DEIS strategy but also to introduce the new DEIS plus scheme which will start next year.

As Minister, I am determined to close the performance gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and to introduce more innovative solutions to tackle educational disadvantage while at the same time making sure we invest more in what is working well because there is a huge amount that is working well. Part of delivering this objective will be the introduction of the new DEIS plus scheme. This scheme will provide additional resources to schools with the very highest level of need. To inform the development of the DEIS plus scheme, I have established a design advisory group. On that group, we have quite a number of different people, including principals, home school community liaison teams, school completion programme co-ordinators - people who work with students day in, day out and understand and know the need that is there - individuals from my Department and teams working with young people from across areas where there is high intergenerational disadvantage. We are also intensifying our engagement with other Government Departments and agencies, whether education partners or stakeholders across the education sector to develop the DEIS plus scheme.

What I said was that I wanted to have both the new DEIS scheme with DEIS plus published by the end of the year. We are still on track for that. What we are doing at the moment is essentially looking at what the different measures that have been identified are, where the greatest level of need is, what we could introduce in the earlier stages and how can we grow on that. Obviously €16 million is not going to provide us with the full DEIS plus scheme we will inevitably end up with. However, we will start to introduce certain elements of that scheme next year and build on it. What we are working on at the moment is identifying what will provide the greatest level of support at the earliest stages possible and on how we can build on that and develop the best scheme possible.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I appreciate that. With that design advisory group, are we on track to hopefully roll out DEIS plus for the academic year 2026-2027? Is that the priority for Government? In relation to the €16 million grant funding, that will not be the full amount to roll out DEIS plus in totality but is it the job of the design advisory group to come up with the specific schools or areas we were going to target first? If so, how do we pick those schools or areas? The Minister knows I am absolutely willing to work with her. At the centre of this is the most disadvantaged children across the country and the Minister will appreciate that the questions that are forthcoming constantly in relation to this are genuinely based on the need for extra supports in our communities.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Shortly after being appointed to the role, I met with a large group of principals, deputy principals and people working in schools where there is educational disadvantage and they were clear they needed this scheme brought in as soon as possible to support and complement the huge amount of work they are doing.

On identifying schools, we will not require schools to apply for inclusion. We will use a methodology to identify schools and look at evidence to inform us, including census 2022 data, HP deprivation index data and other available relevant data. We will take that into consideration and apply it to certain schools across the country in different cities and towns. The process will focus on delivering a commitment to support schools with the highest level of educational disadvantage.

On the Deputy's point, where there is intergenerational disadvantage and challenges for the young person, the community and the family, we will look to support the community, family unit and student involved.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: DEIS plus is a welcome initiative and has been championed by my party and the former Deputy Ó Ríordáin, now an MEP. There has to be cross-party support for the roll-out of DEIS plus. It is about the implementation being as quick as possible because schools need it.

Deputy O'Rourke and I met with a number of principals recently in the audiovisual room in relation to their schools and one point they focused on was the deputy principal role. I hope DEIS plus will help to tackle disadvantage in many schools across the country. We only have 0.75 of a deputy principal in one DEIS school in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area of Cork, for example. I do not doubt the Minister's bona fides on this. We just need to get it done as quickly as possible.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I fully agree and am eager to get this published as soon as possible and get these measures in place. The Deputy mentioned certain things and we are looking at all the things that have been asked of the Department. I am assured the asks are based on the understanding, knowledge and experience of our schools, principals, teachers and, particularly, the children who will benefit from this.

I point to the huge success so far of the DEIS programme. We have seen in recent years a reduced gap in the retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. It has halved, which is fantastic. For the number of young people in DEIS schools sitting the leaving certificate now, that gap has reduced significantly. Where we need to do much better is around the overall attainment rate in those schools. The DEIS plus programme should be able to help us understand what is at the crux of some of the issues young people face.

Complementing this - and it is very much part of the DEIS and DEIS plus schemes - is the focus on absenteeism. In DEIS schools - primary schools as well - there is a much higher rate of absenteeism. If children are not in school, no matter what we put there, we cannot support and target them. The work we do to encourage young people into school and to keep them there and support them will complement the work of DEIS and DEIS plus.

Irish Language

3. **Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her position in relation to the exemptions system for the Irish language as it stands; her views on whether it is fit for purpose; her plans to combat the increasing number of students seeking exemptions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [59852/25]

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Is mian liom labhairt faoi cheist na ndíolúintí Gaeilge inniu. There has been an unprecedented spike in the number of exemptions from Irish granted in recent years, with one in seven young people in the State exempted from learning our national language. What is the Minister's position on the exemptions system for the Irish language as it stands? Does she believe it is fit for purpose and what are her plans to combat the increasing number of students seeking exemptions?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Tá gealltanas i gclár an Rialtais an Ghaeilge a chosaint agus a chur chun cinn. In education this includes the work towards aligning Irish language curriculums with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR, to enhance spoken Irish. This work is being led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

In certain circumstances, a primary or post-primary student may be granted an exemption from studying Irish. The criteria are governed by Department circulars and decisions are made at school level. The circulars make clear that, for fundamental cultural and historical reasons that are inextricably linked to Irish identity, the study of the Irish language is a key aspect of the learning experiences that are considered appropriate for students in recognised schools. Is ar an chúis seo go bhfuil an Ghaeilge ina croí-ábhar sa churaclam do scoileanna aitheanta.

Students should be given every reasonable opportunity to participate in the learning of Irish for as long as possible. Normally, it is in the interests of the child to continue to study Irish to at least fifth or sixth class level before any decision is made to grant an exemption. That is

reflected in the overall number of exemptions at primary school level, which has dropped over recent years.

Circulars were published in September 2019. This was informed by an inspectorate review of the previous circulars and following a detailed and comprehensive consultation process. The inspectorate report is also available online. The 2019 circulars were further adjusted following a further review, resulting in the current circulars. My Department will continue to review the system and make adjustments as deemed necessary. We have also engaged with schools on the issue of exemptions and plans to enhance understanding among schools, students and parents of the purposes and criteria of the exemption system.

Aithníonn an Rialtas an tábhacht a bhaineann le córas oideachais láidir chun tacú le gach scoláire rochtain a bheidh acu ar an nGaeilge agus ar an gcultúr Gaelach agus go bhfuil ról suntasach ag an oideachas in athbheochan agus cothabháil na Gaeilge sa phobal. Leanfaidh oifigigh agus gníomhaireachtaí na Roinne le hathbhreithniú agus athchóiriú foghlaim agus teagasc na Gaeilge chun na críche sin.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: It is great to hear the Minister talk of revision but currently the system for these exemptions is not working. We must not forget they are meant to be exemptions for students with severe or complex learning difficulties who simply cannot learn a language. The figures tell us Gaeilge is essentially optional. The numbers have risen sharply, with more than 73,000 exemptions, and it is hard to see any urgency from the Department to get a handle on it. When the Minister's officials were os comhair an choiste Gaeilge the other week, they could not admit there was a problem. Tá sé sin dochreidte. The rise in exemptions does not show inclusion; it shows neglect.

The same lack of respect for Gaeilge can be seen elsewhere. For example, the other week, 30 minutes of Gaeilge was removed from the primary school curriculum. The message that sends is that the language can be chipped away at bit by bit. Many exempted students, whether they have additional needs or have recently arrived in Ireland, can learn if we can adapt the curriculum to provide proper supports.

Deputy Helen McEntee: In relation to the curriculum, a number of subjects saw a slight reduction in the time allocated to them but there is more flexibility within the time schedules, so schools can increase the number of hours provided for Irish or the time spent on Irish.

The overall figure for exemptions at primary school level is extremely low. It fell from over 18,000 maybe five years ago to just over 12,000 in the 2024-25 school year. The proportion of primary students with an exemption in the same period dropped from about 3.25% to 2.2%. Of exemptions at primary level, 93% are granted to students with special education needs.

I accept the number of exemptions at post primary level has increased, but we are seeing that exemptions have steadied. Even though the number of students attending post primary has increased by 4.7%, we have not seen a relative increase in the number of exemptions. It is about half and half, so it is evenly distributed between the number of students with special education needs getting exemptions and the number coming from abroad. That is generally the breakdown we are seeing.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: It is nearly 60,000 in secondary school. What the Minister mentioned about primary school is great but the reality in schools does not match the picture she is painting.

We need real leadership from the Minister. We need it from the top down. We cannot leave the decision up to principals on their own any more. The rate of exemptions depends entirely on where a child goes to school. In some places, they are granted almost automatically and in others hardly at all. There are simple practical fixes to this. The coiste Gaeilge in its last term produced a report with many recommendations. We can bring back foundation level at junior cycle, allow an oral-only option for students who struggle with reading and writing, give teachers time and resources to differentiate properly in class and address the reality that additional learning support classes are being timetabled at the same time as Gaeilge, which is another example of Gaeilge being less than. If the Department truly values Irish and inclusion, then I would love the opportunity, as would many Teachtaí here, to work with the Minister and Department on this.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I assure the Deputy there is no inertia or lack of will to support young people studying the language. I was in a school yesterday and was asked this question by a student. I want students to enjoy studying the language and, most importantly, speaking it.

On the figures, it is important to say that in the 2024-25 school year, there were over 19,000 exemptions. That is higher than we would like. At the same time, given the number of Ukrainian students who have come into the system, about half of those are students who have come from abroad.

8 o'clock

Not every Ukrainian student or anybody else coming from abroad is getting an exemption, but it is a far higher number and there are also a significant number of young people with special educational needs.

That being said, there is more we need to do. Later this week, I will publish two new strategies, one for Irish in English-medium schools and another for Irish being taught in the Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí. They will be launched on Thursday of this week. The focus and the priority there is how to make sure that the language is enjoyable, that it is being taught well in the schools and that there is support for the schools. That is to build on the work that is already happening.

Work is at an advantaged stage, as I said, on the new strategy. There is an action plan for Irish in English-medium schools as well as Irish in the Gaelscoileanna and coláistí. This is supporting the work through An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, COGG, which has established a unit specifically within my Department to see how we support schools, support teachers, make sure they have the resources and make sure that Irish is being taught in a way that young people are enjoying it. That is clearly the message that I am getting through and it is something that I really want to see that we can make progress on.

School Staff

4. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if her Department has carried out an assessment of the impact that the current teacher shortages are having on students, particularly in rural schools and DEIS areas; and the measures being taken to recruit and retain teachers. [59851/25]

Deputy Paul Lawless: There is a significant teacher shortage across Ireland. The unions have reported this over many years. Indeed, the situation is getting so bad that some schools are combining classes. Other schools are sending classes home. What analysis has the Minister done of the impact this is having in schools, particularly rural schools and DEIS schools? What is the Department doing to address the teacher shortage issue in this country?

Deputy Helen McEntee: This Government is fully committed to ensuring that every child has a positive school experience with access to qualified and engaged teachers who are completely dedicated and committed to supporting their learning. It is fair to say that we have a fantastic cohort of teachers who are committed to just that.

Over 97% of allocated teaching posts are filled and the number of unfilled allocated posts in DEIS or rural schools is comparable to that in all other schools. The data, which is based on our payroll, is not suggesting that there is a massive discrepancy between DEIS, rural schools or any other area. We have a rate of 97% of posts filled.

As with other sectors of the economy, recruitment challenges exist, which I acknowledge. In particular in certain parts of the country, most notably Dublin, there are still challenges. To address these, several targeted measures that have been implemented have led to an increase of 20% in initial teacher education graduates between 2018 and 2023, an increase of over 30% in the number of teachers registered with the Teaching Council between 2017 and 2025, and an increase in allocated teaching posts of 11,752 between the 2018-19 and 2024-25 school years. There are more qualified teachers than ever. The increase in the number of allocated teaching posts has outpaced population increases, with over 79,000 teachers now employed in our schools. We are continuously looking at our data and how that matches what was reflected in the demand in our schools.

Teaching is a highly attractive profession. We still have strong demand for teacher education programmes, with 3,600 newly qualified teachers registered in 2025 alone. With the changes to the overall public sector pay agreement, I believe we have competitive salaries compared with other jurisdictions.

To address some of the challenges, and perhaps I will come to this in my second contribution, one of the first things that I said as Minister I wanted to do was determine how we make sure that we encourage more teachers into the system, how we keep the teachers we have and how we make sure we are supporting them in the best way possible.

Deputy Paul Lawless: There are significant difficulties, particularly around certain subjects. From speaking to DEIS schools and rural schools, and indeed in Dublin as well, we need to focus on easing the difficulties of recruitment and retention in teaching. For example, why is it the case that if a teacher is permanent in Dublin and wants to move back to Mayo, that teacher has to give up their employment? Why is there not a scheme to redeploy - a proper functioning scheme for those people?

Why is Deputy McEntee, as the Minister for education, not trying to recruit teachers in the UAE and Australia? We need them. Despite what the Minister said, we need them. I speak to principals all the time. What is the Minister doing to recruit those teachers? I believe the Minister should be incentivising those teachers by outlining to them that we will recognise their service in the UAE and provide some increment benefit on the pay scale.

Deputy Helen McEntee: One of the first things that I did, and this was directly in response to an ask from the unions, was make changes to ensure that teachers were able to gain permanent roles more quickly, after one year as opposed to two. That was one of the first asks that I had. It was one of the first things that I did and I have said that I will do more.

The Deputy mentioned the fact that there are certain subjects, in particular in post-primary schools, where there is a greater challenge in identifying teachers. I have provided more upskilling programmes. Where teachers currently are proficient in two subjects, they are now able to upskill free of charge in certain areas and in particular subjects where there are difficulties such as physics, chemistry or science subjects overall, maths, computing and other areas where we have identified a particular shortage. Likewise, reflecting the previous question about the Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí, there is work under way to support teachers in making sure that they can upskill and become more proficient so that we do not have such a shortage. However, I appreciate that is a challenge and we are looking at lots of ways in which we can support teachers.

What I have said is that I will continue to look at possible ways and measures by which we can encourage more young people home. What is clear - I visited Australia for St. Patrick's Day this year and I met with many student teachers - is that many of them are coming home. Many of them are spending that time away and want to travel and to experience other jurisdictions, but they are also coming home because they want to come home and they want to teach in our schools.

Deputy Paul Lawless: In fairness, the question I asked the Minister, in terms of the redeployment scheme, was why there is not a fair process for teachers who are living and working in Dublin and cannot afford, for example, to live in Dublin and want to move back to Mayo. The vacancies are there. Why is there not that scheme? Will the Minister engage with me in relation to that?

Has the Minister undertaken any analysis of the two-year professional master's in education? Is the additional year in that two-year programme been another barrier and will she consider reducing that back to one year?

In circumstances in which we have a teacher shortage, not enough is being done. We are not doing anything in terms of redeployment. The two-year master's, it seems, is here for good. There are teachers across the UAE who have been there five, ten or 15 years and if they return to Ireland, they will start on the lowest point of the pay scale. Those are key items that the Minister could take to address and it would go some way in alleviating the teacher shortage. The shortage is there and these are practical measures the Minister could take.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I think I have been clear as Minister that nothing is off the table but I have also shown that I am willing to take action on certain measures. Reducing the length

of time for permanent contracts was the first one. Only in recent weeks, I made sure that people who have qualified abroad can have their skills recognised here, and I am doing it for a longer period and potentially putting that on a more permanent footing.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The two-year master's and the redeployment.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We need to look at all of those.

Deputy Paul Lawless: These are the questions that the Minister will not answer.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I think I have been very clear.

Deputy Paul Lawless: No, the Minister has not answered the questions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy either wants to hear the answer or does not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Minister answer the question.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy either wants to hear the answer or does not.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The Minister is not answering it. That is the point.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot do everything at once. What I have said clearly is that I am willing to look at every measure. In fact, I have met with the unions many times. My teams engage with them regularly on all of the issues that the Deputy has outlined but he is talking about giving teachers an opportunity to move from Dublin to other areas when it is clear that the shortages are in Dublin and some of the larger populated areas. We have to take every issue into consideration when we are making changes to any structure or resource that might be in place. We also have to look at whether the options that the Deputy is talking about would assist us in bringing more teachers into the system. I am keen on supporting the ones who are there and making sure that we have more people coming into the profession as well.

Schools Building Projects

5. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on a new school building project (details supplied); if she is aware that planning permission was granted for these schools in November 2020; the reason for the delays in bringing this project to construction; the indicative timeline for construction, commencement and completion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [60169/25]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask the Minister for an update on a new school building project for Coláiste Ríoga and Dunshaughlin Community National School in Dunshaughlin,

County Meath. Is she is aware that planning permission was granted for these schools in November 2020? It is now November 2025? What is the reason for the delays in bringing this project to construction and the indicative timeline for construction, commencement and completion?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am conscious and aware of both schools. I regularly visit schools, including the two the Deputy has mentioned.

My Department has a strong focus on provision for school place needs, underpinned by robust forward planning including demographic analysis informed by residential development plans. Dunshaughlin is an area that has seen significant growth. It will continue to see that growth, thankfully, in the years head.

Under the NDP, my Department's approach will be to continue to maximise the capacity of the existing school estate as much as possible in the first instance while, of course, providing the necessary additional capacity through targeted and prioritised project roll-out over the course of the period 2026 to 2030 to meet the most urgent and prioritised needs.

The major building project for the schools referred to by the Deputy, Coláiste Ríoga and Dunshaughlin Community National School, are part of my Department's employer-led design programme and will be delivered as a campus project, providing additional school places to meet the needs of the growing population. This campus will deliver a new primary school, which includes two classrooms for children with special educational needs. It also includes a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school, including six classrooms for children with special educational needs.

These projects progressed to tender on 12 December 2024 and the tender period closed on 26 February. After due diligence was carried out and discussions with contractors, the companies that placed first and second withdrew their tenders. This is not something that always happens but, unfortunately, in this instance, it did. The letter of intent then issued to the third tenderer on 15 August - only in the past few months - and subsequent discussions regarding reserved specialist contractors are almost concluded.

These schools will meet a rising demand for school places in the Dunshaughlin area, which has seen increased residential developments, and will respond to what is a very clear need within both communities. My Department will continue to keep the school authorities informed with regard to getting construction commenced on this urgently required project. I hope we will be able to make progress in the very near future. We are coming towards the end of that current stage. It is again important to stress, and I think the community realises this, that there were a number more recently, in terms of the tender. The fact that contractors withdrew meant the timelines that had been set were, unfortunately, delayed. However, we are still on track to be able to start this project as soon as possible.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The community will hang on the Minister's every word in relation to this. For clarity, regarding the letter of intent issued to the third contractor, are part of the works separated off? My understanding is that a letter of authorisation is due. What is the next step on that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is the next stage.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Is it a letter of acceptance? Is it the case that the project has been divided up and there are subcontractors? The Minister mentioned specialist work. Is that related to the struggle to get contractors to commit to this project? Is there a new approach in that regard? Obviously, there are delays in this that are very frustrating. Will she indicate, given she said it would be as soon as is possible, when we might expect that letter of acceptance will issue and the next step after that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: There is nothing unusual or different in this project. I cannot fully commit to the reasons other contractors pulled out. Perhaps there was other work they were doing and there was too heavy a load. Again, we cannot change the reasons for it. We can just make sure that the work is being done now to make sure the next stage can be moved onto as quickly as possible. There are no delays at present. It is a matter of going through the different stages, including the paperwork and the information that has been provided. The next stage is to offer the letter of acceptance, which then means we can start the building, get the builders on-site and move along with these projects, which is something the school community wants to see happen. I am absolutely committed to this. To be clear, the funding is there. The money is ready to start the project. It is just to move on to this final stage. Once we get to that stage, the community, and the school community in particular, will be informed.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There are a couple of issues. There is real frustration in relation to this. As I said, planning was granted in 2020. There will be a need for additional prefabricated space in both of these schools come next September because pupils will not be in them. We can all agree to that due to the fact we have not got contracts signed. From speaking to people very close to not only this project, but other projects, and colleagues around the country, there is a concern about capital projects in the education sector. I have spoken to contractors who say it is not easy dealing with the Department; that there have been changes in the Department; that projects are being delayed related to that; and that there were flexibilities and co-operations that were custom and practice, which are not happening now. This is a major concern, not only in Dunshaughlin but across the State. Other Deputies will have questions later on school building projects. Is this recognised by the Minister and the Department? What can be done to address that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Over the past five years alone, 1,300 projects have been progressed. These are new schools, large-scale projects, additional accommodation projects and emergency works projects. There have been 1,300 projects over the past five years. That is €6 billion that is being spent right across the country. Looking at the work that has been done, I compliment the work of the building unit and the team in the Department because we and they are a team that can deliver a significant amount of work within the budget we have. Obviously, the more money we have, the more schools we will be able to build. We now have a budget of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth out to 2030. My intention is that as many projects as possible will be moved within that overall budget I have.

I also compliment both schools in question, including the principals and all of the teachers, and the community national school in particular, because I appreciate they are on the grounds

of a football pitch. They have worked really well with the local community and GAA team as well, but they are working within a confined space. My absolute priority, and similarly for Coláiste Ríoga, which is working on a temporary site, is to get them into their permanent accommodation as quickly as possible to make sure the students who are there benefit from that permanent accommodation.

Education Policy

6. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the survey of primary school parents and guardians and parents and guardians of children not yet in school on their preferences on important aspects of school provision and choice in their community, as committed to in the programme for Government. [59853/25]

Deputy Emer Currie: I am looking for an update on the survey for primary school parents and guardians on their preferences for school provision and choice in their community that was launched today. I thank the Minister for that. Will she include in her response what happens if a need is established through the survey? What impact will this have on secondary school choice? Will there be a follow-on survey for secondary schools? It does impact on my Dublin City Council part of Dublin West.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I was pleased to be in a position to officially launch the new online survey for our primary schools today. This essentially enables parents and guardians of children in primary school, and of those who will attend primary school, and the teachers, staff and boards of management in our primary schools, to take part in a survey. There were three very simple and straightforward questions in the survey: whether people want their school be single sex or co-educational; whether they want their child or children to be taught through the medium of English or Irish; and whether they want their school to have a denominational or multid denominational ethos or religious or non-religious patronage.

The whole objective of this survey is for the Department, for the first time, to get a clear understanding of what it is that parents want in education provision for their children. The curriculum is the same and is taught the same irrespective of what school they are in, but for all of the other areas I mentioned, we have not ever had a survey of this kind where we are surveying parents of over 800,000 young people. It is important we get that information.

To give some context, the number of young people in co-educational schools is at 90%. Only 10% are same-sex schools, so that question perhaps only applies to a smaller number of people. The number of young people in our schools who are being taught through the medium of Irish is at 8%, so 92% are being taught through the medium of English. Do we want to see a greater increase or level of provision for our Gaelscoileanna? That will, hopefully, support and complement the two new strategies I am launching later this week. In relation to patronage, 95% of our schools have a religious ethos. The majority are Catholic in ethos, others are Church of Ireland, there are a small number of other schools and 5% are multi-denominational. Do we have a desire and demand from parents to provide more diverse opportunities for different types of patronages?

It is very important that as many people as possible take this survey. I encourage, within the Deputy's constituency and others, parents and guardians to take this survey so we get a clearer picture. While there are not the same percentages for post-primary schools - it is about 50:50 at the moment on patronage between multid denominational and denominational - there is potentially an opportunity after this survey to see whether there is demand in certain areas, where there is maybe a more skewed percentage, to do something similar or to ask those questions of parents as well.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister. I also thank her for launching the survey. It is an issue that impacts the Dublin City Council part of Dublin West at primary and secondary school level. The area is not served well enough in terms of access to or choice of secondary schools. Pelletstown has a Dublin 15 postcode but is not in the catchment area for Dublin 15 schools. People there live in the Cabra-Glasnevin electoral area but are in the Finglas school area. For our Dublin 7 neighbourhoods, only 40% of the children living in the area attend local schools because the geographical area is not prioritised enough in school admission policies. There simply is not enough choice, which is driving students further afield. We have two single-sex Catholic schools and a mixed non-denominational school, which is growing and growing well, but will not serve the needs of the whole community for some time. Local capacity is not serving local families. What is the plan after the primary schools? How will this impact secondary schools? Will there be a follow-on survey for secondary schools?

Deputy Helen McEntee: While this survey is for secondary schools, this will last for six weeks and then we will need time to collate that information and decide based on the responses where there needs to be further engagement with communities if there is a demand for change. On the issue of patronage, there is not the same breakdown that we might see in primary schools. About 50% of our post-primary schools are denominational and about 50% are non-denominational. However, I accept that in certain areas that is not the case and there is not as much choice for parents. There is validity in looking beyond this survey and potentially looking at certain areas to survey or to engage parents and see if there is a demand for particular changes in those areas.

We are doing this survey in the way that we have done because previously any surveys that were done were done on a smaller scale and they did not work as effectively. We have to take that into consideration in any type of survey or any type of engagement with post-primary schools. Certainly it is something that we need to keep open. We need to engage with schools, parents and communities on the matter and I am very much open to that.

Deputy Emer Currie: I would also like to give a voice to those parents in terms of post-primary choice.

I take the opportunity to mention funding resources for special schools. I thank the Minister for the increase in the capitation grant in the budget. It is something that we had discussed at the education committee and I know it was on her agenda. I am always pushing for more resources. As I have mentioned previously, on the allowances for special schools, they may have 70 staff but the allowances for principals are based on how many teachers they have, whereas special school could have 70 staff made up of SNAs, escorts, cleaning staff and caretakers. They obviously then do not get those allowances. One of the suggestions coming

from our principals is the introduction of an AP1 for special schools because that would help manage all the staffing. If such a school had 70 teachers, it would have a huge staffing team to manage that but special schools do not have that and they really need it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I acknowledge the Deputy's absolute commitment to supporting our special schools and supporting children with additional needs. Working with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, I was really pleased to have been able to secure additional funding in the budget. There was an anomaly there when students reached the age of 12 that they were not receiving the capitation funding that other students in mainstream schools were getting. It is important that was levelled and that anomaly was changed. The Minister of State and I are open to looking at further ways in which we can support our special schools and support the staff in the schools in particular.

Yesterday I was in Cara Community School, a new special school opened in my constituency with fantastic staff and teams there. We need to make sure that we are doing everything to support those teachers in what can often be a challenging but really rewarding and a really important school environment. I am very much open to looking at how we can support those working in the schools and whether there are changes or introductions of new posts or levels that we can provide that would take some of that pressure off and support those schools in different ways.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

School Facilities

7. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the position regarding funding opportunities for primary schools to provide new outdoor recreation facilities and upgrade existing outdoor spaces; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [59373/25]

Deputy Barry Ward: My question is about the provision of funding for outdoor recreational facilities such as playgrounds and open space, but also provision for new ones and the maintenance of existing ones. What are the opportunities for primary schools in particular?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Investment and expenditure on sports facilities in both primary and post-primary schools is an element of the overall expenditure and investment in the schools building programme. Practically all schools have outdoor play areas although I accept that many of them vary depending on the different schools. Many schools use adjacent local community facilities and we encourage the dual use of different facilities that are close to each other. The provision of outdoor play areas forms part of the accommodation brief for all new school buildings or where a major building or refurbishment project is being delivered for an existing school. Co-operation between schools and the local sporting organisations in sharing their sporting facilities provides opportunity to apply for sport grants including the sports capital grants administered by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport. In recent years there has been huge encouragement of schools and communities in particular working with sporting clubs to have joint applications in that regard.

The provision of capital funding for outdoor recreation facilities is just one way in which we support increased physical activity. The redeveloped primary curriculum specification for physical education extends the time available for PE with a particular emphasis on community partnerships and the use of the outdoor environment generally.

Since 2020, my Department has invested over €6 billion in our schools throughout the country under the NDP, involving the completion of over 1,300 school building projects. A total of 111 of these were large-scale school projects, all of which included extensive accommodation, including outdoor play areas. In July, the Government announced a capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth for the period 2026 to 2030. As others also will, I will publish an implementation plan in that regard. My Department's plan will optimise outputs from the allocations with a strong focus on maximising existing school capacity, progressing priority projects where local capacity across schools in the area is insufficient, and ensuring delivery that is affordable, offers value for money and meets functional needs. In terms of providing further funding for the outdoor spaces, we are investing to support curricular delivery and well-being across schools by prioritising the development of PE halls and sporting facilities in conjunction with the sports capital fund to deliver for both schools and communities.

The climate action summer works scheme, along with the emergency works scheme and the minor works scheme, provides a mechanism for schools to make small-scale improvements where they have facilities that need upgrading.

Deputy Barry Ward: I acknowledge the amount that has been spent on the schools building programme and on the provision of facilities. I also recognise what the Minister said about community facilities and the importance of the provision of sports facilities. I am looking even at a more micro level and I am thinking particularly of Loreto Primary School on Loreto Avenue, Dalkey. The principal, Fíona McKenna, has been in touch with me. The school is in a relatively small area with a playground on-site. It needs repairs to the playground and is having a huge difficulty getting the funding to do that. We all recognise the importance of play facilities and the important role that plays in a rounded education for any child. The danger is that if it is not managed on an ongoing basis and, more importantly, if the schools do not have the resources to do it on an ongoing basis small things get left undone, they get worse and they get dangerous. No playground should end up unusable because of dangerous facilities and that stitch in time does indeed save nine. The way we give the stitch in time is to give the schools the resources in a timely and ready way.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Maybe I can engage with the Deputy further on the particular school. Where repairs need to be made to existing playgrounds or play spaces and certainly where there is a danger for students, schools may apply under the emergency works scheme or indeed the minor works scheme. I am pleased that under the new national development plan, NDP, funding will continue to be available for the emergency works scheme and the minor works grants. It is really important that as many schools as possible can avail of that. Over the years we have seen significant investment in schools and we need to make sure that is spread out and shared evenly across the schools.

The climate action summer works scheme provides a mechanism for schools to make small-scale improvements to school buildings but that also applies to outdoor spaces. The first

tranche of approvals under this scheme is due to be announced probably in the next two weeks. That will be a scheme that will apply and will see funding provided across all the different constituencies and we have another tranche as well. There are a number of ways in which schools can engage with the Department. Funding has been secured for the next round of NDP and it is important that schools know they are able to avail of these types of grants specifically for the reasons the Deputy mentioned.

Deputy Barry Ward: I acknowledge what the Minister said about the emergency works scheme and the minor works scheme. How does the Department prioritise one application over another? If a number of schools are asking for emergency works grants or minor works grants where they have a playground, a play facility or sports facility that is unusable, how does the Department prioritise one school over another? What can schools do to ensure they are on that list? We all recognise the importance of these facilities. I do not say this as a criticism but schools are put to the pin of their collar in terms of the resources that are available to them. They are being pulled every way. Particularly for schools in areas like my constituency, there is a danger that there might be feeling that there could be voluntary contributions that could assist schools in paying for things when the reality is they do not necessarily have access to resources that other schools do not have as well. I am concerned about the prioritisation of schools and whether there is a view that some schools do not need it which is not the case.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is essential that every school - irrespective of whether there is a perception that some can pay for more than others - has access to the minor works, emergency works and summer works schemes, as well as being able to benefit from the larger capital programme. More will apply for the summer works scheme than will get funding, so it is a matter of determining where the need is most acute and how to prioritise that. There is a system and structure within the Department, but where there is a danger to children or where there is playground equipment that cannot be used or a level of resources which means an area is unfit for children, that certainly must be taken into consideration.

What I would advise schools to do is ensure that when they are making applications, be it for emergency works or minor works, they provide as much information as possible, setting out why they need the funding. The intention is to work through the various applications as quickly as possible. The good thing about the emergency works and minor works schemes is that you do not have to apply at a particular time; you can apply as needed because, when an emergency arises, you have to be able to respond quickly. The Department tries to respond to individual applications as quickly as possible. I am happy to work with the Deputy on the school he mentioned.

Special Educational Needs

8. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on staffing issues in a school (details supplied) in County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [58318/25]

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question. The Department of education and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, are aware of the recent issues

raised by the school to which Deputy O'Sullivan referred. I can confirm that the Department and the NCSE have met and are in ongoing contact with the management of the school to ensure the needs of all students continue to be met.

As Deputy O'Sullivan knows, when a special class in a special school is established, there is an automatic allocation of one teacher and two special needs assistants per class of six students. However, the standard allocation can be increased on the basis of the profile and needs of the students enrolled. St. Gabriel's Special School currently has an enrolment of 54 students and a standard allocation of nine teachers and 18 SNAs. Additional resources, namely one teacher and 17 SNAs, supplementing the standard allocation, have been provided to the school. This is a significant increase in additional resources. The NCSE is providing advice and guidance to the school on how best to deploy staff to support the needs of the children. The Department and the NCSE also provide ongoing training opportunities to schools, particularly special schools, in order that their staff have the skills and competencies required for the level of complexity in the school environment.

I am pleased to say that in the recent budget over 860 additional special education teacher posts have been secured and over 1,700 special needs assistants, SNAs, have been provided. This will mean we will have over 46,500 teachers and SNAs working in our education system. Any school, special or mainstream, with concerns regarding the level of resources to meet the care needs of its students can contact the NCSE at any stage to seek a review of its allocation. I am aware of the issues raised earlier in the year, and we are in constant contact with the school authorities in relation to them.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I did not hear what the Minister of State said at the outset. Initially, there were nine special educational needs, SEN, teachers and 18 SNAs. The Minister of State said there was an additional SEN teacher. How many SNAs?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Seventeen.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Are they recent additions?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Right now, that is the number.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Minister of State said that the Department is in contact with the school on an ongoing basis. Has the review that was instigated upon the arrival of officials from the NCSE and the Department concluded in the school? Is there any prospect of additional resources or has it been deemed that the resources provided heretofore are sufficient? As the Minister of State said, St. Gabriel's deals in many cases, if not most, with students with severe intellectual disabilities and complex needs. Many also have autism. It is a particularly vulnerable cohort of students who need to be afforded every help we can give them. Could the Minister of State clarify if there is any further review pending or if further staff are due to be deployed to the school? As he knows, several parents were particularly upset when they received the initial email from school management stating their children could be on a temporary part-time schedule. Have those concerns been alleviated?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Officials from the NCSE and the Department met the school board of management, including the chair, and the principal on 10 October. There is ongoing engagement with the NCSE and the Department. The NCSE is arranging a follow-up meeting with the school this week to discuss the findings of the SNA review, the recommendations to support SNA resources and other related issues. I guarantee that we are working very closely. When the issues arose in early October, the Department worked very closely with the NCSE and the school authorities to ensure concerns were being adequately addressed. I very much take the Deputy's point regarding the complexity of needs within St. Gabriel's and the huge amount of work being done there to provide care and education to students. We are continuously engaging with the school. With regard to additional resources, there are the additional teacher and 17 SNAs, along with the nine teachers and the 18 SNAs, but following the review, we are continuing to ensure any further resourcing requirements of St. Gabriel's will be met.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I genuinely acknowledge the Minister of State's involvement in this. I rang him on Thursday night, when this story was about to break, and he got straight on to the school the following morning. That was appreciated by the parents and the school management.

I seek clarification on one or two more points. The Minister of State said the NCSE is due to follow up this week. I realise he is not going to disclose on the floor of the Dáil what the result of the SNA review will be, but I reiterate the requirement that probably exists. The Minister of State mentioned that there are other related issues. I am not sure if they are sensitive. If he cannot disclose what they are, could he mention the issues he can talk about on the floor of the Dáil.

One SEN teacher was appointed temporarily a number of weeks ago when this issue emerged. Is that the additional SEN teacher along with the 17 SNAs he mentioned or is it a SEN teacher in addition to that allocation?

Deputy Thomas Gould: The question here is whether the Minister of State, the principal, the board of management and the parents are satisfied that the concerns about a reduction in teaching hours for pupils have been addressed and that there is 100% certainty that there will be no such reduction? As the Minister of State knows, St. Gabriel's is a specialist school that deals with children with some of the most complex issues children can have. It is a very important school. I spoke to parents who were very upset when it looked like there would be a reduction. They were worried not about themselves but about their children. What the Minister of State said sounds good, but is it enough to guarantee that the children will get an education at the level they are entitled to? If so, I will welcome it. I just want to have the guarantee put on the record.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Deputy O'Sullivan raised various issues. The details of the review are between the board, the NCSE and the Department. Much work has been done by these three over the past month or six weeks. I pay tribute to everybody concerned, including in St. Gabriel's. They met immediately on the Friday after the Thursday night on which the issue was raised with me, and they have continued to engage.

A reduction in hours is not on the cards. We want to ensure that proper resources are allocated to St. Gabriel's to ensure it can provide care to and meet the education needs of all its 54 students. It is a matter of supporting the school with SNA resources. If there are related training or support needs, we are available to meet them. We are engaging in a very coherent way with St. Gabriel's and we will continue to meet the needs of the school authorities and, more importantly, the education and care needs of the students within the school.

Schools Building Projects

9. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to provide an update on the number of school building projects currently delayed across the State; the reasons for these delays; and the steps which are being taken to ensure children are not left learning in prefabs or overcrowded classrooms this winter. [59599/25]

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to ask the Minister about the criteria for prioritising school capital projects and about delays. It appears that a significant number of projects have been delayed. Can the Minister outline how many capital project delays there are across the country and the primary reasons therefor?

Deputy Helen McEntee: At the outset, I wish to say that my Department has a strong track record of delivery. Since 2020, my Department has invested more than €6 billion in our schools throughout the country under the national development plan. As I mentioned earlier, this involves the completion of over 1,300 school building projects. Given the fact that there are 4,000 schools across the country, the delivery of 1,300 school projects over the last number of years is a significant achievement.

In July, the Government announced a capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth out to 2030 under the national development plan. As part of this allocation, my Department will place a strong emphasis on a number of things, including the provision of special education for children and the development of new special schools. It is about making sure that our new builds have provisions for special education but also, on top of that, that there is additional accommodation within that where we need to provide special classes within mainstream schools that currently do not have them. There will be a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs. Where there is a growth in demographics, it is important that we be able to respond to that, whether it be a new building that is needed or an expansion of a current school place. For those schools not in permanent buildings, such as those in my constituency or the schools referenced earlier that are in temporary or modular accommodation, we need to ensure we are able to deliver new schools for those communities as quickly as possible.

Over 300 school building projects, including 38 new schools, are currently in construction to deliver more than 30,000 school places. Most of these projects are expected to be completed over the course of 2026 and 2027. On top of that, it is planned that approximately 80 further school building projects will progress to construction across 2026 and 2027 as part of a two-year rolling programme.

Project delivery is managed as part of an overall capital programme in line with the Government's infrastructure guidelines. Of course, we always have to take budgetary parameters into account. We do not have an infinite amount of money, so we have to make sure that the projects we have in the system are moving and we are able to progress and deliver them within the budget we have. It is fair to say that delays can happen for certain reasons and different factors, often beyond the Department's control, such as site acquisition and planning permissions. Often, we have issues, as we have seen, with tenders or contractors. Sometimes, these are issues the Department cannot mitigate, but it obviously adds to some of the delays we see in some of the projects.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I appreciate there is a significant amount of money - hundreds of millions of euro - spent on capital projects. Of course, there must be prioritisation and so on and, obviously, the need for expanding schools and special education should be an important prioritisation. However, I would appreciate it if the Minister could consider nuanced issues in schools as well. For example, Claremorris is a wonderful town with two single-sex schools. They had a consultation over several years, which the Department of education in Tullamore oversaw. There is huge support for an amalgamation of those two schools. The primary schools in Claremorris have recently amalgamated. The patrons of Mount St. Michael Secondary School and St. Colman's College are supportive, as are parents, school management and the chamber of commerce. There is a huge level of support for it. However, the Department issued notice to the schools a number of months ago outlining the criteria the Minister outlined a few moments ago, basically stating that it would not be supporting it in any sense in terms of capital infrastructure. I ask the Minister to consider that report, the demand and the choice that I know the Minister is very keen to support. I ask her-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): The Deputy can come back in. I call the Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Given the fact that there are so many schools and competing demands, there has to be prioritisation. There is a need to prioritise, firstly, special education. We need to make sure we are providing not only sufficient places for this school term, but that we are forward planning. That is why we need to look at developing more special schools. We have built 16 new schools in the past number of years, two of which are opening this week, but we did not build any for many years before that, so we need to continue to prioritise and invest in special schools, special education provision, new classrooms and additional accommodation. Where there is an actual demand for school places where they do not currently exist, we have to prioritise that.

In certain demographic areas where there is that demographic increase, be they in my county of Meath or in Kildare, Wicklow or, of course, Dublin and other counties, we have to be able to respond and cater to it. While we have to prioritise providing physical infrastructure for people where it does not exist, that is not to say that other projects will not be able to progress at different stages. There will be that prioritisation based on the fact that we have a budget, though. We are not going to be able to progress everything at the same time or maybe in the timeline that some people would like.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I appreciate that in terms of need, the budget and so on, but the point is that there is such a demand for the amalgamation of the two schools. It appears there is a one-size-fits-all, arbitrary metric when it comes to the capital infrastructure project.

Will the Minister consider meeting me and the school principals to hear some of the issues that the schools are experiencing outlined for her and consider some funding for the schools to amalgamate? There is a significant need for it to happen in terms of education. I ask the Minister, along with officials in her Department, to please meet me and the schools' principals to discuss the consultation that so people in Claremorris and, indeed, in the Minister's Department spent so many hours on. Will she meet me and the schools to discuss this project?

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is a project that I am aware of from engagement with my colleagues in the area. It is not that there is no desire for a particular project to progress or that any desire within a community is being ignored. Rather, where there are greater demands around the provision of school places, we must ensure they are prioritised ahead of areas where perhaps there already is a provision of school places, albeit not necessarily in the context or setting that pupils or the school community want. That is not to say that a project cannot progress in the future, but we have to plan out what the next number of years look like. We will continue to engage with the school community - I can say that very clearly - in the same way we engage with all of the schools that seek to develop new buildings, new infrastructure or additional accommodation schemes.

The overall capital budget is not just focused on new builds and additional accommodation. A significant proportion of it invests in minor works, summer works and emergency works. There are also ICT grants, as well as funding that is now going to be provided for our youth centres at a much higher rate than had been provided before. I am happy to engage with all schools. The Department will continue to engage with all schools, including the school the Deputy mentioned.

Public Sector Pensions

10. **Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the reason an expert report described by an assistant principal officer as significant medical evidence was not acted upon, considering it corroborated the information supplied to the teacher by an employee in the occupational health service, OHS, service (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [58433/25]

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I wish to ask the Minister about a case that affects a teacher in my constituency. I am reluctant to go into too much detail. I will await the Minister's response before I pose supplementary questions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: My Department administers pension schemes, which are provided for in legislation, for teaching staff in primary, secondary and community and comprehensive schools. One such provision of these pension schemes is the awarding of benefits under ill health retirement. There is a process in place for administering such applications that involves the completion of two forms. The first form is an application for benefits, which is returned to the pensions unit of my Department for the processing of the application. The second form

relates to the member's medical condition and must be signed by the member and his or her doctor. The doctor must provide a confidential doctor-to-doctor report to accompany the form detailing the member's diagnosis, treatment and prognosis. This form and report are returned directly to the Department's OHS provider. As this process is confidential in nature, I cannot comment on the medical evidence submitted by the person concerned or the assessment made by the OHS.

What I can say is that applicants for retirement pension benefit on medical grounds must follow this particular procedure and attend for a medical assessment with the OHS. The decision to approve or reject an application is based on the recommendation of the OHS. Medmark, the current OHS, provides independent medical assessments, ensuring that any decisions about an employee's fitness to teach are made based on expert assessment.

I understand that the pensions unit of my Department is familiar with the case the Deputy has mentioned and it has been in contact with the person concerned on several occasions. I encourage the person to engage with my officials with a view to making a fresh application for ill health retirement. This will involve a medical assessment. It is important that is part of the process, as I have outlined. I will ask my officials to consider a new application as soon as it has been received

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that response. At least by her response she is leaving the door open. It is a matter now and I will relate that to the individual to suggest that the person should make a fresh application and follow the procedure. I wish to read into the record that the board of management of the particular school made the decision regarding the granting of critical illness provision, CIP, on the basis of management discretion where exceptional circumstances existed. Appendix B of Circular 0054/2019 was used to assist the board in making its decision. The Minister mentioned the Medmark medical criteria for the granting of a CIP, but this was done by the management on the basis of exceptional circumstances. I would have thought at the time the decision was taken, on 15 December 2020, that it would have progressed quickly after that. For GDPR reasons, I will not go into any detail now on whether the Minister is able to do that. I presume there are other facts that relate to this person who has problems with dressing, meal preparation, use of technology, social and sleep. There are so many. It is possibly the worst that I have had experience of in all my years here. I will take the Minister at her word. I will recommend that a fresh application be submitted. I hope, when it is submitted, that it will be processed as expeditiously as possible to try to bring this matter to a conclusion.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will not go into detail. As the Deputy said, I do not think it would be appropriate to do so in the Chamber. The Department is aware of the case. There is obviously a very clear, independent and separate process that has to take place. I will outline that. The OHS provides employers with the occupational health advice in relation to employees. That applies not just to teachers but to SNAs and other specific non-teaching staff to assess whether they are medically fit for work. It incorporates pre-employment health assessments, it looks at sickness, absent referrals, assessments of medical fitness for work, ill-health retirement assessments and it considers whether a teacher is permanently unfit to teach. There are a number of criteria that it has to take into consideration, including the presence of a disabling illness, the prospect of future improvement or recovery, permanent and total

disability, restricted functional capacity, treatment options fully explored and various other elements. While a person may apply and be successful in one instance, that is not to say that he or she cannot apply on the basis that circumstances change. It is important, if there is a reapplication, that a medical assessment has to be provided with it. I encourage the individual in question to reengage with the Department and to reapply under the grounds I have set out.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: When this application is resubmitted, will it be assessed by the same officials? I am not casting any aspersions because I do not know who the officials are, but I suggest that the Minister recommend that a fresh pair of eyes process the application, rather than the same individuals. If it is the same individuals, they may take up the same entrenched position. My interest, and I am sure the Minister's interest, is to ensure this particular teacher gets a fair hearing. I hope the outcome will be a positive one.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is important to stress that every person gets a fair hearing. The application is made. Medmark, as the current OHS, provides independent medical assessments. Any decisions that are made on foot of those recommendations are based on expert assessment. This is not about any individual taking a particular view. There is an independent medical assessment that has to be provided. It is based on that recommendation that any decision is taken. A person's circumstances can change and in that context, if the individual in question wanted to make a new application, it could be considered if the circumstances had changed.

Oideachas trí Ghaeilge

11. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her views on the importance of promoting the provision of Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [59372/25]

Deputy Barry Ward: Baineann an cheist atá agam leis an nGaeloideachas or the importance of education trí mheán na Gaeilge. This question relates to the provision and staffing of Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ward as a cheist agus as a chuid suime sa Ghaeilge agus san oideachas lán-Ghaeilge. Tuigim an ról lárnach atá ag an gcóras oideachais chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn, agus an stádas ar leith atá ag an oideachas lán-Ghaeilge maidir le caomhnú agus neartú na teanga. I thank Deputy Ward for his question, and for his interest in the Irish language and Irish-medium education. I understand the central role the education system plays in the promotion of the Irish language and the special status of Irish-medium education in the preservation and strengthening of the language.

We have committed in the programme for Government to expand opportunities for pupils and students to attend Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí, to establish new Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí where there is demand and to support parents choosing Irish-medium education for their children. Today, we have just published a survey specifically looking at primary schools. It was really important that one of the questions in it was whether parents wanted their child or children to be taught through the medium of Irish or English. Also important in the

survey is that it is school-specific. While there might be a view that we could have made it more open-ended, making sure that it is school-specific means it can be implemented at the end of the day. If there is a very clear demand within a community for a particular school to change, it makes it easier for that community to engage with the patron to engage with the patron to bring about change.

I intend to publish a new policy for Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht on Thursday morning. In order to inform the development of the overall policy, a comprehensive public consultation process was conducted. Officials in my Department have drawn on the insights gained from this overall consultation process and from research undertaken in developing the new policy. Importantly, the new Gaeltacht policy, which was introduced a number of years ago, has been hugely successful. That was developed using the same approach that has been taken for the two new strategies, including where Irish is taught in English-medium schools and in Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí. The information from the consultation is being considered in light of extensive provision for Irish-medium education, the estimated demand in the education system, as well as issues relating to teacher supply and the Department's budgetary and legislative context.

A task force on models of provision for Irish-medium education is also being established as a key action under the policy. I will give an outline of that in my supplementary answer.

Deputy Barry Ward: I learned about the survey this morning. I welcome it. It is about giving parents the choice they need as to where their children are educated and in what circumstances they are educated. An issue I have raised with the Minister before, specifically in relation to a secondary school in Cherrywood in my constituency, is the way in which plebiscites are conducted and how the Department chooses whether there will be education through the medium of the Irish language. The community that wants Irish-language education is naturally and necessarily going to be more widely spread. The danger is that the metric the Department currently uses only focuses on a narrow geographic area when, in fact, in the case of Cherrywood, with big transport links like the Luas and buses, children can travel to a Gaelcholáiste from households in a much wider geographic area. Will the survey account for that? Will the Minister ensure that parents from a wide area get the opportunity to make that choice as well?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The survey will be based on a parent or guardian's preference. If the child is already in a school, it will relate to the current school. If the child is not in a school, it will relate to the parent or guardian's preferred choice. That is the approach that was designed to make sure the outcome can be implementable, which will be important when we get the information. We are seeing where changes and transitions are working well. The Edmund Rice Schools Trust, ERST, and the transition of its Synge Street CBS to a co-educational Gaelcholáiste from September 2026 is an example. While there might have been some teething problems, we are working very closely with the school, the teachers and the patron in particular to make sure this transition can happen.

In terms of the task force, we have not set a target because we need to understand what the demand is and, most important, how we can introduce a greater number of Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí through engaging with people. It is really important that the strategies have been worked on with the engagement of Foras na Gaeilge, an Foras Pátrúnachta, Gaeloideachas agus

Conradh na Gaeilge. I met with these organisations as a group recently to make sure that all of the issues the Deputy has raised and the concerns the organisations have about being able to roll out more school provision, as well as about how Irish is being taught in our schools and bringing back the grá for it and people's ability to converse in it, are front and centre of the strategies that will be published later on this week.

Deputy Barry Ward: I look forward to the publication of the strategy and I appreciate the work the Minister is doing. The reality currently is that every child who leaves a Gaelscoil to go to a Gaelcholáiste does not have that choice. There are not enough Gaelcholáistí to accommodate the population coming out of Gaelscoileanna. Children who have been through the primary process as Gaeilge do not have the option to continue their education to university level as Gaeilge. Is the Minister satisfied that the resources are available? We hear that the teachers are not there, but that is something that can be addressed. Will the Minister put in place real incentives, whether that is grants for university education through Irish or tax incentives for teachers teaching trí mheán na Gaeilge or in Gaelcholáistí or Gaelscoileanna for that matter?

9 o'clock

Can we please drive this so that, at the very minimum, every child who is graduating from a Gaelscoil into secondary school has the opportunity and chance to go to a Gaelcholáiste within a reasonably proximate area so they can continue that Gaeloideachas all the way through to university?

Deputy Helen McEntee: My objective is to ensure that the option is available for students. In certain areas, it is just not available to them at the moment. I accept that. The task force that is due to be established under the policy is looking to explore issues relating to the various models of Irish-medium education provision. That does not just mean the development of new schools. We have other areas and ways in which the Irish language is being provided. How do we look at best practice where it has worked well? We may need to develop and reconceptualise the current models of provision, if necessary, with a view to identifying ways to increase the provision of Irish-medium education.

The short answer is "Yes". We want to make sure that the strategy and the work of the task force identify ways in which we can provide options for students, whether through new schools or the reconfiguration of schools, through an aonad, how they have worked, how we can develop that and how can we make them work better in certain areas. However, I think we need to ensure that we have a focused strategy and plan in place with the support of everybody involved. I was pleased to find at recent meetings with the various different bodies that everybody is keen to get working and focus on how we can supply more and better provision for students.

Schools Building Projects

12. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the extension of a school (details supplied). [59597/25]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: My question relates to Scoil Garbháin, an Irish-medium school in Dungarvan, County Waterford. I am seeking an update on plans for the extension. The school got word in January this year that the long-awaited and much-needed extension had been approved. It was told in February that it would hear within six weeks from the technical team in the Department. Over nine months later, it has yet to hear despite frequent correspondence from me. I have also raised the matter with the Taoiseach. The school has raised it repeatedly with officials in the Department but its representatives are still none the wiser. The school is at capacity. It proves the point made earlier by Deputy Barry Ward about the need for Irish-medium education and the huge demand. The school is having to turn children away.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The Minister and I have set a vision to deliver a world-class education service which breaks down barriers and ensures that every child can achieve their full potential. The investment of €7.55 billion in capital funding through the national development plan in the coming years will ensure that we can deliver new school places and upgrade existing schools. It will provide a record 14,000 school places in special classes and special schools. We will continue to prioritise and deliver extra spaces in our mainstream schools through the construction of new schools and extensions.

I can confirm to the Deputy that the school in question initially submitted an application under the Department's additional school accommodation, ASA, scheme in 2018. An assessment deemed that the site was restricted and that additional lands were required to deliver this accommodation. This application was withdrawn by the school authority. A request to purchase additional lands was submitted by the school in 2021 and the acquisition of a 2.765-acre site adjacent to the school was completed at the end of May 2025. In late 2024, the school in question submitted a revised ASA application for additional accommodation to meet its future needs.

The Department's approach will be to continue to maximise the capacity of the existing school estate as much as possible in the first instance and provide necessary additional capacity through targeted and prioritised project roll-out over the course of 2026 to 2030 period to meet the most urgent and prioritised needs. A strong focus will be on maximising existing school capacity, progressing priority projects where local capacity across schools in the area is insufficient, and ensuring delivery that is affordable, offers value for money and meets functional needs. The provision of required school places, including for children with additional educational needs, is a priority for all of us in the Department.

A decision will be made in relation to the school's application for additional accommodation shortly in the context of overall programme management. This decision will take account of overall school place needs, including for children with special education needs, and in cognisance of demographic projections, capacity across schools in the area and the extent to which schools are prioritising local school place needs.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I have to say I am deeply disappointed, bemused and bewildered at the Minister of State's response. I got a copy-and-paste, generic response for half the time he was speaking and for the rest, I got a potted history of what I and others involved in the school and community know has happened. I did not get a straight answer.

I do not know how the Minister of State's response tallies with the correspondence I have seen from the Department of education. Approval was granted in January. Correspondence, an email to the principal of the school, stated that the technical team would be in touch within six weeks. That was in February this year. I do not know if we are talking about the same school. This land was purchased. The purchase was completed. I was a councillor at the time and facilitated it. It was purchased by Waterford City and County Council, as a local agent, on behalf of the Department. It was a really good scheme and I welcomed it at the time I was involved. That land is there. Talking about the demographic, the analysis and all that is, to be quite frank, rubbish. Children are being educated in partitioned areas in the sports hall, which is the one indoor facility the school has for recreation. It is not good enough. That is on top of the prefabs that are already there.

This is the only Irish-language-medium education in a town that is a baile seirbhíse Gaeltachta. The situation stands in contrast to the Minister's response to Deputy Ward about the importance of Irish-medium education, nuair nach bhfuil spás sa scoil seo gur féidir leis freastal ar an éileamh i nDún Garbhán. It is a Gaeltacht service town and the one Gaelscoil cannot meet the demand in the town.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The completion of the sale of the additional lands was completed at the end of May 2025. As I understand it, there was a huge amount of work to be done. The actual acquisition of that land, the 2.765 acres adjacent to the school, was completed at the end of May 2025. That is the clear understanding of the Department. The Department is working through the projects at the moment. I take the point that it is the coeducational primary school in Dungarvan which has the medium of Irish. Some 320 pupils were enrolled last year. The Department will be working through all the applications in the next while. This project has been ongoing for some time, going back to an initial application in 2018. However, the additional land has been bought. We will work with the Deputy. When decisions are being made, they will be communicated to the school authority as soon as possible.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I thank the Minister of State. I will engage with him further on this matter, and in writing, because I am dumbfounded and none the wiser. As the Minister of State was speaking, I checked the website of Waterford City and County Council. Planning permission was finally granted on 7 February 2025. Planning permission is in place. The land is acquired. The application was submitted in good time and there was formal approval. I have seen the correspondence and have shared it with the Minister of State. I will share it again. It is correspondence with the Department. This is simply not satisfactory and I will be taking it further. I will be bringing that documentation to the Minister of State. The school has approval from the Department. I have seen the documentation. The school was told in February, when that planning permission came through, that its representatives would hear from the technical team within six weeks to progress the project. Nine months later, they are none the wiser. Children are still being crammed into partitioned-off parts of a sports hall. It is utterly unsatisfactory.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There might be some confusion here-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I think so.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: -----as to the letters that may have been issued in January. I presume those letters that were issued by the Department referenced moving to the next stage. Not until tender documentation is assessed and everything else is done is final approval given. I have not seen the letter of February to which the Deputy referred. A lot of work needs to be done. The site has been acquired. I assure the Deputy that we will work with him. A whole raft of decisions require to be made. When those decisions are made, they will be communicated to the school authority.

Question No. 13 taken with Written Answers

Departmental Funding

14. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the amount of money that has been granted per school for ICT equipment for the school year 2025-26; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [59397/25]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: This question is about the amount of money that has been granted per school for ICT equipment for the school year 2025-26.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The world is undergoing a digital and an AI revolution and it is essential that we equip students with the skills and competencies they need to succeed and thrive in a rapidly changing world. Most young people probably are miles ahead of us in that regard already. A key part of our plan is to support schools through investment in digital technologies, in training and teacher professional development and, of course, in curriculum reform.

The digital strategy for schools to 2027 and its associated implementation plan are underpinned by €200 million in funding. That is over the lifetime of the strategy, as committed under Ireland's national development plan.

In total, and separate to that specific plan, €345 million has already been invested in schools across the country since the implementation of the first digital strategy for schools, which was commenced in 2015.

For this school year, €35 million was issued directly to schools through the grant scheme for ICT infrastructure. As part of providing clarity and certainty for schools, the minor works grant and the ICT grant will be paid annually in the December-January period, so there will be another payment either towards the end of the year or in early January for further ICT grants and this will be incorporated into the Department's grants payment calendar. It is really important schools know when they are getting the grant and I appreciate that over the past number of years it has not been the same figure and it has not happened every year, which has often caused some confusion.

In addition to capital investment, my Department will continue to support initiatives that advance digital learning in schools. We will continue to advance digital education policy and embed technology in teaching and learning. We invest €15 million annually in the schools broadband programme, which has been absolutely essential for our schools, thereby providing high-speed connectivity to all recognised schools. Through Webwise, which is funded by my

Department under the EU Internet safety initiative, we are promoting online safety, digital citizenship and media literacy among school leaders, teachers, parents and students.

While working with Oide Technology in Education as well, we will continue to support teachers with professional learning, training and resources that build digital confidence and innovation. This investment is in addition to other important curricular reform which is under way. This includes the introduction of computer science as a leaving certificate subject, the introduction of coding as a short junior cycle programme and the implementation of computational thinking as part of the new primary school curriculum.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The predictability of when funding will be made available to schools is absolutely welcome, and I know this from my own experience in some schools. To clarify again, am I correct in saying the minor works and the ICT funding will be given in December or January?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Yes.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: That is extremely good. In regard to the €35 million given to schools in May, was that funding down on last year's provision or is it the case the €35 million that was given in May and the funding that will be given in January will be placed together as the whole funding for one academic year? Alternatively, has the ICT grant funding reduced since last year? If the Minister could clarify this I would appreciate it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As I mentioned, in some years more money was provided and one year none was. I am trying to make sure that every year, schools know they are getting that grant. Over the lifetime of the strategy, €200 million has been made available. Some €50 million of that funding was provided in April 2022; zero funding was provided in the 2022-23 school year; then there was a further €50 million in April 2024; and €35 million was provided this year. From May 2025, there will be a further €35 million provided later this year and the remainder is just over €30 million and will be provided next year. That will be the full €200 million over the lifetime of the strategy, appreciating there have been variations in when and how much money has been provided.

What I am committing to with the new national development plan, in which there was a further commitment for the ICT funding and strategy, is that it will be paid on an annual basis in December-January every year and that schools will have certainty around that. I appreciate there has been a variation in how the funding has been provided but it is important to acknowledge that the €200 million that was committed to will all be paid out. There is a commitment to make sure schools receive that. What I hope to see and what I am looking for the Department to do next year, is an assessment of what schools actually have. Having invested this money, not just from this strategy but from the previous one, it is to assess what schools have, where they need upgrades and whether schools need new equipment or whether we are getting to the stage where the equipment just needs to be upgraded and we are investing to make sure the technology is up to date and the schools have exactly what they need.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: That clarifies the position of the predictability of when that funding will come through and the fact some of the €200 million fund previously in the strategy still remains and will be followed through on.

Does the Department outline guidelines to each school when it gives the ICT funding on what possible initiatives the school could use the funding for or is it totally up to the boards of management or principals of schools or people who are in post in relation to ICT equipment?

The previous Bill debated this evening was about back to school costs. In regard to the ICT equipment required by schools, is there a possibility that schools would be able to set aside a certain amount of funding they receive every year to buy pieces of ICT equipment that could be allocated to or rented out to students? The Minister might not be able to answer that question now but it could be clarified at some other time.

Deputy Helen McEntee: On the Deputy's first question, I mentioned briefly that we have Oide Technology in Education. This is a Department-funded support service that specifically promotes, but importantly supports, the embedding of digital technology, so it is looking at teaching and learning across post-primary and primary schools. It provides a range of free online courses that are available to school teachers and school leaders on certain things such as security for schools and AI for schools. It supports awareness of and confidence in emerging technologies, leading digital learning and developing a digital learning plan for schools. It gives teachers support in what they use the funding for and how they present that. There are courses on strengthening leadership and planning; and coding and computational thinking using Scratch, promoting creativity and problem-solving at a primary level. That is now very much embedded in the primary school curriculum. Schools are doing this, as I have seen during visits to schools over the past couple of months. There is a course in digital technology for modern foreign language teachers as well with that particular emphasis at primary school level, enhancing learning through technology. There are supports, advice and guidance there.

In terms of the Deputy's second question on how funding can or should be provided, it is really important to get an assessment and understanding of what schools have at the moment based on the funding provided to date and on whether we need to be more targeted or to do it in a different way as we look to the next strategy.

School Funding

15. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the steps her Department is taking to address the growing financial pressures facing schools, particularly in relation to the rising costs of heating, electricity, and day-to-day operational expenses; if increased funding will be made available to ensure schools can continue to function effectively and safely through the winter months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [59750/25]

Deputy Peter Roche: What steps are the Department taking to address the growing financial anomalies, difficulties or pressures facing many schools, particularly in relation to the rising costs of heating, electricity, and day-to-day operational expenses that any school would incur?

Will increased funding will be made available in those circumstances for schools that want to continue to function effectively and safely through the winter months?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Like the Deputy, I am acutely aware of pressures schools can be under and the subsequent pressure on parents and the school community. That is why the Government is committed to increasing funding to support schools. The programme for Government very clearly commits to increasing capitation funding to schools of all types to ensure that schools can meet the elevated day-to-day running costs. They are not immune to the increasing costs we have seen across the board.

The commitment in the programme for Government builds on the progress which has been made in recent years. This year specifically, my Department secured €39 million in budget 2026 towards increased capitation funding. This is on a permanent basis so instead of once-off funding, this will go directly into the base for primary, post-primary and special schools. There has also been an increase for the DEIS urban band 1 schools, where there is a particular challenge. We have seen an increase in the standard capitation rates to schools of €50 per pupil for primary schools and €20 per student for post-primary schools. We have also allowed for the increase of €20 in capitation rates for the DEIS urban band one schools and the increased capitation rates will now also see special schools receiving the same rates of capitation rates for young people aged 12 years and over.

The increases announced in budget 2026 are in addition to the 12% increases as part of budget 2025. In the last three budgets there has been an overall increase of 49.7%. That said, I appreciate there is more work we need to do and more support we need to provide.

We need to look at how we permanently reduce the costs and one of the ways I believe we can do that is to look at our energy costs. A photovoltaic, PV, solar programme has been rolled out across many of the schools and, already, the feedback I am getting from the schools I have been engaging with is that schools are starting to see a reduction in their overall energy bills. It is really important we can permanently reduce the cost for schools.

My Department is looking at a body of work to assess the overall data within schools to examine what are the actual costs, where are the hidden costs that maybe we do not see every day that can emerge and add a significant challenge to schools if they are not planned for or pre-empted and of course there is the pressure that this places on the school. Separate from that is the financial support services unit, which specifically engages and works with schools when they are in difficulty. The unit can advance particular payments to schools to help them during difficult times. I encourage any school in that situation to make sure it engages with the section and with the particular groups involved.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): I thank the Minister. I apologise to Deputy Roche but our time for this session is up. As agreed on the Order of Business earlier, we must move on to Topical Issue Matters.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): 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 Erin McGreehan - To discuss the opening of an additional train station in County Louth.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss lack of critical infrastructure and investment in Kildare north.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the post for radiographer clinical specialist ultrasound at Louth County Hospital.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the progression of an east-coast naval base in Dún Laoghaire.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss the recent court decision regarding the wastewater connection for the Ennis Plaza.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss ongoing service issues following the roll-out of phase 7 of Bus Connects in Dublin 9 and 11.

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss the withdrawal of funding for CCTV in Moyross, Limerick city.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the ban on turf cutting in Barroughter, Clonmoylan and Ardraigue bogs in County Galway.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss provision of an integrated homeless health hub in Cork city.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss challenges to biodiversity in the upper tributaries of the Fearle river in Kerry.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the requirement for a drive through test lane in light vehicle CVRT centres.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the urgent need for additional SNA support at Scoil Cholmcille, Skryne, County Meath.

Deputies Conor D. McGuinness and David Cullinane - To discuss the Irish Coast Guard SAR aviation service.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss wandering and malnourished horses in urban areas of Limerick.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the impact of defective blocks.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the NOAC performance indicators 2024 and actions to improve local authority outputs.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss the timeframe for delivery of a permanent special school in County Monaghan.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for immediate intervention and humanitarian assistance in Sudan.

The matters raised by Deputies Ruairí Ó Murchú, Barry Ward, Conor Sheehan, Paul McAuliffe and Louis O'Hara have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Naval Service

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, for coming to the House to deal with this important issue, which relates to the progression of a naval base at Dún Laoghaire. The Minister of State will be aware that in recent years Ireland has procured two coastal patrol vessels from the New Zealand navy. These are in the possession of the Irish Naval Service. One of them, the *LÉ Aoibhinn*, is currently docked in Dún Laoghaire Harbour. I understand that the plan is that they will be used as coastal patrol vessels in the Irish Sea and along the east coast. It seems that the perfect place to base them in those circumstances is Dún Laoghaire Harbour, which is accessible at all points of the tide. This means there is 24-hour access for ships like that in and out of Dún Laoghaire Harbour. It is not a busy commercial harbour, so it is not going to interfere with operations in the way it might in larger, busier harbours like Dublin Port, for example, or some of the other large commercial ports along the east coast. Dún Laoghaire is also close to Dublin, midway along the east coast, so it will be an easy point from which to service the whole of the Irish Sea.

Equally, it is a very important opportunity to take what is a valuable heritage asset for the State and make it useful in serving the State. Dún Laoghaire Harbour is over 200 years old. It is an enormous Victorian harbour with lots of space. Over the past number of years, it has ceased its commercial function in many respects. The Stena Line had served as a link between Dún Laoghaire and Holyhead, but it ceased operations in 2015. Since then, there has been a need for great investment in the harbour. It is primarily a leisure port, but this does not mean it does not have capacity to do that. The old ferry terminal building is vacant. More importantly, there is a pier there which is unused at the moment. It would require a bit of infrastructural investment to make the pier usable by the Naval Service. There is a real opportunity to make Dún Laoghaire Harbour that base.

I do not know if plans have been finalised in this regard. I am asking the Minister of State for an update. I have been in touch with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, which owns and operates Dún Laoghaire Harbour as one of its subsidiaries. I know there has been some discussion, but I am not sure what stage this is at.

From the point of view of the Naval Service in the first instance, this is the perfect match in view of the fact that the harbour is equipped to deal with such vessels such as those in question, particularly in light of its geographic location and the fact that it can facilitate easy access to the Irish Sea for the one or two patrol vessels to do the job they need to do. We know that the Naval Service needs to build up capacity in this regard.

In tandem with this, there is also a real opportunity for Dún Laoghaire, which has in some respects lost its greater function, to be more than just a leisure harbour. It is wonderful at that,

as I can attest, but it can do so much more for the Irish State and the community adjacent to it by facilitating the *LÉ Aoibhinn* and perhaps other vessels in berthing there and in patrolling the Irish Sea.

I absolutely support at least getting to level of ambition 2, referred to in the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, and going further. This has to be part of that. I know the Minister of State will agree that there are massive deficits in our lines of defence. One does not have to be gung ho on militarisation to understand that as a militarily non-aligned country, we have to have the capacity to defend ourselves. The function these ships can perform is a defensive one, but it also involves patrolling and carrying out customs, fisheries and drug trafficking enforcement. There is so much work to be done in that regard by the Irish Naval Service. Those in the service have enormous skill sets. We need to work to bulk these up in order to make sure that the service can do the job to which I refer. We also need to provide the service with a base from which its vessels can operate. Dún Laoghaire Harbour seems to be the perfect place to do that. Will the Minister of State provide an update on where the negotiations stand or on whether a decision has been made in respect of this matter?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I am responding on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence, who, unfortunately, cannot be present. He asked me to pass on his apologies to the House. On his behalf, I welcome the opportunity to respond on this matter and thank Deputy Ward for his question.

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the long association between the Naval Service and Dún Laoghaire. There is a long-standing tradition of Naval Service ships using harbours and piers on the east coast for shelter and shore leave. The Report of the Commission on Defence Forces calls for the development of an east-coast base for the Naval Service. Reflecting this, the programme for Government has also recognised the need for an east-coast base. In that regard, the Naval Service has been asked to submit a fully worked-up business case setting out full infrastructure requirements for marine and support-related elements.

As the Deputy will be aware, the issue of an east-coast base has been discussed in the context of the inshore patrol vessels, IPVs, *LÉ Aoibhinn* and *LÉ Gobnait*. These IPVs were acquired with a particular focus on east-coast operations, where they are well suited to key missions like the protection of critical infrastructure. With the *LÉ Aoibhinn* becoming operational in 2024, the then Tánaiste gave approval to lease berthage in Dún Laoghaire Harbour to support east-coast operations in the short term, likely for a period of five years. With that in mind, the Department has been in discussions with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, the owner of Dún Laoghaire Harbour, regarding the possibility of leasing berthage for exclusive use by the Naval Service. I am advised that discussions are well advanced and agreement in principle has been reached.

A Naval Service regeneration plan is due to be submitted for the Tánaiste's consideration. This plan has been devised on foot of a detailed workshop held between senior military officers, led by the Chief of Staff, and senior officials in the Department. The issue of additional naval bases, on the east coast or elsewhere, will be considered in the context of that awaited plan and recommendations arising from same.

Deputy Barry Ward: I am glad to hear that work is continuing apace. I am glad to hear there is an agreement in principle. We have an opportunity here and one of the things we are lucky to have as a State is a team of committed people, not just in Óglaigh na hÉireann but specifically in the Naval Service. We do need to make it into a navy. We need to give it the equipment and the personnel necessary to operate as a navy, thereby allowing it to serve the people of this country and patrol our waters. More than most countries in the European Union, Ireland has an enormous exclusive economic zone relative to our territorial space. There is a real job to be done here. We have spent quite a lot of time discussing the level of ambition that was set out in the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces. It is now time to put that into action.

I appreciate that we have increased spending on the military and on defence. We have increased the level of expenditure by 50% in the past six years. I recognise the new ambition set out in the budget. If we seriously expect people not to leave Óglaigh na hÉireann and go into other careers that might be more lucrative or, more importantly, if we expect people to join Óglaigh na hÉireann and commit themselves to serving this country, then we have to make it worth their while. We have to ensure that the facilities are there for them, that the terms and conditions are there for them, that the equipment is there for them and that we have enough people to serve on the vessels we have in order to ensure that those vessels can do the job they have to do.

The vessels to which I refer do not come cheap. Buying two inshore patrol vessels from the New Zealand navy and then not operating them is madness in the extreme. Let us make sure we address this and that we deliver for the Defence Forces and the people who serve in them. As I said, one of the ways we can do that, and I hope this is something that will come to fruition sooner rather than later, is to guarantee that Dún Laoghaire Harbour will be the base for the two inshore patrol vessels, namely, *LÉ Aoibhinn* and *LÉ Gobnait*. It makes sense to do so and I hope the Department will commit to doing it with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.

Deputy Robert Troy: As previously outlined, the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces called for the development of an east coast base for the Naval Service. While IPVs can currently operate from Haulbowline, it is a strategic goal of the Defence Forces to develop a forward-operating base on the east coast. I agree with Deputy Ward on the need for the Government to start implementing some of the recommendations outlined by the commission.

In the short term, the Department has engaged with the county council to agree terms for the use of Carlisle Pier, with agreement in principle reached. The securing of berthage facilities in Dún Laoghaire will support the operational activity of the inshore patrol vessels, particularly in patrolling the east coast. The Naval Service regeneration plan is awaited to provide further insight. The potential location of any future east coast base will be considered in the context of that plan and recommendations arising from it. I will be sure to relay Deputy Ward's very positive contribution this evening to the Tánaiste. I am sure he has made the same points to him both publicly and privately in recent times.

Closed-Circuit Television Systems

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue. There is a comprehensive network of CCTV cameras in Limerick. It was established as a direct response to a number of public order challenges in the city. The CCTV is a key pillar in the Limerick regeneration framework implementation plan, LRFIP, which followed on from the Fitzgerald report. This was the flagship Government programme to deal with the significant issues that existed, and still exist, in Limerick's regeneration communities. In essence, it was devised as a consequence of the Fitzgerald report, which was commissioned after some depraved individual burnt out a car with two children in the back of it in Moyross in 2006.

Limerick city's CCTV system is one of the very good and positive outcomes we have had from regeneration. It is one of the best in the country. The framework and governance are widely acknowledged to be quite good. It was funded by the Department of housing, which gave €880,000 in 2024 for regeneration area CCTV. We acknowledge and accept that regeneration is being wound up. In 2024, Limerick City and County Council made a formal approach to the Department of justice to seek replacement funding, but no allocation was secured. In 2025, Limerick City and County Council and An Garda Síochána submitted a joint business case via the Garda Commissioner for inclusion in budget 2026. To date, no replacement funding has been approved.

Due to the ongoing uncertainty, the company that runs the CCTV has now issued its staff with protective notice. The implications of this are really grave for us in Limerick. I cannot overstate how revolutionary the network of CCTV cameras has been in policing terms. We have a 70% prosecution rate for a couple of thousand serious incidents and a very high rate of guilty pleas and convictions. I am very worried that we have had several serious incidents in Limerick in the past year alone. I am really afraid that we are going backwards. There have been 17 shootings in the past year and 11 very serious violent incidents on the south side.

We had a welcome allocation of 20 extra gardaí in the August-September allocation. However, if this scheme is wound down, it will, in effect, nullify that allocation in one fell swoop. I am not the one saying this; it is coming from senior gardaí. The Minister for justice said earlier that he hopes a solution can be found after meeting with the Mayor of Limerick. My colleague Senator Dee Ryan has raised this issue in the Seanad as well. We need a permanent solution because the safety and well-being of the people of Limerick are at risk if the scheme is wound down or the cameras have to be turned off. We also have CCTV approved for the Castletroy greenway, for Garryowen and for Rathkeale in the county. Garryowen is one of the biggest policing blackspots in the city.

These schemes are in jeopardy if the Department of justice does not put a permanent funding solution in place. We are talking about €600,000 or €700,000. We are not talking about millions or billions of euro. The Government put billions of euro into regeneration. If this funding is refused, we will be put back years. Limerick is a special case. If a fund does not exist, the Minister needs to find or create one. Without Department-led funding, the council will be forced to reduce the monitoring and maintenance and eventually will be forced to turn off some or all of the cameras. This is a big policing and public safety issue.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I understand the Ministers, Deputies O'Callaghan and Browne, met with Mayor Moran today to discuss this matter. The fact that meeting took place indicates how serious the matter is being taken by all

who attended it. I commend Mayor Moran on coming to meet directly with the two Ministers. I am hopeful a solution can be found in the short term to the funding issues that arise to keep the CCTV scheme running. In fairness to both Ministers, they are anxious to see a solution and identified to Mayor Moran what they believe is the short-term solution.

I recognise Deputy Sheehan's interest in continuing to invest in CCTV to build safer, more secure communities. I thank him for his very positive contribution. Community safety is a top priority for the Government and the Department of justice. Everyone has a right to be safe and to feel safe in their communities. Community CCTV plays an important role in achieving that goal. It is important to note that there are a number of CCTV systems operating in Limerick. I understand the particular system referred to by the Deputy, and, as he alluded to, by Senator Dee Ryan, was established under the regeneration programme in Limerick approximately ten years ago as part of a much broader initiative to improve the quality of life of local communities in Limerick. I understand that, to date, the majority of funding for this CCTV scheme has come from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage as part of the regeneration projects in Limerick, with a significant contribution also being made by Limerick City and County Council. I also understand the CCTV system concerned consists of approximately 240 cameras, with an operating cost for 2024 of more than €800,000. As such, the infrastructure in place in Limerick is well outside the scope of the grant aid scheme administered by the Department of justice which supports community groups wishing to establish community-based CCTV systems in their local area. Grants up to a maximum of €40,000 are available for capital expenditure and up to €5,000 for maintenance under the scheme.

CCTV is very much part of community safety and it is intended that as the new local community safety partnerships are established, they will take a view on the need for additional CCTV in their areas. In addition, under the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Act 2023, the Garda Commissioner will have a significant role to play in the approval of CCTV schemes into the future. It goes without saying that the Government is very much aware of the value of CCTV generally in keeping people safe and ensuring they feel safe. Insofar as this particular scheme is concerned, I hope it will be possible for it to continue to operate as it has done over the past decade.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister of State. It might seem like it takes a lot of money to run the Limerick scheme compared with community CCTV schemes, particularly in more compact areas. However, Limerick is a unique place and not just because I am saying it is. It is unique because, unfortunately, we have eight of the top ten most deprived areas in the State. We have some of the best but poorest communities in the entire country. Those communities need extra support. They got that extra support through regeneration, which is now being wound down. There must be a mechanism devised by which the funding that was in the Department of housing, and it is not within that Department's competence to be funding CCTV, can be transferred to the Department of justice because this is a policing and public safety issue. Ultimately, it also a cost-saving issue because it reduces the cost of investigation, it reduces the cost to the Courts Service because we have a higher than average guilty plea rate and it takes bad faith actors off the street. I always think of a woman in her late 70s called Rose Hanrahan who was murdered in December 2017 in Thomondgate in Limerick. If it was not for these cameras, Rose's murderer would not have been apprehended, charged and

convicted. It was done because the vile individual who set upon Rose that night was caught on this system of cameras.

At the moment, I am very worried there are the seeds of a feud in Limerick again. We really need these cameras to deal with that properly. We need a proper, long-term funding solution from Government.

Deputy Robert Troy: I again thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter. As I said, the Government recognises the important role that CCTV plays in building stronger, safer communities across the country. The importance of this matter is demonstrated by the meeting held today between the Mayor and the two relevant Ministers. Since 2017, the Department of justice has administered a grant aid scheme supporting groups wishing to establish a community-based CCTV system in their area. To date, grants totalling over €950,000 have been approved for 36 community schemes across the country. This includes 14 schemes across County Limerick, which have received funding of over €330,000. Under this grant aid scheme, funding is only provided for the cost of equipment. Staffing costs are not covered and the maximum grant under the scheme is €45,000.

As has been indicated, the operation of infrastructure that has been developed in Limerick and has to date been funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Limerick City and County Council is unfortunately outside the scope of the grant aid scheme administered by the Department of justice. However, it is my understanding that there are local authority CCTV schemes operating in both Dublin and Cork, and possibly elsewhere, that are funded by local authorities. As such, it seems appropriate that the funding requirements for the continued operation of the CCTV system in Limerick need to be again considered by Limerick City and County Council and the Department of housing to ensure the funding arrangements for the CCTV system in Limerick city are placed on a sustainable footing.

The Deputy has made some valid points here this evening and I assure him they will be relayed back to the two relevant Ministers who met Mayor Moran earlier today.

Bus Services

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It is with huge regret that I raise the issue of the organisation of bus routes in my area here in the Dáil Chamber with the Minister of State. It is something that, between the NTA and the operators of those buses, should not come to the floor of the Dáil. We know BusConnects has been controversial in many places where it has rolled out. It has proven so in the latest phase, phase 7, in the areas of Finglas and Glasnevin that it has impacted. From 19 October, the 9, 83, 140, 40 and 40b were replaced with the new bus routes 23, 24, F1, F2 and F3. While the consultation was done over an extended period, there was dissatisfaction with the routes.

As in any change process, some people will be happy and others will be unhappy, but there are a number of very simple changes that could have been made to address the issues. However, in the three weeks since the implementation occurred on 19 October, the routes alone are no longer the issue. There has been an absolutely calamitous roll-out of the service over the past three weeks - one of those weeks being the midterm week, when many children were away from school and not using the service. Whatever about people getting used to new routes or

trying to find new ways of getting to work or arranging their school runs and so on, the reduced frequency on these routes is now the biggest issue. When you put the failure of certain buses to turn up on top of that, people are waiting, on average, between 30 and 40 minutes, according to the emails I have received. I have received nearly 100 emails in the past three weeks on this issue.

For example, the new 23 and 24 routes have a reduced frequency. Instead of the bus service being much more frequent, at 10 or 15 minutes, we are now down to 20 minutes. If one of those buses does not turn up, in the morning times children go out for a 8.10 a.m. bus and are not getting that bus until nearly 8.40 a.m. or 8.45 a.m.. They are late for school despite having been at the bus stop for an hour. I am talking about a 15-minute journey here. This is something that should not occur because there is demand for that service and the frequency should be there to meet it. I am getting reports of bus stops with 15 to 20 people waiting on buses. When the bus arrives, there is no room for people to get on. This is happening very early in the route. It might happen at the second or third stop on the route.

The NTA should be able to resolve these issues with the provider, in this case Dublin Bus, but I am really disappointed with the response of the NTA. It has not reacted to what is clearly an issue around service delivery. It has not reacted to the bedding-in problems and tried to address them. From the feedback of the constituents who have been in touch with me, they are very dissatisfied. This is basic stuff. People plan their day around the bus service. This bus service worked for many years but now, as a result of the changes, there are people being late to work and missing connections and there is the core problem of the routes not servicing the areas that were previously serviced. I will cover that in a moment. At the very least, if Dublin Bus and the NTA are going to implement new services, the frequency should be appropriate to the demand. There should not be extensive numbers of people at bus stops. There should not be limited space on a bus early in the route and there should not be missing buses. A very basic provision of services is needed.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for raising this important topic, which I am taking on behalf of our colleague the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. From the outset, I clarify that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the National Transport Authority. The NTA works with the public transport operators, which deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters.

That said, I reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2026 the Department of Transport secured €940 million of funding for public service obligation, PSO, and TFI Local Link services. That was a significant 43% uplift, an increase from €658.4 million in 2025. BusConnects is a transformative programme of investment in the bus system, providing better bus services across our cities. It is the largest investment in the bus system in the history of the state and is managed by the NTA. The aim of the network is to improve the existing Transport for Ireland system through enhanced services with high frequency spines and new local, orbital and radial routes.

The recently launched F spine, providing routes F1, F2, and F3 as part of phase 7 of the BusConnects network redesign, introduces high-frequency 24-hour bus services - routes F1, F2 and 80 - on key corridors, enhancing connectivity between areas such as Tallaght, Finglas, Charlestown and the city centre. This redesign under phase 7 of BusConnects also introduced new radial services - routes 23, 24, 73 and 82 - and the new local route - route L89 - to streamline the network and make services more efficient. The NTA has advised that in advance of these new routes being implemented it distributed over 200,000 booklets to households across all the areas covered by the routes. It also advertised the new services in local media outlets and online, and it provided detailed briefings to local public representatives.

Separately, the NTA reported a technical fault in the Dublin Bus priority system, which adjusts traffic light signals to ease bus movement. The system malfunctioned for three consecutive days, causing unforeseen delays and significant frustration for customers. The issue was resolved last Wednesday and performance is expected to steadily improve. This issue was separate from the BusConnects new service roll-out, but it impacted all affected Dublin bus routes. The performance of all public transport operators is monitored by the NTA as part of the contractual arrangements in place between it and the operators. Importantly, these contractual arrangements allow not only for the monitoring of performance by the NTA and the publication of its annual performance reports, but also for the imposition of financial penalties where performance does not meet the required standards. Improvements are also being introduced to the vehicle location system and real-time passenger information, all of which will improve the reliability of the system. The NTA informed the Minister that it is carefully monitoring capacity and reliability during these early days of the new services and will continue to monitor situations, adjusting where appropriate. I am conscious that is not the experience the Deputy had, though.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister of State. I am reassured that the NTA has said it will monitor frequency because anybody who has seen any of the bus stops or any of the buses being used will see that an increase in frequency is required. I am certain it is going to have to respond because of the level of demand. The difficulty is how long will it take the NTA to take that action.

I know BusConnects is controversial in different areas. I have encountered that in some areas and it involves some compromises at times. There are positive elements to the service, such as two new 24-hour bus routes, additional new services, connections to the Luas and so on. However, it is the basic design of the service that many people were very disappointed with. There is no longer a local connection between west Finglas and south Finglas, with many people living in one area but their children in school in the other. Routes Nos. 23 and 24 no longer serve the north city centre - the O'Connell Street area - so people from the area are now dropped off at George's Street or Merrion Square, which are miles away from the traditional shopping areas that they would have gone to in Henry Street or Mary Street. There is now no bus service operating in the Beneavin Road area, particularly where it interacts with Glasnevin Avenue. The diversion of the former No. 9 bus from a road that has a bus lane onto Ballygall Road East which does not have a bus lane, makes absolutely no sense. Finally, the east Finglas and Glasnevin area now no longer have a connection to places like Na Fianna, Scoil Mobhí and the Glasnevin-Drumcondra area. They are the structural route issues and I can work with the NTA on those, but what we cannot do is roll out a new service and fail to deliver the

proposed service or roll out a new service and provide a less frequent or lower capacity service. This is a matter that the NTA will have to address. In asking the Minister of State this question, the NTA will have had to have prepared a response to input into the Department. I hope doing so was a call for action.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Deputy is right. Transport connectivity and reliability are critical for the people who live, work and study in Ireland. They are essential to encourage people out of cars and onto public transport. In the latest progress report published in March this year, the BusConnects Dublin programme has shown significant improvements in key performance indicators. There has been an annualised increase of 9.35 million, or 75%, in scheduled service kilometres in the NRD phase 1 F1 to 5B compared to equivalent routes operating prior to the NRD project. Passenger boardings on routes in the NRD phase 1 to 5B increased by 40% when compared with Dublin metropolitan bus routes that have not yet been altered in the redesign network. Overall, the redesign routes saw a 48% increase in passenger boardings while other routes experienced an increase of 8%. Additionally, the interim analysis indicates that 12% more places of employment are now reachable within 30 minutes with the redesign network compared with the pre-BusConnects network. This is moving the network towards the 18% place of employment reachability target.

It should be noted that the F spine, which is part of the BusConnects Dublin area NRD, was finalised following three rounds of public consultation that culminated in more than 72,000 submissions being received. The overall network represents a major investment in enhanced bus services, delivering a 35% increase in annual in-service kilometres, a significant increase in overall capacity and frequency for customers, as well as more evening and weekend services. The NTA will continue collaborating with operators and customers to enhance the punctuality and reliability of services throughout the NRD. Further, through initiatives such as the capacity improvement programme and implementation of ticketing techniques, the NTA is taking steps to enhance capacity and improve the overall travel experience for passengers.

I want to assure the Deputy that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will relay the concerns raised on the floor of the Dáil tonight to the NTA to ensure a timely intervention and take on board the early teething problems, which we hope is all they are, to the new bus route.

Hospital Staff

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank everyone who facilitated me to do this. I have just made my way up from the civic reception in Dundalk to celebrate the Louth Ladies Gaelic Football Association, the Louth senior team and the under-20 team after a spectacular year. Hopefully, there will be more of that to come. I had to leave Jarlath Burns and Marty Morrissey, but this is obviously an incredibly important issue.

This Topical Issue arises from the retirement of the clinical specialist sonographer in ultrasound at Louth County Hospital in Dundalk. The position was advertised in the summer and there were a number of applications, but there has been no progress in filling the position. There is now serious concern among the staff and public that the position will not be filled at the hospital and that the service, which has been incredibly well used over the years and is growing in demand year on year, will be run without on-site management. This situation is not

recommended by the Irish Institute of Radiography and Radiation Therapy, IIRRT, which recommends that there be a clinical specialist sonographer working on site, especially in a hospital the size of Louth County Hospital. This is because such staff play a vital role in managing and supervising the unit.

The previous clinical specialist sonographer in ultrasound at the Louth hospital was the only full-time radiographer who worked in ultrasound at the hospital. Her retirement leaves vacant three-and-a-half posts, two of which also look after all other scanning such as general X-ray, CT and DXA. A fourth person is due to start at the Louth hospital in January but it will still mean that two of the four at the Louth hospital will be basic-grade radiographers.

To put it in perspective, the HSE's own numbers are stark. The recently retired clinical specialist sonographer completed 2,000 ultrasounds herself at the Louth hospital in 2024. In the first ten months of this year until her retirement, she had completed 1,465. At the same time, the waiting list for ultrasounds in the hospital's group is the largest it has ever been, with 5,000 outpatient appointments needed at the moment and 35 referrals a day coming into the Louth hospital. The total number of ultrasounds done in Louth County Hospital in 2024 was 7,825, up from 7,608 in 2023.

The real scandal is that there has been considerable outsourcing of ultrasound scans happening in the north east of the State for many years, with 5,348 ultrasounds done in one private clinic in 2024 alone. Many of these scans are being recorded by HSE radiologists, which they are allowed to do under their HSE contracts. The public waiting list continues to grow and the outsourcing of ultrasounds to private clinics where the HSE is paying a huge amount of money grows also. Instead of putting in jeopardy the ultrasound service at Louth County Hospital, the HSE should be developing it. The best equipment is there but there are two rooms that are not being used to their full capacity due to lack of staff at the hospital.

Four years ago, a radiologist was on site at Louth County Hospital. Now, there is none. Instead, they are on the phone. It cannot be the case that a clinical specialist position at Louth County Hospital remains unfilled. The clinical specialist sonographer not only does the bulk of the ultrasound scanning but also does the organisation of the list, the management of the service to the public and the oversight and training of other scanning staff. As per guidance from the IIRRT, it is not best practice to run an ultrasound scanning service for Louth County Hospital without a clinical specialist sonographer being on site.

There are real fears that the whole ultrasound service will be downgraded and frittered away until there is no service. Everything that is needed in order to continue the great service that was being done before the retirement of the clinical specialist sonographer is there, except for the replacement sonographer. Ironically, Louth County Hospital was the first hospital in the State to get a clinical specialist in ultrasound when the service was established all those years ago. It cannot be the case that it does not get one now when it needs it more than ever.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising this issue and giving me an opportunity to speak to it. I am advised by the HSE that a clinical specialist radiographer vacancy has arisen in Louth County Hospital, Dundalk.

10 o'clock

A recruitment process to fill this vacancy has commenced, a number of applications have been received and interviews for this position are due to take place later this month.

I am assured by the HSE that while this recruitment process is ongoing there will be no disruption to patient care or service delivery. All clinical services continue to operate as normal, ensuring that patients and service users experience no change in access, quality, or continuity of care. I also understand that enhanced governance arrangements are being implemented for this position. These are designed to strengthen oversight, improve co-ordination and ensure clearer lines of accountability across LCH and Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda.

As the Deputy will be aware, LCH is part of the HSE Dublin and North East Health Region. In conjunction with Our Lady of Lourdes, Drogheda these hospitals operate with an integrated managerial and clinical governance system, care pathways and support functions. These hospitals are planning for the future to safeguard against increasing demand including anticipated population growth, particularly among those aged over 75.

To meet this challenge, projects have been developed in LCH which include theatre access for ear, nose and throat procedures and a Uroflow clinic for urology services. Additionally, a new procedure room will open in 2026 to enhance day services. These developments complement the already significant investments in Drogheda. There has also been an introduction of additional consultant coverage during weekends, extended consultant presence on weekdays and public holidays and expanded specialist availability to support inpatient care and consultations. Likewise, enhanced access to key diagnostics, including imaging at weekends will accelerate treatment pathways.

More broadly, I would like to outline the positive developments in LCH and Drogheda. This Government is committed to building on the significant investment and improvements made at both hospital sites. This significant investment is demonstrated by the 39% increase in the budget for LCH since 2020. In 2025, the budget was over €31 million, an increase from €23 million in 2020. In the same period, there was a 48% increase in the budget for Drogheda. In 2025, the budget was over €303 million, an increase from €204 million in 2020.

The Acute Inpatient Bed Capacity Expansion Plan 2024 - 2031 aims to deliver an additional 4,367 acute inpatient beds nationally including an additional 141 beds for Drogheda. LCH has 93 inpatient beds, encompassing both adult and paediatric. Since 2020, eight beds were delivered for LCH. Drogheda has 500 beds an increase of 15.7% since 2020. We have also invested in staffing at both hospitals which has increased by 2% in LCH and by 13.5% in Drogheda since 2020.

I hope all this positive news will be welcome for the Deputy, who so ably represents the constituency.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I welcome some of what the Minister of State says but I am not sure it is going to give the answer we need. As I said, there is serious concern among the staff and the public that the position that I am talking about - the clinical specialist radiographer - will not be filled. We need to make sure this happens and I would like to think the Minister of State will come back to me. I welcome that he says the

recruitment process is ongoing, that there will be disruption to patient care or service delivery and all clinical services continue to operate as normal. That is all fine.

He also said that a recruitment process to fill this vacancy has commenced, a number of applications have been received and interviews for this position are due to take place later this month. However, that does not necessarily answer where this position is going to be. I want and hope that surety can be provided that this specialist position will make its way to the Louth County Hospital where it is necessary from the point of view of the work that has to be done. It is also necessary from the point of view of ensuring that we have the correct level of supervision that is dictated by the Irish Institute of Radiography and Radiation Therapy.

I am not sure that the Minister of State will be in the position to give that answer, but I will be chasing up the Minister of Health. I also ask that the Minister of State engages with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. We need to ensure that this is not a further downgrading of Louth County Hospital or the downgrading of the very important works that need to be done whether we are talking about the necessity of everything from ultrasounds through to X-rays, CT scanning and Dexa scanning. We need to make sure that this necessary facility is maintained. As much as we went to see Our Lady of Lourdes operating at full capacity, we do not need to lose this service in the Louth County Hospital.

If the Minister of State can give me the answer - brilliant stuff. If he cannot, he needs to chase it up with the Minister. I will be doing the same because it is not good enough that we let down the people of Dundalk.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú again for raising this issue so forcefully and giving me an opportunity to speak on this matter. It is important to recognise that significant investment has been allocated to LCH and Drogheda in recent years which has uplifted capacity, staffing and bed numbers at each of the hospital sites. Projects that have been delivered in LCH include theatre access for ear, nose and throat procedures and a Uroflow clinic for urology services. Additionally, a new procedure room will open in 2026 to enhance day services. These developments complement the already significant investments in Drogheda. These two hospitals operate co-jointly and provide a comprehensive suite of services for the people of Louth.

I want to emphasise that the ongoing assessment of the needs of this region is a priority for this Government as evidenced by the major capital investments in both LCH and Drogheda. The Government is committed on building on the already significant improvements made in these hospitals. In relation to the post of clinical specialist radiographer at LCH, it is good to hear that there has been a number of applications received and interviews will take place later this month. We all know recruitment processes can take time, but I wish to assure the Deputy that progress is being made in this process. I reiterate that the HSE has confirmed that there will be no disruption to patient care or service delivery. All clinical services will continue to operate as normal ensuring that patients and services users experience no change in access, quality, or continuity of care.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will the Minister of State go back to the senior Minister to find out if this position will be in Dundalk?

Deputy Robert Troy: I will most definitely, and will relay the Deputy's points to the Minister.

Turf Cutting

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I raise the situation in Ardgrigue, Barroughter and Clonmoylan bogs in south-east Galway. The local turf cutting contractor was served with a High Court injunction to cease cutting turf earlier this year. As a result, local people have been left without a supply of fuel this winter. There are over 40 families affected. It is important to say that these are bogs where local people have cut turf for many years. This is causing significant distress to the people affected. Many are elderly, have dwindling supplies or do not have an alternative supply of turf. They now face into the cold winter months without fuel.

The bogs have been designated as special areas of conservation, SACs. People have been offered a once-off payment from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, to walk away from the bog and to allow rewetting. Many have declined it - as is their right - because many want to continue to heat their homes with turf. It is the only realistic option for them. Other forms of heating are far too expensive to install.

This injunction was taken out and it seems that these families are being coerced and forced into this scheme. They do not want to take part in it because they will be left worse off if they do and will not be able to cut turf again. I understand that under the legislation the families could be allowed to harvest turf if the Minister, Deputy Browne, signs an activity requiring consent, ARC, order. Their main ask is that the Minister signs this order to allow them to return to their bogs. I ask the Minister of State to outline if this will be facilitated.

I also raise the fact that the NPWS is beginning works to wet the bogs of those who have signed up to the scheme. This includes the installation of dam blocks to block drains with the aim of raising the water table in the bog. There are significant concerns surrounding the risk of flooding on neighbouring land, the risk posed by holes left behind and who would be held libel in the case of any injuries caused by these holes. There has been a complete lack of consultation. The NPWS is not responsive at all and does not seem to be accountable to anybody. I also want to raise concerns with the process around the SACs designations. These three bogs were designated to be sites of community importance, SCIs, by 2002. Under the habitats directive, if SCIs are intended to be made special areas of conservation this must be done within six years of them being designated SCIs. In this case, the three bogs were not officially designated as SACs until the years between 2021 and 2023. This is in direct conflict with the timelines mandated under the habitats directive but we have had no real explanation yet for this. I ask the Minister of State to provide that this evening. There are questions around the process but the big question the local people want answered is whether the Minister will sign an ARC order to allow turf to be cut in these bogs again.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank Deputy O'Hara for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and the Minister, Deputy Browne. The bogs at Ardgrigue, Barroughter and Clonmoylan are special areas of conservation in the Deputy's county of Galway. I reaffirm the Government's commitment to

protecting Ireland's valuable peatlands and to working with all stakeholders. As the Deputy will be aware, peatlands are of cultural, economic and ecological importance to Ireland and are profoundly significant for our communities and our history. They are a cornerstone of many communities; a source of heating, as the Deputy pointed out; a way of passing on knowledge; and a deeply held right for many families.

The EU habitats directive requires member states to select sites for the protection of habitats that are considered threatened, including active raised bog, which is considered to be in danger of disappearing within the EU territory. Ireland has selected 63 sites for the protection of active raised bog habitats, including Ardgraique, Barrougher and Cloonmoylan bogs, and has designated these bogs as special areas of conservation. This protects approximately 9% of our original raised bog resource.

The Government adopted a clear long-term strategy to protect these sites. In 1999 the Government announced arrangements for the cessation of turf cutting on raised bog special areas of conservation, and a compensation package, including for the three bogs the Deputy referenced, was outlined. It also announced that commercial turf cutting would cease on certain SACs and that a ten-year derogation was given for domestic turf cutting. At the end of this derogation, following extensive stakeholder consultation, the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme was launched in 2011. The scheme was advertised again in 2024, closing to new applicants in 2025.

These raised bog SACs are included in European sites as identified by the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011. Statutory instruments for each site further affirm their protected status. The cutting of turf may not be carried out or caused to be carried out or continued to be carried out on these plots by any person save in accordance with the provisions of regulation 30 of the 2011 regulations or with the consent of the relevant authority or both. I understand that since 2011, no planning application for turf extraction has been made on Ardgraique, Barrougher or Cloonmoylan and no formal request for ministerial consent has been received. It is a criminal offence subject to prosecution to extract turf without the required ministerial consent or relevant statutory consent or both.

Extensive supports have been put in place to assist turf cutters on these sites. The cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme compensates households affected by restrictions on turf cutting for domestic use on raised bog special areas of conservation. To date, the Department has paid out over €7.3 million to 329 families who had been cutting turf on the three bogs in question and is processing a further 118 applications.

The protected raised bog restoration incentive scheme is also available to landowners who wish to have their lands included as part of that scheme.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: From the response, I do not think the Minister of State appreciates the distress and tension this situation is causing in the local community. He outlined the compensation schemes available but the reality is there are 40 families in the area who are well aware of the schemes but have not entered the schemes and will not enter them. They have been allowed to cut turf on these bogs for many years. Now they are being left without the fuel they rely on to heat their homes. I have outlined that many of the people affected are elderly. It is a deeply unfair situation. They have been kept in the dark about the process of designating the bogs as SACs and the ongoing works by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS.

They feel they are being bullied and coerced into signing up to a scheme they do not wish to sign up to. It is regrettable to see how divisive it becomes in the local community when people are pressured into signing up to something like this.

The Minister of State said no formal request for ministerial consent has been received. Can he clarify whether a formal request must be made? Were a request to be received, would it be considered and, in the Minister of State's view, granted? If clarity cannot be provided on these issues, I ask that at the very least, the Minister of State or the Minister, Deputy Browne, or the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, from the Department would meet the families affected and hear first-hand about the impact it is having on them. They are very reasonable people who work hard and want to get on with their lives in peace and quiet. Will the Minister of State or the Minister, Deputy Browne, or the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, from the Department commit to meeting them before the end of the year? I would be more than happy to facilitate it.

Deputy John Cummins: All I can do is take back what the Deputy has said to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and the Minister, Deputy Browne. I cannot give an indication of whether an application, if made, would be accepted. That would have to go through, I assume, an assessment process. It is not within my remit so I am not fully *au fait* with the process that would be involved.

I re-emphasise that we are trying to progress the 118 applications still in the system and that €7.3 million has been paid out to 329 families under the scheme. I appreciate the comments the Deputy has made. I understand the importance of this from the cultural, economic and ecological points of view. The strategy to protect raised bogs dates back to 1999, long before either of us was involved in politics. I will take the Deputy's comments back to both Ministers. I assure him we are prioritising the applications in front of us under the compensation scheme. I suggest that if the Deputy formally writes to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, we can get an official response to the comments he has raised.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.18 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 5 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.18 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 5 November 2025.